

# LIFT

SUMMER 2025 | VOL.11 | ISSUE 1

## Sky High Soirée Inspires in Wings of Hope Hangar



April marked a new era for Wings of Hope's annual spring fundraiser. For the first time ever, we held it in the Wings of Hope hangar — the perfect venue to showcase our mission and immerse our supporters in our life-changing work.

"This year's Sky High Soirée was truly unforgettable," said Wings of Hope's Director of Development and Communications Brittni Snidle. "By bringing our guests into the Wings of Hope hangar, we gave them an up-close experience of our mission — to change and save lives through the power of aviation. Seeing the planes in person, talking with our pilots and medics, hearing directly from patients, and capturing sunset moments with our aircraft created a powerful connection to the impact they help make possible."

Through the support of sponsors, led by presenting sponsor Fabick Cat, ticket sales, and a live auction, the event raised mission-critical funds for Wings of Hope's work around the world, our SOAR into STEM program for students, and our Medical Relief & Air Transport (MAT) program in the U.S.

In 2024, our volunteer MAT pilots flew 114 missions in three aircraft, covering 83,204 miles and using over \$101,000 in fuel — just one of the many expenses the fundraiser helped to offset.

MAT pilots Dick Horowitz and Phil Koch served as the evening's emcees — their sense of humor only matched by their long-serving dedication to Wings of Hope.

While guests enjoyed hors d'oeuvres and drinks among aircraft in the hangar, they were treated to exhibits showcasing our SOAR into STEM program for youth and an inspiring presentation by former MAT patient Claire Biangardi, who was joined onstage by her mother, Marianne. Claire was diagnosed with a rare immune disorder as a toddler and flown by Wings of Hope to Cincinnati Children's Hospital for a series of treatments. Now 14, she is a healthy teenager who serves as an ambassador for Wings of Hope, Make-a-Wish® Missouri & Kansas, and Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

In her remarks, Claire said Wings of Hope "gave our family an incredible gift, the gift of hope."

Her emotional story moved many in the room to raise their paddles and donate to Wings of Hope. Claire also reconnected with the pilots who flew her to Cincinnati more than a decade ago.

With our hangar doors open to a beautiful spring sky, Mother Nature inspired too. "Watching the planes glow under the evening sky while celebrating the generosity of our supporters was nothing short of magical," said Brittni. "We're already looking forward to next year."



*Changing & Saving Lives  
Through the Power of Aviation*



## Global Programs: John Givonetti Giving



When Wings of Hope first began partnering with John Givonetti Giving (JGG), it was in support of an educational outreach program for students living in rural villages in Pursat Province, Cambodia. The program offered children of subsistence farmers — people who grow their own food to survive, not to sell at market — the opportunity to break out of a life of poverty by teaching them the two skills they needed to get into university: English language and computer skills. The older students were trained to be volunteer teachers to the younger students to gain the leadership experience and confidence they needed to succeed in university. JGG also built dormitories to house students during their time at university. At its height, the program served more than 700 students with about 50 student teachers.

"COVID brought things to an unexpectedly abrupt halt," said JGG Founder John Pavese. "Our program was run in the schools — and the schools were mostly closed."

John and his wife, JGG Chairman Sokhary Kong Pavese, split their time between North Carolina and Cambodia. During the pandemic, they weren't able to visit Cambodia for two years.

"In 2022, we returned to a much different Cambodia — one that was working to get back to normal," said John.

With so much uncertainty, JGG decided not to restart the English

### JGG Student Success Story

Sokpheaktra-Soeurn joined JGG's English language program in the 6th grade and went on to become a student teacher. After graduating high school, she studied business enterprise at university and lived in JGG's Siem Reap dormitory.

While a university student, she worked full time for a company that marketed locally handmade cotton and silk fabrics — and continued working for this company while pursuing her MBA.

Despite her busy schedule, Sokpheaktra completed a free, 6-month entrepreneurial training program — and was awarded \$700 in seed money to act on her dream of designing and marketing a stylish clothing line for women and men. She presented her business plan to the owner of the fabric company she worked for who agreed, with a few others, to partner with her in her new business: Visakha Fashion.

Today, Sokpheaktra is completing her MBA while selling her clothing at her business partner's store in Siem Reap. She also advertises on Facebook (in Cambodia) and has established consignment sales at upscale Phnom Penh hotels. One day, she hopes to extend her company's market reach beyond Cambodia.







language program but remains committed to providing living quarters for all the former student teachers attending university in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap — and other students from across Cambodia.

As the final group of students age out of the dorms, many are pursuing their dreams in business, medicine, and other fields.

#### What Does the Future Hold for JGG?

In the simplest terms, JGG is returning to its roots.

"Once again, JGG will act as a foundation funding modest infrastructure projects — as it did when it first began about 15 years ago," said Sokhary.

"Our hope is to do one project a year," added John.

Its most recent project was funding the completion of a library/meeting building at Kok Khang Primary School in rural Siem Reap. Construction of the library had stalled as funding dried up during the COVID pandemic. JGG not only funded the completion of the original project but added covered outdoor seating to serve multiple uses for both students and the community.

The library opened on Jan. 17, 2025, with nearly 1,000 people attending the grand opening celebration — including 585 students and 350 parents.

#### Next Up: A Floating Medical Clinic

Earlier this year, John and Sokhary joined a group of 15 government officials on a tour of floating villages in the Tonle Sap flood basin. The purpose of the trip was to explore the possibility of funding a floating medical clinic to serve about 2,000 residents living in three of these villages.

The Tonle Sap is a flood plain for the Mekong River. During the dry season, it measures about 1,000 square miles and is 3 feet deep. In the rainy season, it grows to 6,000 square miles and an average depth of 33 feet. As the lake expands and contracts, the villagers raise anchor on their floating homes to remain close to the shoreline.

"Because of the annual flooding, nothing permanent can be built in the flood plain," said John. "So the floating villages are always hours away from anything permanently built — including medical facilities."

"These communities are in need of a floating health care post for checkups, vaccinations and, especially, maternal care," said Sokhary.

One village already has a floating medical clinic. The government is asking JGG to fund a second, with the government providing two nurses. Stay tuned on the status of this project.

## MAT PATIENT UPDATE

### Valentina:

## After Two Years and a Dozen Flights, This High School Grad Is Ready to Take on the World

Before heading off to her final Shriners appointment and last Wings of Hope flight this past April, Valentina was excited "just to be a normal girl again."

The 19-year-old who lives outside of Nashville, Tenn., took her first flight with Wings of Hope in January 2023.

"I needed surgery on my femur because my left one was shorter than my right one," she said. "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to do it in Tennessee, and Shriners Hospital was the best place to do it here in St. Louis."

Leg-lengthening is a long process that requires multiple surgeries, physical therapy, and follow-up appointments.

"We'd fly every two weeks, then two months, then three months, and so on," Valentina explained. "I've flown 12 times total so far."

David Lewis is one of Wings of Hope's volunteer pilots who has flown Valentina and her mother for the past two years.

"Flying our patients to and from their appointments makes their lives much, much easier," said David. "Some people live a day's drive away from St. Louis, and we make their trip two to three hours."

Before Valentina and her mom learned about Wings of Hope, they drove to Shriners Children's St. Louis — a 10-hour roundtrip drive that cut into Valentina's school day and the family's routine.

Valentina said flying with Wings of Hope changed her life.

"Without Wings of Hope, I wouldn't have been able to get my very first surgery which helped me even out my legs and my femur. And, today, I wouldn't be able to hike and do things outdoors. Now, I get to go home without screws and rods and things in my body."

She also has seen how Wings of Hope has helped others.

"I've flown with other families before, and I've seen how stressed out they are and how much they struggle," Valentina said. "I don't think they could do it without Wings of Hope."

The Wings of Hope flight crew is just as excited as Valentina to see her progress.

"It's just been amazing to see her transformation," said David.

We caught up with Valentina in early June, and she said, "things are great since my last flight."

"Doctors noticed a difference in my leg strength and recommended physical therapy — which I actually finished going to just last week!"

The recent high school graduate said she is "super excited to pursue an economics major" when she starts college in the fall.

Reflecting on her Wings of Hope experience, Valentina had "only good things to say."

"The pilots were extremely attentive toward my mom which helped relieve discomfort post-op. When reaching St. Louis, we were always greeted by a staff member and offered snacks to help with our inevitable motion sickness. All in all, Wings of Hope thought of everything that their patients may need — and made my experience flying with them memorable."





# Mentors, New Hands-on Experiences Elevate SOAR into STEM

It has been six years since Wings of Hope launched SOAR into STEM, and our Education Programs Manager Lee Ann Nolte said the spring 2025 session was the best yet.

The five-week, hands-on STEM and aviation educational experience takes place twice a year — in the fall and the spring. Each Saturday session brings students into the Wings of Hope hangar to learn about the basics of flight, mechanics, engineering, aviation navigation and communications, and uncrewed aerial vehicles (aka drones). The five-week session culminates with the students taking Young Eagle flights, courtesy of local EAA Chapter 1675.

Hands-on activities include building gliders (not the dime-store version), practicing communicating with air traffic control during a simulated exercise that mirrors airport traffic patterns, installing an electrical system on a foam aircraft, and working with aircraft mechanics on some of the essential skills used in maintaining planes. Student teams also participated in an engineering project — designing and building a working catapult for competition at the end of the session — and practiced flying drones.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the program is the opportunity for students to learn from a team of volunteer mentors who are experienced in aviation and STEM fields.

"We added new mentors who brought a lot of enthusiasm and energy to the program," said Lee Ann.

Fourteen mentors, including seven Boeing engineers, represented a wide range of experience including working as commercial and military pilots, mechanical and systems safety engineers, mechanics — including one who worked on fighter jets — certified flight instructors, a former NASA intern who did his undergraduate research on high-power rocketry, and an aviation map maker for the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency.

They shared their expertise through an expanded offering of demonstrations including a mock aircraft inspection, demoing the ForeFlight flight planning app, and a presentation on the inner workings and aerodynamics of free flight.

Mentors included Wings of Hope Board Member Kirk McDonald, who flew the Lockheed C5 Galaxy in the Air Force, and Bill Hoffman, a Wings of Hope volunteer and former Navy pilot who flew the A-4 Skyhawk and EA-6B Prowler aircraft from aircraft carriers. Guest speakers included Frank Dressel, a U.S. Air Force Academy graduate and former military pilot, and Ed Schertz, longtime volunteer and former Wings of Hope bush pilot.

Boeing's F-15 Lead System Safety Engineer Roland Diaz led the session on aeronautical engineering. He had this to say of the program: "I was impressed with the attendance and attention from the kids as well as all the experience from the mentors involved. It's very special to see this kind of community sharing their aviation passion with future enthusiasts while simultaneously accomplishing a selfless mission."

The most recent SOAR into STEM session also boasted the most highly engaged group of mentors to date, with many attending the full day including eating lunch with students and assisting with afternoon activities.

"With so much knowledge in the room, I felt like any question a student asked, there was someone who had the answer!" Lee Ann said.

For the second time, the program featured a dedicated maintenance day — which was a big hit with students.

"The students really enjoyed all the activities and talking with mentors at each of the stations," said Lee Ann. "And the mentors did an excellent job with the activities they led and were very engaged with the students."

All told, 26 students from 11 school districts participated in the spring session — and 20 students had perfect attendance.





***"...there is nothing else like this available to prepare teens for aviation careers."***

We asked students what they liked most about the program, and here's what they said:

"I got to experience how engineering is put into this, the mission of Wings of Hope, and how great it is," said Yetzari. "Learning how to fly and learning the basics is a great experience — and there's career chances. I would tell them (other students) that it's an opportunity to not miss."

"My favorite part was meeting mentors and getting information from them — also doing the STEM and aviation activities," said AJ.

Braylen enjoyed "meeting new people with common interests, and experts that know a lot about aviation and STEM fields."

A career exploration fair capped off the spring session. Eighteen exhibitors convened in the hangar to help students pursue their aviation interests and develop a professional network. Exhibitors included SOAR into STEM sponsor Boeing, Gulfstream, the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Navy, Aviation Explorer Post, Civil Air Patrol and the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA). The fair drew 90 students and guests, 50 exhibitor representatives, and 10 volunteers and staff — for a total of 150 participants.

Phil Schroeder, a military recruiter who participated in the fair, said: "Your event was just terrific. You had STEM motivated kids that wanted to be there! Hats off to you and yours for putting this all together for our community."

Sandy Wirtz, an exhibitor representing the Greater St. Louis Business Aviation Association (GSLBAA) Education Foundation, had a similar experience: "This event is one of the best I've attended — a great group of future aviators who are interested in learning and eager to hear what we have to tell them. I also like that the parents attend this event with the students to show their interest and support of their children."

A parent of one of the students, whose daughter Brooklyn participated in SOAR into STEM, said the program "was perfect for my daughter to get introduced to the world of aviation in preparation for a career as a pilot."

"I have done a lot of research and there is nothing else like this available to prepare teens for aviation careers."

**To learn more about SOAR into STEM and the other educational experiences we offer students including field trips, internships and speaker visits, visit [wingsofhope.ngo](http://wingsofhope.ngo) or contact Lee Ann Nolte at [LeeAnn.Nolte@wingsofhope.ngo](mailto:LeeAnn.Nolte@wingsofhope.ngo).**





# Meet our new board members and staff!



Dr. Mina Mehanni



Kirk McDonald



Ned Koprowski

The Wings of Hope Board of Directors recently elected three new members. **Dr. Mina Mehanni** is a heart doctor who specializes in cardiovascular medicine.

"I first got involved with Wings of Hope through the SOAR into STEM program, where I had the chance to combine two things I care deeply about: aviation and education. That experience really opened my eyes to how impactful and mission-driven this organization is — not just in what it does, but how it does it."

Mina said he is excited to contribute as a board member "not only as a cardiologist — but also as a pilot and STEM advocate."

"I see so much potential in continuing to expand Wings of Hope's educational and humanitarian outreach, and I'm excited to work alongside my colleague board members and be a part of shaping that future."

Argent Capital Portfolio Manager and Senior Research Analyst **Kirk McDonald**, CFA, 22 years of industry experience.

Kirk started volunteering as a SOAR into STEM mentor last fall.

"I was a natural for that because of my background as an Air Force pilot, and I studied engineering at the Air Force Academy — so this was a great way I could teach kids some engineering concepts and aviation concepts at the same time."

As a board member, he hopes to help the organization through his financial expertise, fundraising, and networking to increase awareness about Wings of Hope in the community.

**Ned Koprowski** served in the U.S. Air Force before embarking on a 40-year career with the Boeing Company. Shortly after retiring, he joined Wings of Hope as a volunteer in 2019. Ned said he is honored to be on the board and hopes to use his background in aviation and engineering "to bring some perspective to the board regarding issues that are specific to aviation, aircraft maintenance, aviation safety — basically bringing a new set of eyes to how we conduct flight operations and what we can do to make those more efficient and serve as wide a population as possible."

In December 2024, we welcomed Database Coordinator **Annie Daum** and Development Manager **Melissa Skrivan** to our Development team.

In her role, **Annie** has embraced the challenge of mastering a new database system — helping us strengthen the way we track and grow our impact. Annie is passionate about using smart systems and collaborative problem-solving to support the people and purpose at the heart of what we do. She has 20 years of experience in nonprofit data management and entered the development world three years ago.

"I'm inspired daily by the dedication of our volunteers and the impact we're able to make together through aviation. Joining this uniquely volunteer-driven nonprofit has been both exciting and deeply meaningful," Annie said.

**Melissa** joined Wings of Hope after serving as the American Parkinson Disease Association-Missouri Chapter (APDA) Director of Development. Prior to APDA, Melissa managed the direct mail marketing program at The Foundation for Barnes-Jewish Hospital.

"I have loved my time at Wings of Hope so far. Everyone is so passionate about what they do — and they're so excited to be here," Melissa said. "I've been in nonprofit for almost 20 years, and I don't think I've ever seen a volunteer corps like I've seen here where people just truly show up in meaningful, significant ways that make a difference every day. Everyone I talk to cares about the mission, cares about the people we're helping — and that just makes it a joy to come in."

Our Facilities Coordinator **Gregg Peterson** assumed his new position in January, but his connection to Wings of Hope goes back to 2000 when he was volunteering at the Chesterfield

Regional Chamber's Pumpkin Run alongside a number of Wings of Hope volunteers.

Gregg was an Edward Jones financial advisor for 17 years and spent 25 years in the Coast Guard. He joined Wings of Hope as a volunteer in 2022.

A jack-of-all-trades, Gregg's approach to volunteering is "put me where you need me."

Gregg calls himself "an armchair pilot" who loves working among the aircraft. He also enjoys working with people who share his passion for service: "I love being around people who like to give."



Annie Daum



Melissa Skrivan



Gregg Peterson



Lena Pak

Our Director of Administration **Lena Pak**, who has been managing our volunteer program on an interim basis, will now officially oversee the Wings of Hope Volunteer Program. Anyone who has worked with Lena knows she brings thoughtful leadership, clear communication, and strong support to our incredible team leaders and volunteers. We are so thankful for her dedication to this vital and important role — and excited for her future contributions.

Our volunteers are the lifeblood of Wings of Hope. Whether they are in the hangar working on planes or in the front office managing administrative and financial tasks, we depend on them to do mission-critical work that keeps our wings in the air and our operations running smoothly.

## MEDICS: Keeping Patients Safe in the Air



Peggy Lee

### PEGGY LEE CHIEF MEDIC

Chief Medic Peggy Lee joined Wings of Hope in 2017 after 43 years as a nurse at Missouri Baptist Medical Center/BJC HealthCare. Her career spanned all areas of nursing including cardiac, surgical, emergency room, administration, home health and, most recently, recovery room.

Peggy learned the importance of volunteering from her mother.

"I remember my mom when I was about 8 or 9, she signed the girls up to be church helpers. There are

nine of us. We'd go on a weekend and dust the church," Peggy said. "Even with nine kids, my mom was always involved in volunteering. It was always instilled in us. She taught us that you get more fulfillment out of that than you give — a thousand times more."

Currently, four doctors and four nurses make up our team of medics. Their job is simple but critical: to fly with patients who may need some extra monitoring and support during transport.

Every patient is accompanied by a medic on their first flight. After that, only patients who meet certain criteria fly with a medic — including patients who need oxygen and those on stretchers. When deciding who requires a medic, Wings of Hope Medical Director Dr. Charles Bowen makes the final call.

Most of the children we fly to and from Shriners Children's St. Louis do not need medics.

"Aside from their orthopedic issues, they're healthy. They don't need a medic," said Peggy.

Medics are limited in what they can offer on flights because they would have to be licensed in every state the plane flies over to, for example, administer medication to a patient as they fly above that state.

"We cannot give any medications, but they may have a family member with them who can administer their meds or, if they are able, they can give themselves medications," said Peggy.

Checking vital signs and monitoring oxygen levels are key functions of our medics.

"Our oxygen inside the plane is not going to be the same as it is here on the ground," Peggy said. "When we have a medic on board, we always monitor their oxygen. If there is a problem, we have to let the pilot know and either go down lower or land."

In her role leading our team of medics, Peggy not only flies with patients, she also is in charge of making all the necessary phone calls to patients, family members, doctors, nurses, and staff at the medical centers receiving patients. This process can take up to three weeks.

"But if we get a phone call that somebody's at the end of their life and the family wants to see them one last time, we will pull a plane and a crew together in days," Peggy said. "They are a priority — to get those patients home with their loved ones."

End-of-life flights occur quite frequently and always require a medic. Peggy recalled an end-of-life flight with a patient who had just "hours to live."

"We made it, and he died about 15 minutes after we landed — but the family was so thankful that we got him home," she said. "It was everything to them."

Peggy said one of the best parts of volunteering as a Wings of Hope medic is "the people I work with — all the volunteers are great."

"And I love the patients," she said. "I've always loved nursing which is why I'll do it until I become a patient."

When asked how volunteering at Wings of Hope compares to her nursing career, Peggy said: "This is the best non-paying nursing job I've ever had."

### GREG KWASNY MEDIC

Dr. Greg Kwasny was a pilot for Wings of Hope before he became a medic. Today, he also works in the Volunteer Fulfillment and Purchasing departments — and on the post-flight team.

"We clean up, vacuum, check the oil, and make sure the plane is ready for the next flight," he said.

Greg began flying for Wings of Hope as a volunteer pilot after 35 years as an ophthalmologist in Milwaukee. After retiring from his medical practice, he moved to St. Louis to be close to family. Although he no longer practices medicine, Greg spends one day a week teaching in the ophthalmology residency program at Saint Louis University.

Greg said what he likes most about being a medic is interacting with patients.

"A lot of the patients have never flown in a small airplane before, so having a medical background and being a pilot, I can tell them what's happening, what the noises are," said Greg. "The pilots are busy flying the airplane. It's pretty noisy and hard for them to communicate with the patients. But I'm sitting right next to them, and I can explain what's happening."

Greg also enjoys the relationships he has built with patients who have been flying with Wings of Hope for years. He calls them "frequent flyers."

"We get to know them pretty well and watch their progress," said Greg. "We started flying one kid out of Kansas when she was 4 or 5. She's now in her teens. At first, she couldn't even walk; now, she's playing softball."

Adult cancer patients also tend to fly with Wings of Hope over many months or years.

"We have two ladies, one with advanced breast cancer, that we fly to MD Anderson," said Greg. "She has a friend who flies with her as a caregiver. They've been flying with us for four to five years."

Greg said he was initially attracted to Wings of Hope for the opportunity to continue flying.

Even though he is no longer flying for us — he aged out when he turned 75 before the age limit was increased to 80 — he still enjoys volunteering.

"It's a nice group of people, and most of them are in the same age group as me," said Greg, who just turned 80. "Plus, overall, the mission that we're doing — it feels like we're accomplishing something, even at our advanced age."



Greg Kwasny



18370 Wings of Hope Blvd.  
Chesterfield, MO 63005  
636.537.1302 | 800.448.9487  
www.wingsofhope.ngo

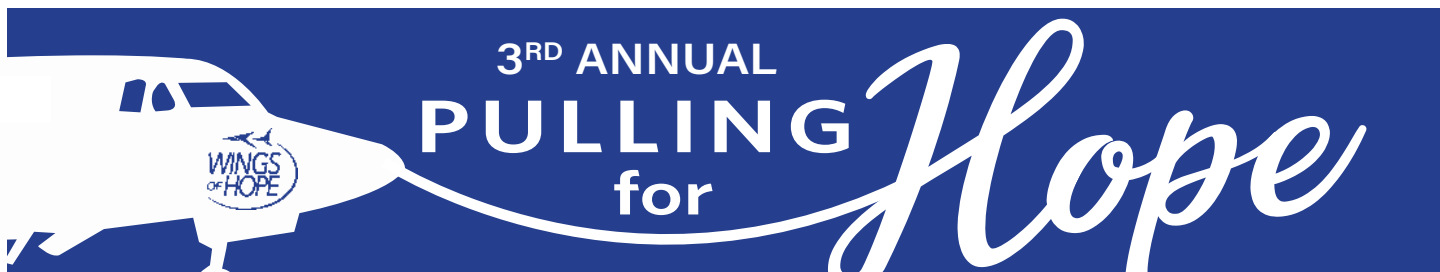
Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Louis, MO  
Permit No. 9161

*Changing  
& Saving  
Lives  
Through the  
Power of  
Aviation*



4-Star Rating on Charity Navigator,  
GuideStar Platinum Rating

# SAVE THE DATE!



## **SATURDAY OCTOBER 4, 2025**

**More Info Coming Soon!**

**[wingsofhope.ngo/pulling4hope/](http://wingsofhope.ngo/pulling4hope/)**

