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Local volunteer pilot helping make difference in national nonprofit organization

by Derek Krayenhagen
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Siouxland — Imagine being sick and the care you need is thousands of miles away.

Well, that's where the people at Angel Flight Central come in, with the help of volunteer pilots.

Rick Angell of Cherokee, Iowa has been flying for nearly five years now.

His love of aviation has seen him do many fun things from trips to the Bahamas to visiting his kids in the Des Moines area.



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But for all of that fun he's had, nothing compares to his volunteer efforts with Angel Flight Central. (watch)
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"You get to help people and you get to see some people, you think your having a bad day? You ain't having a bad day. You're helping people in medical need that are having some tough times," said Volunteer Pilot, Angell.

Angel Flight Central is a non-profit organization with the mission of serving people in need by arranging flights for access to health care they wouldn't be able to access otherwise.

Families like the Gabriel's of Sioux City.

Judy Gabriel has a rare form of cancer called chordoma, which can occur anywhere along the spine, from the base of the skull to the tailbone.

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Judy said, "The cancer is so rare that there's very few surgeons that can operate on the type of cancer that I have."

Judy's surgeon was in Pittsburgh, but the Gabriel's had no way of getting there, and with the surgeries costing thousands of dollars, money was already tight.

The Gabriel's were put in touch with Angel Flight Central and their trip was booked.



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"He was more concerned about me, more concerned about me feeling like I was going to be okay. And I was going to get there, don't worry about it, the last thing you need to worry about is your transportation," said Gabriel about Angell.

The Angel Flight program was started in 1995 with the hopes of flying two passengers a month.

Since that day, thousands of volunteer pilots, like Rick, have flown millions of miles assisting people in need.

"The men and women that are pilots for us throughout our ten state region, they're truly heroes. And they give their time, treasure, their talent, and people are alive today that would not be if it wasn't for them getting these people to their medical treatment facilities," said Angel Flight CEO, Don Sumple.

With an army of volunteers Angel Flight Central has been making a difference one flight at a time.

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Angell said, "The bigger issue is getting the word out to providers and people that Angel Flight exists. And it's for them. And it's not a charity, you don't have to be in need to do it, you don't have to be in financial need to do it. You just need it."

The pilots fly legs of 300 miles before another pilot picks up the passengers.

Rick told me he does about four or five of these flights a year and the passengers are always grateful!



He said "I had one lady the lady I took to Denver she gave us cookies when we got on the plane. You get notes and cards

She said, "I had one lady, the lady I took to Denver, she gave us cookies when we got on the plane. You get notes and (watch)

(/) It makes a difference in their lives."

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Currently Angel Flight Central, which consists of ten states in the Midwest and the upper Midwest has nearly 300 volunteer pilots.

Sumple told me they could always use more to help people like Judy Gabriel.

Since Judy's cancer is so rare, her and her husband take several trips to Boston a year, where she has to get checkups with her neurologist.

Because of Angel Flight, Judy is getting the quality care she needs, without worry.

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She said, "They move mountains, there's so many organizations but Angel Flight by far has been life changing for us I would say."

Angel Flight Central also uses their pilots to help in response efforts during natural disasters, re-unite military personnel and their immediate families, among other humanitarian efforts.

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