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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

Hampton couple providing free air travel for medical treatment

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MARY PIEPER, For The Globe Gazette

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Doug and Robyn Pralle of Hampton stand next to their Cessna 183 plane. The couple recently started a non-profit organization called Compassion Flights to get North Iowa patients to other locations in the Midwest for medical treatment.

HAMPTON | Doug and Robyn Pralle of Hampton have started a non-profit to provide free flights for those who need to travel a long distance to receive medical treatment.

Compassion Flights officially took off in January.

When Doug was younger, his father was diagnosed with cancer and received treatment in Chicago.

"There were people who did nice stuff for us," he said.

Once a couple of doctors gave Doug and his mother tickets to a Chicago Cubs game while Doug's dad was getting treatment. They even arranged for them to get a limo ride to the stadium.

Doug said that's how he got the idea to do something for those who need medical treatment not available in North Iowa.

Doug, who has been a licensed pilot for 10 years and owns a Cessna 183 plane, flew a few people to get medical treatment before Compassion Flights got its non-profit status.

The first official Compassion Flight was for 8-year-old Elliot Burgos of Mason City, who has a brain tumor.

Doug flew Elliot from Mason City to Mankato, Minnesota, on April 28 for treatment.

Elliot sat beside Doug in the front of the plane. It was an adventure for the little boy, who took over the GPS during the flight under Doug's supervision.

"He did great," Doug said.

The Pralles keep their plane in a hangar at the Hampton Municipal Airport, but Doug flew the plane to the Mason City Municipal Airport to pick up Elliot to make it easier for the family.

Donations to Compassion Flights pay for the cost of the trips.

"We have had good response from the community in sponsoring the flights," Doug said. "It's been great to see the reaction."

Compassion Flights recently received a \$5,000 grant from the Franklin County Community Foundation.

The funds will be used to remodel a long-vacant avionics shop adjacent to the hangar where the Pralles' plane is located to create office space for Compassion Flights.

The space also will serve as a waiting room for those going on Compassion Flights.

"We want people to feel as comfortable as possible," Doug said.

Robyn does the paperwork for Compassion Flights, including the applications for flights. The organization has a board of directors that chooses flight recipients from those applications.

The Pralles are looking for more pilots as well as other volunteers.

They are planning a fly-in breakfast at the Hampton Municipal Airport on Labor Day as a fundraiser for Compassion Flights. Hopefully there will be lots of planes there, Doug said.

Compassion Flights will fly people to locations in Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri and North and South Dakota for medical treatment.

Doug said the organization has access to a couple of bigger planes if someone needs treatment outside that service area and might even be able to arrange for a commercial flight.

Visit the organization's website, compassionflights.com, for more information on how to volunteer, donate or apply for a Compassion Flight.

Mary Pieper

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