

Pilots for Christ lifts patients on a wing and a prayer

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DAPHNE, Ala. (RNS)—On one of his healthiest days since being diagnosed in June 2008 with Stage 4 neuroblastoma, 9-year-old Tyler Trembley raced joyfully across a playground, his mother looking on.

After heavy bouts of chemotherapy and surgery to remove a tumor wrapped around his kidney—involving thousands of miles of air travel to specialty hospitals—the third-grader is getting better.

Pilot Tommy Lee, standing in front of his Piper Cheyenne airplane in Monroeville, Ala., is a volunteer pilot with Pilots for Christ International, an organization that provides free flights to needy medical patients.

(PHOTO/RNS/Mike Kittrell/The Press-Register of Mobile, Ala.)

“I’m witness to how awe-inspiring this life is,” said his mother, Sherry Trembley, who praised the help of [Pilots for Christ](#), an aviation ministry, and others including Angel Flight, which also aids patients with medical needs by providing free flights for medical care.

“Every day,” she said with gratitude, “my heart flutters.”

A single mom to Tyler and his twin sister, Hannah, Trembley admits she was overwhelmed last summer, and soon exhausted, trying to get Tyler to Children’s Hospital in Birmingham, Ala., and then to Sloane-Kettering Memorial Clinic in New York.

“I don’t know how I found out about Pilots for Christ,” she said, shaking her head. “God has placed people in my path who I’ve needed.”

Tyler was too sick to be driven by car or flown commercially, and chartering a plane was too cost-prohibitive. The Trembleys found themselves being borne aloft by pilot Tommy Lee, at no charge, in Lee’s Piper Cheyenne turbo-prop.

Lee, who owns a car dealership, helped found the local chapter of the national Pilots for Christ in 1994. Inside the hangar where he keeps his plane hangs a banner: “Whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Proverbs 14:31”

“Our service is our ministry,” said Lee, 55, who got his pilot’s license at age 18 and did additional training in the Army—preparation, he now realizes, for his call to this mission of the air.

This local chapter of Pilots for Christ takes patients to medical destinations within a 350-mile radius, the most frequent being [M.D. Anderson Cancer Center](#) in Houston, and St. Jude Hospital in Memphis for children.

The organization has no nurses and is not an air ambulance, Lee said. “We can’t take anybody who needs medical assistance en route.”

Prospective patients for transport need to apply and have a doctor’s approval. The cost to charter a comparable private flight to Houston, Lee said, would probably be between \$4,000 and \$5,000.

Pilots for Christ depends on volunteer time given by pilots and the use of their planes, and from donations that pay for fuel and mission support, which can include anything from costs for ground transportation to lodging for patients. Other volunteers sometimes ride along to assist families and help soothe jangled nerves.

He hopes the ministry one day will be able to buy its own plane, a cost that he estimated could be as high as \$1 million.

“I could not have done it without the help of Pilots for Christ,” said Trembley, who credits those first flights for Tyler—beginning with a prayer circle led by the pilot—as essential to strengthening her emotionally.

Recently, Bob Eubanks, a retired orthopedic surgeon who’s also a member of Pilots for Christ, flew the Trembleys to Atlanta, where they connected with an Angel Flight that carried them on to Sloane-Kettering.

“Each of these trips,” said Eubanks, who extolled the beauty of flying through the skies on these missions, “are bathed in prayer.”

Eubanks said air traffic controllers will pay heed to what he called “mercy flights” or “compassion flights,” often giving direct routes for landing.

He added: “Many times (someone) in air traffic control ... says, ‘Thank you for what you do.’”

The stories are legion.

Mike Floyd, 62, a retired special education teacher, came down with cancer of the adrenal glands. He has been flown by Pilots for Christ numerous times to M.D. Anderson Cancer Clinic. “God has laid a mission on their hearts,” Floyd said.

Jimmy Crenshaw, a 47-year-old mill worker, was diagnosed with a form of leukemia. He depended on Pilots for Christ for flights that involved trips to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, as well as to M.D. Anderson.

“I was desperately sick,” said Crenshaw, who still deals every night with excruciating pain in his bones.

Hazel Gentry, 85, needed help in a different way. Her sister-in-law had an

advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease, and Gentry wanted to move her back from Jacksonville, Fla., to be near family. Lee and other volunteers, using a stretcher, were able to make that happen.

Nine-year-old Tyler had a wish of a different sort.

"I wished for a rainbow," he said, remembering his first flight with Lee on the way to medical treatment. "Then I looked out the window—and there was a rainbow!"

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