

Angel Flight West hits milestone of 40,000 free flights

Posted at 09:19 PM on Saturday, Jun. 20, 2009

By Cyndee Fontana / The Fresno Bee

When Grant Smith first became a pilot, he lived out that boyhood dream by taking his wife on weekend flights.

Then his wife, Mary Frances, noticed a poster in an airport that asked: "Are you tired of going for \$200 hamburgers?"

And they were. Soon, Grant Smith signed up as a volunteer pilot for Angel Flight West, a nonprofit organization that provides free flights for children and adults with serious medical conditions and other important needs.

Saturday, Smith marked a milestone -- flying the 40,000th mission for the organization. He and two dozen other pilots from California, Arizona and Nevada gathered at Fresno Yosemite International Airport to pick up 41 young burn survivors heading home from a summer camp.

Smith, a retired electrical engineer who lives in Menlo Park, called it "probably about the best use you can have for an airplane."

For pilots, parents and passengers, that is a common sentiment. Angel Flight West assists passengers such as cancer patients, disaster victims and people traveling to tend to a sick family member or friend.

Flights must be less than 1,000 miles, and passengers must be medically stable and ambulatory. Financial need is a consideration.

Executive Director Alan Dias said Angel Flight West was founded in 1983 and flew only about a dozen missions the following year.

Now, the organization logs 10 to 15 mission each day. Volunteer pilots pick up the full cost of flights.

"You can see the growth over the years," Dias said. And for pilots, he said, "it's the best way to combine their passion and compassion."

Pilot Kevin Moore, who lives in Palo Alto and works at the biotech company Amgen, said he has flown more than 100 missions. Said Moore: "I wanted to not only enjoy myself flying, I wanted to do some good for people."

Saturday, one of his passengers -- Amanda King, 16 -- was a familiar face. She's flown several times with Moore and is a regular at "Champ Camp," a weeklong camp in the Fresno County foothills.

Amanda said she might not be able to attend without the help of Angel Flight West. And she loves the camp: "The people there are really nice, and it's wonderful to be with other burn survivors."

Fellow camper Treshaunn Twine, 12, of Hemet also said he doubted he could make the trip any other way. And he said he likes the view from the plane.

"It's fun because you're in the air and then, if you're tired of flying, you can go to sleep," he said.

Smith, 77, had two other passengers heading toward the Santa Rosa area. Wife Mary Frances also made the trip.

One passenger was Svetlana "Squirt" Granvold, 18, a counselor-in-training at the camp. It was her first time flying with Smith, even though he's a veteran after logging close to 300 flights for Angel Flight West.

Smith said he tries to fly 25 to 30 missions each year. He brushed off the personal cost -- estimated at \$15,000 to \$18,000 annually -- saying, "you don't think so much about how much you're spending if you're doing something good."

Granvold called it a remarkable service, adding, "if I had money, I'd give them a tip."

Mary Frances Smith laughed and said they wouldn't accept it.

"But it's nice to have someone offer."