

# Hope in Flight

Local pilots put their passions for aviation to a higher use

By Bernadette Finnerty  
Photo by Kerry Pittenger

Joshua Matos is a 16-year-old boy who loves baseball and surfing the Internet. But his life is anything but normal. Josh has undergone two kidney transplants, gets most of his nutrition through a feeding tube, and visits Children's Hospital of Philadelphia monthly for blood work and check-ups to monitor his condition. The kidney problems he has endured since birth have led to developmental delays. "Josh doesn't

*Pictured:  
Dr. Joseph Sandberg*



operate like a normal 16-year-old," says his stepfather, Ernest Rodriguez, his legal guardian. "His kidney problems have caused other medical problems, and he requires constant medical attention and monitoring."

Life isn't easy for Josh, but Rodriguez sees to it that he gets good medical care, that his educational needs are met, and that he's happy. One thing that makes Josh happy is attending summer camp at Camp Holiday Trails, a camp in Charlottesville, Va. for kids with special medical needs. But as a single father with a full-time job at a printing company in South Jersey, getting Josh to the camp—nearly 300 miles away—is no small matter.

That's where Angelflight East—a group of volunteer pilots who donate their time, money and aircraft to make sure people like Josh Matos can get to places like Camp Happy Trails—comes into play. In short, Angelflight provides free air transportation to people of all ages whose medical needs—evaluations, diagnoses, and treatments—can be met only by health care facilities far from their hometowns. Angelflight East is based in Blue Bell, Pa., but there is a network of similar organizations all around the United States. Angelflight pilots can connect with other similar organizations and complete a long trip in several "legs" if necessary.

For Angelflight pilots, the ability to combine their passion for aviation with helping others is a gift. Dr. Joseph Sandberg, who lives in Mount Laurel and runs a busy dental practice in Marlton, is a perfect example. Sandberg first got involved with Angelflight in 2001, when fellow dentist and pilot Vincent Mayher asked him to join a mission to fly a young girl from South Jersey to Pittsburgh for treatment of an intestinal disorder.

It was just after the attacks of September 11, and all flights were grounded. The plane Mayher usually rented for these flights was stuck in Virginia. So he asked Sandberg, who owns a 1978 Piper Lance, to fly the mission with him. Sandberg agreed and the flight was given special clearance. Sandberg and Mayher flew the girl and her mother to Pittsburgh, despite the fact that there were no other planes in the air.

Sandberg got so much out of the experience that he joined Angelflight East, and has flown as many as six missions each year since then. His latest mission was a Friday morning trip in late July to retrieve Joshua Matos from his camp in Virginia. "There is something special about the experience of helping another person directly," says Sandberg. "I really love the idea of that one-

to-one interaction. I like having the chance to talk with them and get to know them a little during the flight." Sandberg says he always takes a picture with his Angelflight passengers and often gets thank you notes, holiday cards and updates on how they are doing.

Sandberg, who also serves as president of the New Jersey Chapter of the Academy of General Dentistry, is no stranger to donating his time to organizations about which he cares. Before joining Angelflight, he had served other organizations, donated money and volunteered from time to time. But he says nothing compares to flying missions for Angelflight. "Some passengers have never been in a plane like this, and they ask lots of questions about it," he says, "and I love to talk about it. I also get to learn about them and their families. It's always a great experience. I like having the opportunity to make connections with people I would never have met otherwise."

*"You really get to know these families," says Kwoka. "You're really helping them, and in some ways you become an important part of a chapter in their lives."*

Sandberg adds that Angelflight pilots often ask a co-pilot to come along. "There is a real sense of camaraderie among pilots. We have the same interests, and it's a nice way to spend your time, flying with a friend."

Ed Kwoka—who runs two companies, flies between 10 and 20 missions each year and serves as president of Angelflight East—agrees with Sandberg's sentiments. The Burlington Township resident has been flying since 1991 and has put his 1975 Piper Seneca II into service for the organization since 2000.

Like Sandberg, a fellow pilot introduced Kwoka to Angelflight East. After his first mission, he, too, was hooked. Kwoka's first year and a half with the organization was spent flying one family to Boston every month with their baby girl, who was born with an abnormality in her skull that required multiple surgeries to allow her head to

grow normally. "You really get to know these families," says Kwoka. "You're really helping them, and in some ways you become an important part of a chapter in their lives." After Hurricane Katrina, Kwoka spent a week flying relief missions in Louisiana.

Kwoka is serving a two-year term as president of Angelflight East. He jokes that he missed one board meeting and was elected president in his absence. Despite his affable demeanor, Kwoka is serious about aviation and devoted to Angelflight East. His fascination with flying began in childhood, when he dreamed of joining the U.S. Air Force Academy. But after being hit by a car as a teenager, Kwoka knew his injuries would leave him no chance of flying jets in the U.S.A.F. Instead, he entered the business world and earned his pilot's license.

Kwoka's association with Angelflight East and his passion for flying have also led to new business ventures, which he says are uniquely suited to his interests and abilities. He recently purchased a New Hampshire-based air charter company and serves as one of its pilots. He says he learned a lot about running a flight scheduling operation through his association with Angelflight. He seized the opportunity to acquire the charter company and enjoys the one-on-one contact with clients.

Kwoka and his 13-year-old son, Alex, are currently working on building a helicopter from a kit they ordered about two and a half years ago. "It's a real helicopter," says Kwoka, "we're about 10 months from finishing it. It's a lot of work. My wife jokes that I should petition Mother Nature to add more hours to each day."

Kwoka adds that in both of his businesses (he also owns a computer consulting firm in Burlington City), he takes advantage of any opportunity he can to spread the word about the organization that is so close to his heart. That grass-roots spirit is crucial to the organization, which coordinates from its Blue Bell office nearly 1000 missions each year with 500 pilots and just three paid staff members.

That feeling is infectious, though. Angelflight missions aren't possible without the cooperation of hospitals, airports, doctors and private corporate donations. "Pilots donate their time and the cost of the flight, which includes fuel, but airports generally waive landing fees for Angelflight missions," says Sandberg. "For these missions, everyone wants to help."

For more information about Angelflight East, visit their website at [www.angelflighteast.org](http://www.angelflighteast.org). ■

Do you have a story of inspiration to share with us? If you know someone who has inspired you, or had a life-changing experience that will inspire others, please write to us at [edit@southjersey.com](mailto:edit@southjersey.com). We'd love to consider their story for a future edition.