

# ANGELS OF THE SKY

BY RACHEL FRIEDMAN

**AeroAngel** is on a remarkable mission to help medically vulnerable children access distant, life-saving medical care with free, private jet flights.

#### Editor's Note:

I recently spoke with Mark Pestal, the founder of AeroAngel, a national nonprofit with the tall mission of helping seriously ill children fly to distant, life-saving medical care by providing flights on private business jets at no cost to their families. AeroAngel, based in the Denver area, is expanding its unique flight donation program, begun in 2010, to help more families access critical medical care. Mark, a retired attorney and professional pilot, currently serves as AeroAngel's volunteer Executive Director. The charity has flown many missions on Embraer jets and has plans to fund its first Phenom 300 to accomplish even more flights.

*Rachel Friedman*

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**Rachel Friedman:** Most aircraft owners and pilots have heard of angel flight organizations. What unique niche does AeroAngel fill in the aviation charity arena?

**Mark Pestal:** AeroAngel's mission and operating model is unique among so-called angel flight organizations in that it is providing flights all on turbine aircraft with a crew of pilots. We transport seriously ill children who cannot fly on a commercial airline to specialty children's hospitals. A typical child may be medically fragile, have a compromised immune system, or need to use portable medical equipment, such as a feeding pump, on a flight. We do not provide medical care as found on air ambulance flights or accommodate passengers who need a stretcher or extensive medical monitoring. We provide long-distance flights – coast-to-coast on many occasions – with some on very short notice. Flights are provided only to children unable to safely fly on an airline flight.

**RF:** What led you to start AeroAngel?

**MP:** While serving on the board of an



angel flight organization, I observed that the most challenging flight requests were going unfilled as when the passenger had the greatest need for a private flight. Most flights were being done for passengers who could fly commercially but who were simply looking for a free transportation resource. To do the flights no other group was doing meant using more capable aircraft that could fly in weather where icing conditions or low ceilings were encountered, as well as providing a more comfortable experience as found on a pressurized aircraft. Many volunteer pilots were not flying aircraft suitable to long-distance flights with heavy payloads

and only possessed limited experience flying in more challenging weather conditions.

**RF:** From what you've said, AeroAngel operates much like a corporate flight department. What unique career experiences did you bring to the endeavor?

**MP:** At the time I started AeroAngel, I was working as an Assistant United States Attorney in Denver, and in that position had represented the FAA in a number of aviation accident cases, which afforded me an opportunity to work with many

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talented aviation experts and professional pilots. That experience not only piqued my interest in professional aviation but also solidified my commitment to create a strong safety culture for AeroAngel.

Over the years, I have also done some freelance writing for several aviation publications on safety-related topics. In addition to serving on an angel flight board, I worked for a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., and while in the area, flew with the Civil Air Patrol. While not having flown as a career, I have continued my training over the years and obtained my ATP certificate and several type ratings as I gained flight experience in different turbine aircraft. In May, I completed a single-pilot type rating in the Phenom 300 at CAE in Dallas.

**RF: As AeroAngel enters its 12th year of operations, what challenges do you see on the horizon?**

**MP:** We're seeing increased demand for flights, even though we do very little advertising and outreach to children's hospitals for flight requests. There are over 250 children's hospitals in the country, and many are increasingly specializing in the treatment of rare disease and conditions. So, meeting future demand for flights is certainly a key focus.

Of course, we've had to deal with the pandemic. We did not suspend flights at any point but actually increased them during 2020 and 2021. If anything, the pandemic only highlighted the critical need for a child to be protected from exposure to pathogens while traveling for medical care. Contracting not just COVID, but many other bugs could jeopardize the chance to undergo treatment, lead to a poor outcome... or worse.

**RF: Are there particular children's hospitals for which you do the majority of AeroAngel flights?**

**MP:** Boston Children's tops the destination list, followed by Lucile Packard Children's Hospital in Palo Alto. Both have incredible programs for children needing complex heart surgery, and the children we fly in would be at risk on a commercial flight. In addition to flights for many other children's hospitals, we also do flights for children enrolled in clinical trials for such diseases as Hunter's Syndrome, who must travel long distances frequently to participate in the trial.

For example, we have been working with Duke University to support their pioneering program to treat children born with no immune system – often referred to as “bubble-boy kids.” Duke's breakthrough therapy, which recently received FDA approval, is literally breaking these children out of their bubbles with a thymus-cell implant procedure. Sadly, without the treatment, these children have very limited life expectancies.



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The critical challenge is getting a child who has rarely left his or her home to Raleigh-Durham without exposure to life-threatening pathogens. We've done two flights so far during the clinical trial, but Duke has a growing waiting list of over 25 children who will need to undergo the procedure. The only safe option for a child more than a few hours driving distance is a private flight. Given the critical nature of these children, it's fair to say that these are literally life-saving flights to life-saving medical care.

**RF: You certainly have a tremendous passion for AeroAngel's mission as demonstrated by the countless hours you have volunteered over the past 12 years. What is your vision for the next decade?**

**MP:** Being the team lead has certainly been an amazing faith journey. We're at an exciting point to build our unique flight donation program and infrastructure. I like to say that it's like we're building a hospital at the same time we're doing surgery at the construction site. Our ultimate goal is to become the NetJets for children's hospitals, doing more flights on short-notice anywhere in the country and even internationally, if necessary.

In June of 2018, we dove into the jet management business after I received a call out of the blue from a Colorado company that owned a Learjet. The owner had decided to donate the Lear 55 to AeroAngel to help us do more flights. So, in less than two weeks, I was standing up our own flight department. We were able to operate the jet for several years, and, more importantly, it served to demonstrate the value of having a jet available for flights as an essential part of our service model.

In addition to growing our team and logistical capacity, we're working to fund a Phenom 300 in order to be able to do more flights, while increasing our flight request fulfillment rate. Having a dedicated jet (whether owned or leased) will enable us to schedule flights, alleviating the uncertainty to families needing a flight, as well as on our team trying to fill flights. It really doesn't matter who actually owns the jet, as long as we have the ability to use it for our mission. To offset our operational costs, we would consider a shared ownership model or placing the jet under a charter operation.

**RF: You mentioned that it is your personal goal to fill 100 percent of the flight requests for critically ill children. Do you purchase charter flights when a donated flight is not available?**

**MP:** Yes. A few years ago, we started an Emergency Flight Fund to augment our jet donor database. We often receive flight requests on short notice for a variety of reasons. We also want to be able to back-up donated flights

with a charter in the event of a mechanical breakdown or scheduling issue. There is also the opportunity for jet card or fractional owners to donate hours to our program as well. Charter flights are especially important, and certainly more cost-effective and efficient, when providing cross-country flights, for example.

**RF: Having flown many AeroAngel flights on Embraer jets, is there one flight that stands out to you?**

**MP:** We've been fortunate to fly almost the entire Embraer product line from the Phenom 100 up to the Legacy 600, and more recently a new Praetor 500. Admittedly after first seeing the Phenom 300 up close at Oshkosh in 2012, I dreamed of using it for AeroAngel flights.

Fast forward a couple of years, and that dream was fulfilled after I posted an urgent flight request on Facebook that a Phenom 300 driver in the Denver area saw and which the owner he flew for approved. A few days later, we flew to Salt

Lake City to take three-year-old Sophia, her parents, and a nurse non-stop to Cincinnati Children's Hospital to see multiple experts in her rare, debilitating disease. Without that roundtrip flight, she would not have been able to access life-changing medical care. Since that time, we've added a number of other Phenoms to our donor list and flown them all across the country.

**RF: Tell me about your jet donation program. How does it work?**

**MP:** We have several hundred jets on our database and try to make it as easy as possible for an owner to donate a flight. Our team handles all of the flight logistics, including preparation of a detailed itinerary for the passengers. Available flights are emailed out in our weekly flight schedule. In more urgent situations, we may reach out to a donor's dedicated contact to check availability. We can provide a tax receipt for the value of the donated flight.

Whether a jet owner or pilot, we try to cover all aspects of the flight, except the filing of a flight plan. As an AeroAngel jet donor, there's no long-term commitment or pressure to do flights. We're extremely grateful for the generosity of many Embraer owners and recognize that even one donated flight per year can be a huge blessing to a family.

**RF: What is the best way for someone to find out more about becoming an AeroAngel jet donor or supporter?**

**MP:** I very much enjoy talking with owners and donors to provide details about our unique flight donation program and take the next step toward a mutually beneficial partnership. I can be reached at: (303) 548-3426 or by email: [mark@aeroangel.org](mailto:mark@aeroangel.org). We have more information on our website: [www.aeroangel.org](http://www.aeroangel.org), Instagram: [aeroangel\\_org](https://www.instagram.com/aeroangel_org), and Facebook: [AeroAngel.org](https://www.facebook.com/AeroAngel.org). 



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