

FOUR corners

EDITED BY JOANNA WANE



TIM RANIGER

Mercy Missions

“Sky Angel” Lance Weller
spreads his wings.

Lance Weller’s Cirrus SR20-G3 is state of the art. The nifty little plane has all the computerised equipment a pilot could need, a parachute that deploys out the top of the aircraft, and four comfortable, black-leather seats. These seats sometimes carry passengers on Angel Flight missions for the charity Weller founded in 2011 to improve lives “one flight at a time”.

Angel Flight New Zealand (AFNZ) is modelled on similar enterprises in the United States and Australia, where pilots donate their time, plane, flying skills and running costs to transport people with non-emergency conditions and limited financial resources to medical services.

Weller flew 10 missions in three years when he lived in Brisbane and was



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one of several Sky Angels who flew a nine-year-old girl each week more than 300km from Grafton to Brisbane to have dialysis. When the plane landed, the family was met by an Earth Angel and taken to hospital by car.

“So it took all the stress out of that visit,” he says. “They didn’t have to find a taxi and wait around. We have the same here – people are looked after the whole way.”

Weller, 64, spent more than three decades in Australia before retiring back home to New Zealand. Originally from Porirua East, he moved across the Tasman in his 20s and worked his way up in various companies before buying a small jewellery tool and equipment business. The company grew and went nationwide.

“Then I bought a cattle property and Darcy ran it as a hobby while I ran the business. Now I’m over here, worn out,” he laughs.

In Australia, Angel Flight does around 200 missions every month and has become part of the community – something Weller would like to see happen here. By the end of last year, the New Zealand charity had 40 registered pilots and 35 Earth Angels, who arrange free transport on the ground. Five co-ordinators organise the missions, which require around a week’s notice to mount.

The service is free for anyone financially and medically in need. Patients must be referred by a doctor or other health professional, and require a doctor’s letter clearing them to fly in a light aircraft. “We don’t want to carry someone

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and make them worse,” Weller says.

In New Zealand, his missions have included transporting a man without legs, a 14-day-old baby with a cleft palate, and an 11-year-old boy with a similar condition. The boy had already had five operations and needed to travel from Kaitaia to Auckland for another assessment.

“Dad was working and Mum had five other kids. They were faced with a long drive down and back. He would have missed four days’ school and who would have looked after the other children while Mum was away?” Angel Flight flew the mother and son to Whenuapai, waited while the boy had his x-rays and returned in time for the other children to be collected from school.

Sky Angel volunteers must have clocked up 250 hours as pilot in command, and be able to fly a four-seater, to register. “By the time you’ve flown 250 hours, you’ve been over a few dry gullies [jargon for flying experience].”

Weller is keen to hear from anyone interested in volunteering. More Earth Angels are needed in Christchurch and Wellington/Paraparaumu, while more pilots are wanted in Gisborne, Napier, New Plymouth, Paraparaumu and across the South Island. To find out more, visit www.angelflightnz.co.nz. **HELEN FRANCES**