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Real Life Angels: Pilots, Planes and Angel Flight Team Up to Help Save Lives

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Kevin Satterwhite of Valdosta, Ga., could hardly contain his excitement as he and his mother approached the small [Cirrus sr22](#) four-seater plane. It was to be the 8-year-old's first flight ever, and like every young boy, he was in awe that a vehicle larger than his grandmother's truck could actually soar with the birds.

But despite the delighted look on the boy's face, this was no joy ride. Atlanta [Angel Flight](#) volunteer pilot Skip Moore and his wife, Victoria, had flown to Valdosta to pick up Kevin and his mom for another round of chemotherapy at AFLAC Cancer Center at [Children's Healthcare of Atlanta](#) where he was being treated for rare inoperable malignant tumors. It was only one of many missions the Moore's have taken to transport fragile children (and adults) to and from medical treatment -- all free of charge. But this one was special. It was to be Kevin's last trip until doctors could assess his progress.

"He didn't have an ounce of fear of flying and chatted with us the whole way about his favorite foods and computer games," says Victoria Moore. "When he turned toward his mother and said, 'I love you, Mama,' we had to hold back our tears."

Though the Moore's have flown numerous missions, they admit to a certain partiality for the small, bald-headed youngster with the outrageous sense of humor and capacity to enjoy life, despite his illness. His grandmother, Shirley Alday concurs. "He's smart, funny, witty -- until it comes to sticking a needle in him," she says, "but who can blame him? After months of chemo and multiple rounds of radiation, he deserves to be a little cranky every now and then."

According to patients like Kevin, the planes might be made of metal, but the 900 Angel Flight volunteer pilots who hail from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and the Carolinas have magical powers. In 2010 alone, they provided their planes, gasoline and time to complete 2,551 missions, an average of seven missions a day, seven days a week.

That's an increase of 835 percent since executive director, Jeanine Chambers, took the helm in January of 1991. Based at [DeKalb-Peachtree Airport](#) and run entirely without governmental funds, the organization relies on donations and fund raisers, like the upcoming annual [Jim Shafer Memorial 2011 \(Golf\) Tournament of Angels](#) at Chateau Elan in Braselton, Ga., on May 12. Golfers compete for prizes, including two round-trip tickets via Air Tran, but most confess their strong support for the organization.

Since September 11, 2001 (9/11) and Hurricane Katrina, Angel Flight's mission has expanded to include emergency response. Both were watershed events. The small staff went into high gear, working 24-hours a day to arrange transportation, emergency supplies, rescue stranded victims and reunite families.

"On September 11, we were the first organization the FAA allowed to transport Red Cross workers, cadaver dogs and search and rescue teams to the scene," she says. "We also kept blood supplies flowing around the state."

Even under normal circumstances, the logistics of arranging missions is complex. A single trip might take Bernadette Darnell, director of mission operations, 15 to 20 phone calls to coordinate flights, ground transportation, and even emergency lodging for the family. It also includes coordination with sister organizations, pilots and hospitals outside the five-state area it serves. Of course, there's the unknown factor -- weather -- which can derail the best-laid plans. Some patients need short-term treatment that can be accomplished in a day. Others may have to remain weeks or months at a time. Under those circumstances, Angel Flight arranges for family visits as well.

From Volunteer to Executive Director

Ironically, it was Darnell, Chamber's mother, an "Earth Angel" (volunteer) who convinced her daughter to lend a hand while she was studying for her MBA at Georgia State University. Within a month of graduation, Chambers became the organization's executive director and has never looked back. She's twice been named to *Georgia Trend* magazine's "40 Under 40" list that showcases young achievers in business, government, politics, education and nonprofits.

At first, she and her mother were the only salaried personnel. Today there are 10 -- a combination of full-time and part-timers needed to keep the organization running smoothly. All agree that the heart of the organization is the pilots, many whose names are well-known, but prefer to remain anonymous. Some have been involved for years. Others, like Moore, for only a short time. Each pilot must be fully licensed and have received IFR certification from the FAA (Instrument Flight Rules that permit an aircraft to operate in poor weather conditions).

The Power of Volunteerism

For the Satterwhites -- Kevin's mother Michelle, sister Heather, and grandmother, Angel Flight has been a gift from heaven. "We were having a really hard time financially, having to ask the Park Avenue Methodist Church for gas cards and struggling to share one vehicle between two families and make the four-hour trip to get Kevin to treatment," says Alday. "When a social worker at the hospital told us about Angel Flight, it seemed to be too good to be true."

Angel Flight is often a life-line even for patient's whose families can afford commercial flights. Some are too fragile for long delays. Others like Kevin, who have

compromised immune systems, risk serious infection.

Pilot Power

Moore admits to a lifelong passion for aviation, but has only had his license for two years. As president of Sparus Holdings, Inc., three wholly owned subsidiaries, he uses his plane for business but says, "Angel Flight allows me to fly with a purpose."

Each passenger is special. His first flight was transporting a burn victim who hadn't uttered a word in the weeks following his accident. As they flew over Atlanta, he blurted out, "Look, I can see Stone Mountain," and he began asking a million questions. To add to the family's joy, his father who had recently returned safely from Afghanistan, was meeting them at the plane when they returned home.

"One of our aims when we retire is to become more involved in Angel Flight," says Moore. "In the meantime, we want to help encourage more corporate sponsorship and expand services to take more family members on visits. The patient is just one side of the equation."

Though Chambers' original plan following graduation was to get the organization on its feet and then leave, Angel Flight has seeped into her blood. "We're a family serving families, with some magical intervention, as well," she laughs. Few families would disagree that Chambers and Darnell are among the angels at Angel Flight who wave their magic wands and make miracles happen.

About Angel Flight:

- Patients range in age from newborn to 100.
- Most are cancer patients, followed by transplant patients.
- The number of flights requested per person ranges from 1 to 72.
- People from 41 states and four countries were served in 2010.
- Angel Flight has branch offices in Greenwood, SC, St. Simons Island, Ga., and Tuscaloosa, Ala.

To volunteer or request a flight:

<http://angelflightsoars.org/>

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