

2012 RURAL HERO OF THE YEAR



Pilot Joe Pelissier with passenger Phil Schwimmer

The Oregon Office of Rural Health is proud to present this year's Rural Health Hero of the Year Award to Angel Flight West – Oregon Wing. Following are submission excerpts from those who supported the nomination.

EXCEPTIONAL CONTRIBUTION

The Oregon Wing of Angel Flight West (AFW) is a group of volunteer pilots that provide free transportation in small planes for people who need to get to medical appointments and access other essential services. The Oregon Wing of Angel Flight West was started in 1998. Over 14 years, the pilots have donated nearly 1,700 flights for more than 600 Oregonians. If not for these pilots, my husband Phil wouldn't be alive today. He has pancreatic cancer and in August 2011, doctors gave him three months to live. Then we learned about a clinical trial at Virginia Mason Clinic in Seattle. But because of medical bills, we'd lost our home and all our retirement savings, and we didn't have the resources to travel that far. The AFW pilots have flown Phil to and from Seattle 42 times and I know they'll be there as long as we need them. We're not the only rural family whose lives they've changed. There are so many stories . . . a few of them are told below in "In Their Own Words."

"ABOVE AND BEYOND" VOLUNTEERISM

The Angel Flight West pilots provide more than just desperately needed transportation – they also pay all the flight expenses. I don't travel with my husband when he goes to his appointments, but the pilots send me pictures from each flight. I've made a collage on a wall in the living room that shows me the beauty of what it's like to be up there. These people have become friends. The kindness the pilots have shown has had a tremendous affect on Phil's attitude.

IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Jacksonville has a population of just 2,200 and AFW has flown two other residents -- both for cancer treatment -- one to Seattle and one to Southern California. But it's not just Jacksonville -- AFW has flown people from Nyssa, Milton-Freewater, Vida and Burns, and from Baker City, Ontario, Coos Bay, Eagle Point, and Central Point. They even flew a service dog from Veneta to Santa Rosa, California, for training. Eighty-five percent of the people Angel Flight West flies in Oregon live in small towns and rural communities. For an intimate look at how AFW can affect someone's life, please view the segment of the Turning Point series that features Angel Flight West, at <http://tinyurl.com/7opye7c>.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The services you've provided for our Tribal patients are not only excellent, but exceeded expectations.

For that service and opportunity, I sincerely thank you.

One of our greatest challenges has been to provide meaningful care to patients with a very serious disease when our state is so large geographically and our major metropolitan center is in the upper western corner of the state. It is not uncommon for many of our patients, some of whom are severely disabled, to drive 8 to 10 hours, sometimes in inclement weather, over the mountain ranges, to an appointment at our clinic. Angel Flight West has become an integral part of our program to deliver care to multiple sclerosis patients who live in underserved areas of our state. The availability of Angel Flight West has already had a very significant impact on our ability to care for the very deserving patients who ordinarily would have very limited access to the medical care they need. I also want to save a special note of thanks for the wonderful people who pilot the planes that transport our patients. As volunteers who donate not only their time, but also take on significant economic expense to provide this service free of charge, I salute them all and wish I could thank each one of them individually.

When I was a kid, my grandma used to play any classic song you asked her to on the piano – Funny Valentine, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, Somewhere Over the Rainbow. She used to play for ballet studios, social events and dance halls back in the day. I just got off the phone with my dad who was able to fly on an Angel Flight the other day with my grandmother from California to Brookings, OR courtesy of Jim Hager. Because of Jim, my grandmother was able to get out of a terrible situation at a convalescent hospital and move into a better facility closer to family in Brookings. For years now, my grandma's health has been deteriorating. She has Alzheimer's, is completely unresponsive and sits almost lifeless in a wheelchair all day long due to having broken her hip a while ago. She taught herself how to play piano and played everything by ear. I don't think she ever learned how to read music. She just had a really good ear and a natural ability to play on a level and style that any professional pianist would envy (according to my musician father). When she used to play, my grandpa would just sit and sink into his chair, he'd look up and just close his eyes. The sound was so harmonious, it just made you stop in your tracks, sit, listen and feel calm. There is a piano at this new facility in Brookings. She went over to the piano yesterday (her first day there) and for the first time in several years, started playing. It's like she has come back to life. I think she might be back home again - for how long I don't know. I just cannot wait to get out there and see her. I want to express my overwhelming gratitude to Jim. My dad told me about how unique, energetic and positive he is. I am truly humbled, inspired by and grateful for this man because he gave my only living grandparent a chance to live out the rest of her life in a better place and receive better care - physically, mentally and spiritually. What a priceless blessing my grandma received. Our family is so lucky and grateful for it. We'll never forget what Jim's done for us.

I am writing to thank you all for the wonderful support and assistance you have given me over the past three months. Without you and your generous and caring pilots, I would not have been able to receive chemotherapy treatments each week. Those who wish to step up and selflessly volunteer, has renewed my faith in my fellow man. Each time I board a plane, I thank God for these selfless pilots. Each pilot has gone over and above, to ensure my comfort and safety, right down to a bottle of water and a blanket! Because of the relentless nature of pancreatic cancer, and the toll a full day of chemotherapy takes, your Mission Coordinating Team on the ground has worked doubly hard to find a roundtrip for me each week, from Aurora (south of Portland) to Renton (Seattle) and return the same day. I know that was asking a lot, but you always came through, week after week, and I can't thank you enough. I'm alive and doing well now, thanks to my doctor, weekly chemo, and all of you!

From an Anonymous Volunteer Pilot . . .

The real heroes of Angel Flight are the courageous patients and families that we fly. As pilots we fly for the love of flying and the rewards of sharing, but our passengers fly out of often dire necessity. This helps us all keep our contributions in perspective.

**CONGRATULATIONS, ANGEL FLIGHT WEST-OREGON WING, AND THANK
YOU FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE AND CONTINUE TO DO!**