



The Oregonian

Angels in the skies

A cancer patient says she can never adequately thank volunteers who fly her to distant treatments for free

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The words were straightforward, but Teresa "Tres" Morgan had to record and replay them to understand. The doctors were telling her that the breast cancer she thought she'd beaten had spread to her lungs. She had a year. With treatment, maybe longer. We're all dying, one doctor said, which Morgan heard as, "you first."

The Eugene woman, who worked three jobs to raise two sons and managed real estate on the side to save for retirement, quit everything that dark September day in 2006. She drove to Portland, Spokane and Seattle for second opinions. Finally a Seattle oncologist offered a different protocol: a low-dose weekly chemotherapy regimen that had shown promise in some trials. But his clinic was nearly 570 miles round-trip from her home. Morgan couldn't tolerate the 11-hour drive alone, couldn't afford months of hotel stays and knew no one in Seattle.

"I had no idea how I was going to do this," she recalls. Then her father discovered a small group of Oregon and Washington pilots who fly people like his daughter to their treatments -- for free.

Could Morgan walk? Would she sign a liability waiver?

Yes.

Just after 8 a.m. on a brilliant Oregon morning, Derrick Teal, boyish and freckled at 50, steps toward a frail woman entering the Eugene Flightcraft office. Behind him, a much younger woman, slender in brown corduroys and running shoes, pipes up.

"Hi, I'm Teresa," Morgan says as Teal turns with a surprised smile. She extends a confident hand, tipped with hot-pink nails. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

They step to the counter, where she signs a waiver. Then she follows him onto the tarmac, looking like two affluent baby boomers heading off on vacation. Teal pops open the plane door and she slides onto the gray leather seat, snapping her seat belt and adjusting her headphones.

"Clear," Teal shouts as the Piper Saratoga roars to life. Then Angel Flight 7 Echo Mike, en route to Boeing Field, taxis and takes off. Morgan leans back, clutching an embroidered handkerchief and closing her eyes for her 38th Angel Flight.

From 5,500 feet, the Willamette Valley unfolds like a crazy quilt of Crayola colors -- forest green, olive green, spring green -- that Teal delights in like a child.

"I never get tired of flying this valley," he says. The Portland business executive grew up bouncing into his hometown of North Bend in his dad's Piper Cherokee. By 1992, he'd earned his pilot's license, and two years ago bought his dream plane, a sleek six-seater that costs about \$122 an hour to fly.

But his wife, Julie, is often busy, and he's exhausted friends who want to see Mount St. Helens. So when he saw a brochure for Angel Flight West, the local wing of Air Charity, whose members fly about 90 percent of nonemergency donated flights nationwide, he signed up.

As managing director of Hand Therapy Specialists in Portland, Teal handles the business side of four clinics that provide physical and occupational therapy for hand injuries. He saw the flights as a way to give back

and spread the gospel of flying. Seeing the Earth from a small plane reveals nature and the Northwest from an entirely different perspective, he says.

Pilots review passenger requests online, then volunteer for one or both legs of the mission. They often work like links in a chain, passing passengers up and down flight corridors. The volunteers are as varied as those they transport.

Teal lives in Forest Park and flies his elegant plane out of Scappoose.

Glen Showalter, a 56-year-old Mennonite who farms rye grass between Albany and Eugene, flies his four-seat Cessna 182 out of a grass airfield. He's flown Morgan 15 times.

Ed Ward, 46, is a registered investment manager in Kirkland who flies his four-seat Cherokee Archer out of Paine Field in Everett. The pilots and organization cover all costs.

Showalter, the father of nine grown children, says when he flies alone, he feels selfish, that he's wasting resources. These missions allow him to do what he loves while doing good. "I want to give the right credit," he says. "The Lord has blessed us where we can afford to share with others. Jesus was very well known for helping and healing the sick, and this is an opportunity to extend that practice."

Ward's inspiration is his mother, Betty, a tireless Grants Pass volunteer who died of cancer last June and whose work he feels he's carrying on. He uses his small inheritance to fund the flights -- 20 since January. "When she passed on, I felt the torch passed to me," Ward says. "I take this cancer issue very personally, and I will fly anyone, anywhere, anytime, who is committed to the fight."

So when freezing weather canceled Morgan's return flights this winter, Ward put Teresa Morgan and her mother on commercial carriers to get them home safely -- twice. "What do you say to that?" Morgan says, tearing up at the memory. "These people don't even know me and they're doing this. How do you adequately thank any of them?"

Inside the Seattle Cancer Care Wellness and Treatment Center on May 29, Morgan waits. She waits for lab results, for the nurses to mix the day's drug cocktail, for the intravenous drip to empty.

Outside, Derrick Teal waits for her. He sits on a concrete bench in the shade until she emerges, and then escorts her to the complimentary pilot car he borrowed at Boeing Field.

The pilots aren't expected to give door-to-door service, but Morgan says they often choose to. Within 20 minutes of returning to the airport, Teal and Morgan are flying south.

Pilots often plan the flights so that passengers will see the sunrise or pass through clouds in a way that makes flying "a full experience," Ed Ward says.

"When you're up there and flying and looking, it is a total escape from stress and worry," he says. "Even flying through the patchy clouds, it's like a slalom course in slow motion -- it's a magical experience."

Many passengers require just one trip. Others fly routinely. Morgan's weekly chemo leaves her exhausted, queasy and sore, as if she has bruised every muscle.

"It is humbling," Teal says of what he's seen in 127 missions. "We're all only a diagnosis away." Both passenger and pilot fall silent as Teal's Piper climbs over Vashon Island, leaving Seattle, banking over a blue-green Puget Sound where sailboats bob as if it's already summer.

Morgan likes to sit up and watch the pilot work the instruments and hear him talk to the towers. She looks for landmarks: Rainier's blocky face and all its snowcapped siblings: Baker, Adams, Hood, Jefferson and the Three Sisters -- all delicate in comparison. A mile up, Interstate 5 appears orderly and reasoned. And blanketing everything, there is green.

"I heard someone say, 'We live until we die,' and I'm still living," Morgan says. "In the air, you see the miracle that has been provided for us. Even the clouds put me closer to God. I feel his power and his miracles, and I believe he is blessing me."

"Thank you," she says to Teal.

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