

Life

Newsday | SECTION G | SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 2004

EAST END EDITION



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Volunteer pilots ferry
gravely ill patients
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INSIDE: ED LOWE, DINING, WHO'S COOKING AND REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING / CLASSIFIED

Special delivery

With more than 60 pilots on Long Island, Angel Flight gives hope to patients and their families



NEWSDAY PHOTO / DANIEL GOODRICH

JOSE FERNANDEZ carries his son, Christian, 8, to the plane of Angel Flight pilot Don Catalano.

ON THE COVER: Christian Fernandez and his mother, Ana, are buckled in for the flight from Long Island to Boston for Christian's cancer treatment. Christian's father is in the cockpit next to Catalano. Annie Torres took the photo.

'I have a pretty nice plane. I've been very blessed. It's a way to give back.'

— Don Catalano, Angel Flight volunteer pilot

BY JENNIFER SMITH
STAFF WRITER

It was a gorgeous morning for flying. Gusts of wind cleared the March sky, gently buffeting Don Catalano's six-seater on the descent to Long Island MacArthur Airport in Ronkonkoma.

Inside the Long Island Jet terminal, Jose and Ana Fernandez of Coram waited patiently for their ride to Boston, a duffel bag by their feet. Their son, Christian, 8, sat listlessly on Jose's lap, one arm dangled over his father's neck.

One month before, doctors at Stony Brook University Hospital had opened up Christian's skull in a nine-hour operation to check on the brain tumor discovered four years ago. Surgery, radiation and chemotherapy had kept it in check for a time, but recently, symptoms returned despite the toxic assault. The cancer had metastasized.

Unable to halt its colonial march across Christian's cerebellum and spine through

standard therapy, his pediatrician referred him to Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston as a candidate for experimental therapy in a phase 1 clinical trial, where patients receive new drugs whose efficacy, and at times toxicity, is unknown. It was Christian's last option.

That's where Catalano, a corporate real estate broker from Smithtown who flies for work and for pleasure, stepped in. A nurse practitioner at the hospital in Stony Brook wanted to spare the Fernandez family the 250-mile drive to Boston with a critically ill child. So she signed them up with Angel Flight, a nonprofit charity that matches patients with pilots who fly them to medical care.

Catalano, 46, is one of 60 general aviation pilots based at Long Island airports who volunteer their planes, their time and their expertise to Angel Flight Northeast, one of six regional chapters operating under Angel Flight America's national umbrella.

Like many Angel Flight volunteers, Catalano considers himself lucky. General aviation is not a pursuit for the slender of pocket. Factoring in fuel, payments on the plane, insurance and hangar rental at Republic Airport in Farmingdale, Catalano estimated it costs him about \$570 an hour to fly and maintain his cherished \$1.5 million Piper Meridian, which he uses mostly for business trips.

"I have a pretty nice plane; I've been very blessed," said Catalano. Since buying the plane in 2002, he has flown about a dozen missions for Angel Flight and Air LifeLine, a similar charity that recently merged with Angel Flight. "It's a way to give back," he said.

Many Angel Flight passengers of otherwise average means find

they cannot afford the financial and physical toll of transportation to hospitals and clinics that are hours, or even states, away from their homes. The group flew Katrina Lee, a 33-year-old breast cancer survivor from Somerville, Mass., on a dozen trips to a breast reconstruction specialist in Great Neck. Without those pilots, "there's no way I would have been able to do it," she said.

Serving remote areas

Others who use the service live in remote areas where small planes provide the quickest pathway in and out. "The people who really benefit the most are the people on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket," said pilot David Malin, a Malverne resident who flies about 12 missions a year in his rented plane.

Still other passengers have compromised immune systems and cannot fly commercially at all because of the risk of infection from recirculated air. And those awaiting organ transplants or people rushing to the bedside of sick family members



NEWSDAY PHOTO / DANIEL GOODRICH

THE FERNANDEZ family hoped experimental therapy could do what radiation and chemotherapy couldn't: Halt the cancer.

simply need to get from one place to another as quickly as possible.

Patients generally find out about Angel Flight through doctors or social workers and are then screened for suitability — passengers must be ambulatory and able to withstand pressure changes because the planes, mostly single-engine models that seat four or eight, are not outfitted with medical equipment. After the screening, patients simply tell an Angel Flight coordinator when and where they need to go. An alert goes out to volunteer pilots, who pay for gas and other flight-related costs. After the flight is confirmed, all patients need to do is show up at the airport.

Relieving anxiety

"It fills a tremendous need," said Larry Camerlin, a former Franciscan friar and hospital chaplain who founded the northeast chapter, based at Lawrence Airport in North Andover, Mass., in 1996. "People tell us that Angel Flight takes away all the anxiety," Camerlin said. In short, patients can stop worrying about how to get there and concentrate on getting well.

Back on the ground after the short hop over from Republic, Catalano greeted the Fernandez family with a mix of enthusiasm and concern. As with most Angel Flight runs, the pilot knew little about the people he was flying — just their names, the patient's medical condition and each passenger's weight, so he could seat them to balance the plane.

take to get to Logan International Airport. Too weak to walk, Christian was carried out to the tarmac by his father. Jose ducked his 6-foot-3 frame into the plane, then reached out to help his son climb the stairs, mindful of the healing incisions curving across Christian's downy head like lines on a tennis ball.

Once everyone was buckled in and outfitted with a headset to communicate over the roar of the jet engine, Catalano finished his preflight check and steered the plane toward the runway. Christian sat facing the back of the plane, eyelids drooping as his head tilted to one side on the buttery leather seat.

Back when he was feeling better — even as recently as a week or so before the flight — Christian would get up early to watch cartoons such as Pokémon, his favorite. But as he got sicker, he had trouble sleeping. Yawning, Christian stretched one hand across the aisle to his mother and grinned, showing two adult-size front teeth. Ana smiled ruefully when asked if Christian liked to fly.

"He thinks we're going to Santo Domingo," Ana said in Spanish through a translator.

FAST FACTS

- Last year, 3,723 missions were scheduled by Angel Flight's Northeast chapter.
- Since the chapter began in 1996, it has flown more than 15,000 missions.
- More than 800 volunteer pilots are active in the Northeast.
- More than 60 Angel Flight pilots are based on Long Island.
- To contact Angel Flight, call 800-549-9980 for flight requests or go to the Web site, www.angelflightne.org.

Source: Angel Flight Northeast

New York worsened during a visit to family. Tests indicated a tumor, and Christian was flown back to Stony Brook University Hospital, where his parents worked as housekeepers.

The hospital has a good insurance plan, they said, and much of their son's care is covered by



AP PHOTO

AFTER BREAST CANCER, Katrina Lee, of Massachusetts, was able to get care from a Long Island specialist in reconstructive surgery because of Angel Flight. Without the group's help, she said, "I would have stopped the follow-up visits."

Medicaid. But 10 months ago Jose injured his back and is receiving worker's compensation; Ana subsequently took a four-month leave of absence to deal with Christian's rapidly deteriorating health. To cover day-to-day expenses, they depend on savings and the kindness of family in New York and in Santo Domingo, where their daughter, Gabriela, 5, was sent to stay with relatives. "It's been very hard," Ana said.

Jokes and worry

Ana and Jose were apprehensive about the effect the new treatment might have on their firstborn, but they tried to hide their fear from Christian on the ride up. Ana made little jokes with him and reached out between their seats to gently cup his round cheeks with her hand. As the plane hit turbulence, Ana whooped and giggled. Christian tried to put his red fleece hat on her head for fun. But as the bumps leveled out, she grew quiet, holding fast to his hand as she gazed out the window, her even features pensive.

Below, the glitter of Long Island Sound gave way to the wintry landscape and semi-frozen lakes of Connecticut, as Catalano steered the plane northeast. Up in the cockpit, with the patient detail of a man who could talk about his subject for hours, he turned to Jose and began to explain what the bank of gadgets, switches and dials do.

Catalano's obvious joy in flight is something he has in common with other pilots who volunteer for medical missions.

"It allows them to combine their passion for flying with the ability to help others who are in great need," said Steven Williams, Angel Flight Northeast's director of operations. The service is an unusually direct form of charity work. Instead of writing off a check to an organization, pilots see who they are helping. And they offer a service that is in some ways more valuable than a simple monetary donation.

"You're doing something here that really can't be done by most other people," said

Some patients sit in silence. . . . Others tell their life stories. Many are overcome with gratitude.

See ANGELS on G12

Angel Flight

ANGELS from G6

Michael Harbater, a 53-year-old pilot from Far Rockaway.

Harbater has flown about 120 missions for Angel Flight since 1997. That's when he got his instrument rating, which means that, like all Angel Flight pilots, he is certified to fly in low-visibility conditions, when pilots must rely on instruments instead of visual landmarks to navigate. "Because of this relatively rare skill . . . you are able to help people who don't have much of an alternative," Harbater said. Local pilots say they get back as much as they give through their work for Angel Flight. "It's rewarding on both levels," Williams said.

'A reason to fly'

David Malin had never done any volunteer work before hooking up with the charity five years ago. Since then, he said, missions requiring him to land at busy commercial airports such as Logan International in Boston have made him a better pilot than he would have been by just doing pleasure flights. And seeing the relief and the gratitude on the faces of patients made him feel like a better person, he said. "Angel Flight gave me a reason to fly," Malin said. "It made all my training worthwhile."

Besides the chance to help patients, Carol Froehlig of Glen Head said she enjoys giving them a chance to experience small-plane flight.

Soaring through the air in her four-seat Cessna "is the most exciting and challenging thing I've ever done," said the retired elementary school teacher. "I feel such a tremendous privilege in being able to fly . . . you are up in the air, and it is an absolutely stunning view. You feel like you are close to heaven."

Her two years of missions for Angel Flight have taken her to parts of the country she might otherwise never have visited, such as Presque Isle, Maine, tucked up near the Canadian border. And like Malin, Catalano and Harbater, she relishes the contact with the patients she has flown.

"It's just a connection you have with these people because of what you're sharing with them and what you've offered them," Froehlig said.

Each flight is different. Sometimes, a pilot might fly the same patient a number of times; more often, they simply ferry a stranger from one place to the next.

Some patients sit in silence throughout the journey. Others tell their life stories. Many are overcome with gratitude, like the family that tried to pay Malin after he flew from Plymouth,



ANGEL PILOTS Michael Harbater, David Malin and Carol Froehlig at MacArthur Airport.

PHOTO BY JAMES MESSERSCHMIDT

Mass., to Philadelphia so their daughter could receive cancer treatment. "They were in tears," he said. "Because most doors are closed in their faces."

On long trips, Angel Flight regional chapters, which fly to destinations less than 1,000 miles, work with one another to coordinate pilots for each leg of the journey. For instance, last year, Catalano picked up a toddler from Virginia at Republic Airport and flew him to Montreal, where the boy received treatment for brittle bone disease that wasn't yet available in the United States.

Hearing later that the boy's condition was improving made him feel like he was on "cloud nine," Catalano said. "It's one of your better days."

Patients such as Katrina Lee say they are just as touched by the pilots they encounter. "You have to meet these men," she said. "They don't ask; they don't pry. If you want to tell them, they'll talk about these things. But they respect people's privacy."

Lee, a forensic interviewer with the Norfolk County district attorney's office in Massachusetts, was diagnosed with breast cancer at 29. Soon after having a lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation, Lee took a genetic test that showed she could very likely have a recurrence. Her doctors recommended a bilateral mastectomy — removing all the breast tissue — along with a hysterectomy.

But Lee wanted to have children. So she decided against the hysterectomy and began hunting for doctors who did reconstructive breast surgery that left the patient's abdominal muscles intact; in the most

common procedure, called a tram flap, surgeons use skin, fat and muscle from the abdomen to reconstruct the breast. "I wanted to preserve as much muscle tissue as possible to carry kids," Lee said.

Because she found few doctors in the Boston area offered the procedure, Lee ended up being referred to Dr. Alex Keller, a surgeon in Great Neck who specializes in the procedure. The cost of booking a commercial flight to New York, along with a hotel and car rental, for her consultation proved astronomical.

Her mother drove her down for the surgery itself. The return trip was agonizing. "Every pebble in the road hurt," Lee said.

Keller's office referred her to Angel Flight in 2001; a week later, her first flight was scheduled and ready to go.

Over the course of a dozen trips to Long Island, Lee began to enjoy the flights and the bird's-eye view they provided. More important, the missions saved her time off work and got her to the after-surgery care she needed without wearing her out financially and physically. Without Angel Flight, "I would have stopped the follow-up visits," said Lee, who is still in physical therapy in Massachusetts.

The trip home

Not every flight has a happy outcome. The MRI taken the day Christian and his parents arrived in Boston showed that the tumor in his brain had increased dramatically in size over just 25 days. Doctors stopped halfway through a spinal MRI because he didn't feel well and sent him home with

his parents to housing provided by the hospital.

The next morning, Ana called the doctor to tell him that Christian was not doing well. He was sleepy, hard to rouse — classic symptoms of a child turning the last corner, said Dr. Mark Kieran, Christian's physician at Dana-Farber. At the hospital that morning, his breathing was abnormal; then he had a seizure. The tumor's expansion had triggered bleeding in and around the brain.

"He had decreased 300 percent just in the last 12 hours," Kieran said. "The tumor had clearly hit a critical area . . . Neither he nor we had any control anymore."

After talking with Kieran, Ana and Jose decided to return home to Long Island by ambulance with their son so he could be among friends and family. He died on the

evening of Friday, March 5.

"When we referred him up to Boston, we knew at that point that the odds were substantially against him," said Dr. Robert Parker, who had treated Christian at Stony Brook since his initial diagnosis. "We were hoping for something that would slow the growth and give him as much good time, quality of life as possible, and that we could learn something from this that would allow us to better refine treatment for other kids."

The Fernandez family knew that. But they felt it was worth a try. Angel Flight gave them that chance.

As Jose climbed into the ambulance headed for Stony Brook, he told Kieran, "You guys did everything you could. We're glad you tried, and it gave us hope. [But] God's decided to take this in a different direction."



PHOTO BY ANNIE TORRES

CATALANO with Christian and Jose Fernandez.