

Geri Wilson gets a last visit with family, on angels' wings

BY AMELIA T. REIHELD

Gerri Wilson believes in angels, and for good reason. The Edenton, NC woman was invited to a birthday party not too long ago. It would be a big deal, her father's 80th, and everybody - aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and generations of cousins, would be there in Akron, Ohio, celebrating. Everybody but Gerri, that is. She longed to attend, but it seemed that there was just no way. Because of her declining health from inoperable cancer, neither driving nor catching a commercial flight was a good option. Chartering her own private jet was the stuff of fantasy.

Enter the angels. These angels are very much of the flesh-

and-blood variety, volunteer pilots affiliated with a nationwide organization known as Angel Flight. When people in financial need require transportation to distant medical centers for treatment, when donated organs or blood need to be transferred from one location to another fast, when disaster strikes and workers need to get to a small town quickly, Angel Flight and other charitable aviation organizations find a way - with private pilots, small airplanes, and public-spirited airports-to meet that need.

Linda Raheely, director of Edenton's Hospice program, knew how much Gerri Wilson wanted to get to Akron. Recalls Gerri, "Soon after my referral to Hospice, I was asked what

was the one thing I'd like to accomplish in the time remaining to me. I made the remark that there were so many things, but that I'd really like to visit my dad, and my brothers and sisters again. My sisters and I see each other often, but we hadn't been all together in over ten years."

Thanks to her husband's work for Mercury Air Center in Atlanta, Linda Raheely also knew about compassion flight organizations, and the miracles they work. All it took was a phone call to the mission coordinator for Angel Flight of Georgia, based in Atlanta. Bernadette Darnell swept into action. Angel Flight had recently joined forces with Make A Dream Come True, an organization that grants final wishes for terminally ill adults. "Lots of groups do things for sick kids, but adults need help, too," she says. The Edenton-to-Akron mission was soon listed on their website, mass e-mails went out, and three pilots from Virginia, North Carolina and Ohio offered their services.

"Angel Flight arranged everything to get me to my dad's birthday party," Gerri recalls with amazement. She wasn't the least concerned about how small the airplanes would be. "I'd have climbed aboard a torpedo, if it would have meant spending that time with my family," she says.

Up, up, and away!

On a beautiful Friday morning in May, Harlan Davis, a pilot from Farnham, Va., and his copilot, Ken Chatham, met Gerri and her friend, Bob Whealton, at Edenton's Northeastern Regional Airport. He ushered the pair aboard his single engine aircraft, a Cessna 182, and headed west toward Richmond.

The next leg of the trip would be in an airplane even smaller, piloted by Bill Colleran, a student at Ohio's Kent State University. It's a beautiful flight over the Blue Ridge Mountains in a Cessna 172, and Bob was enthralled with it all, the view, the charts, instruments, and communications. Gerri dozed peacefully in the back seat.

There was an air show in progress at Akron's Fulton Municipal Airport, and the place was mobbed. "When our pilot told the controllers this was an Angel Flight," marvels Bob, "everybody got out of our way. It was like parting the waters."

Gerri's sister met the pair at the airport. The other six siblings also knew what was up, but somehow they managed to save the news of their Edenton sister's arrival as a surprise for their father.

The following afternoon, some 45 well-wishers had gathered to celebrate the major milestone. "Dad, there's one more present," announced one of the sisters, and pointed at the pair coming toward him.

"Dad just started bawling, and soon, I don't think there was a dry eye anywhere," Gerri recalls. The emotional afternoon passed in a series of embraces. "One of my brothers came flying across the yard when he saw me. Two of my other brothers who hadn't seen each other for a long time grabbed each other in a bear hug. I tapped one of them on the shoulder, and asked him if he could use one more sister, and when he turned around and saw me, he hugged me for at least five minutes. I don't think I could possibly have had any medicine that would have done me more good."

Sunday's flight back was another beautiful ride. Bill, the college student who had so impressed Gerri and Bob, greeted them once again in Akron, and brought them as far as Danville, Virginia, where they were met by Mike Simmons, a pilot from Leasburg, NC, whose airplane, a Cessna Cardinal, is based at Danville Regional Airport. The hop back to Edenton would be just a little more than an hour. For Mike Simmons and the other pilots, it was another good day to go flying, especially

for a good cause. For Gerri and Bob, this was the trip of a lifetime.

When Gerri Wilson and Bob Whealton met and fell in love a year ago, they hoped to watch each other grow old. Then came the bad news. Now they're just hoping to spend the summer together. But thanks to the efforts of total strangers, Gerri was able to introduce her dearest friend to many of the other most important people in her life. "They welcomed Bobby with open arms," she says. "I hope he'll continue to be a part of the family."

"I can't say enough good things about Angel Flight," vows Gerri. "These pilots donate their time and talent, their gas and oil, the use of their airplanes, the maintenance, and the airport fees, to people like me, and all they expect is a simple thank you."

As for those volunteer pilots, they do it because they love to fly. It's a fine way to share their joy in aviation. To them, that pleasure, and the knowledge that they made it possible for Gerri Wilson to attend her last family reunion, is thanks aplenty.

Facts about Compassion Flights

More about Compassion Flights

Angel Flight, AirLifeLine, and other groups of pilots offering their services at no charge to those in medical and financial need, can be reached through hospital social service workers, Hospice, and other medical professionals. Patients needing transportation to major medical research centers for specialized treatment can ask that one of these organizations be contacted. The regional groups refer to each other, and coordinate their missions nationwide through each other.

Compassion flights aren't for every patient. Because small aircraft can be challenging to climb in and out of, and because volunteer pilots aren't equipped to care for passengers who are very ill, patients must be stable and ambulatory. Small aircraft often have strict weight limits, and passengers may be urged to pack light for their journey.

Volunteer pilots meet strict criteria for training and experience. They must hold at least a Private Pilot's license with Instrument Rating, and have logged at least 200 hours of pilot-in-command time. The aircraft used must be insured, and maintained according to FAA standards. The pilots donate their time and all of the expenses of operating their air-

craft to the tax-exempt organizations. Many airports and fixed-base operators offer these charitable flights a discount on fuel, and waive landing, parking, and ramp handling fees. FAA Air Traffic Control gives the compassion flights special consideration as well, often shortening the routes and facilitating the take-off and landing clearances.

Pilots, medical professionals, and patients wishing to know more about Angel Flight and other compassion flight organizations can check out the following websites:

Air Care Alliance - a group to which most compassion flight organizations belong - 1-888-260-9707; www.aircareall.org

The following organizations may be contacted directly for more information on qualifying for - or volunteering for - charitable flights.

Angel Flight of Georgia
1-877-4AN ANGEL
www.angelflight-ga.org
AirLifeline
1-877-AIRLIFE
www.airlifeline.org

(Amelia Reiheld is a freelance writer, photographer, and Angel Flight pilot, currently living in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She, her husband, a couple of cats, and a little airplane, will be moving to Edenton in early fall.)

Crash

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Thomas Built Buses, which is now a subsidiary of Freightliner and a part of Daimler-Chrysler AG.

In June, the company announced plans to build a new

plant for school bus production.

Founded in 1916 by Perley A. Thomas as Thomas Car Works, the firm's corporate headquarters and manufacturing plants span more than 850,000 square feet in High Point.

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