

Whangarei Leader


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YOUR PLACE, YOUR PAPER

Angel Flight heaven-sent

By DENISE PIPER

SMALL aircraft pilot Lance Weller really is an angel in the sky.

The retired businessman is single-handedly setting up a charity to fly patients to far-away hospitals for non-emergency appointments.

The enterprise is called Angel Flight New Zealand.

Mr Weller was a volunteer pilot for the Australian version which has done more than 5000 flight missions.

But when he moved back to New Zealand after 43 years he was disappointed to find the charity wasn't operating here.

"I saw how wonderful it was to help people in strife.

"The last mission I did was a two-year-old boy with a brain tumour and his father. They lived about five hours' drive from Brisbane but because of the boy's condition they took two days to drive there. I just think about the difference that flight made to that family."

Mr Weller now lives in Tutukaka after picking Whangarei district off a map because of the warm weather, airport and proximity to Auckland.

He hopes to start Angel Flight NZ with Northland patients, particularly those in places like Kaitia who face hours of driving to get to hospitals in Auckland.

"We will pick them up and fly to North Shore where an Earth Angel volunteer will be waiting to drive them to hospital. They can be there in an hour and a half at no charge," he says.

"Our motto is improving lives one flight at a time."

The patients need to be recommended by a health professional and be in financial need.

Angel Flight is not an air ambulance or emergency helicopter and doesn't have medical equipment on board, so patients must be fit to fly.

The flights complement the



Taking flight: Lance Weller flew his single-engine aircraft from Brisbane to Whangarei and is ready to take patients on Angel Flight missions.

Photo: DENISE PIPER

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Angel Flight NZ founder Lance Weller

work of the Northland Electricity Rescue Helicopters which do emergency flights, he says.

Mr Weller is looking for sponsors and volunteer drivers and pilots.

Several airmen from Whangarei Flying Club have already put up their hands, he says.

He felt that as founder and chairman of Angel Flight NZ he had to volunteer his plane, a Cirrus SR20.

But in order to use it he had to fly the single-engine craft in a daring trans-tasman flight from Brisbane to Whangarei.

The journey went from Brisbane to Lord Howe Island, to Norfolk Island, to Kerikeri for customs then on to Whangarei.

Mr Weller admits the trip was mentally and physically challenging, and the craft had just enough fuel for each leg of the journey.

"It is a daunting flight - there's lots of empty ocean out there."

He and co-pilot Garth Jensen from Sydney took no risks. They took emergency beacons, a life raft, a back-up GPS, a live tracking device and wore life jackets at all times.

The Cirrus is a modern computerised plane with its own parachute in case the engine dies over water, which provides peace of mind, he says.

Mr Weller is hoping to complete his first mission next month.

■ Call Lance Weller on 434-3271 or lance747@bigpond.com if you are interested in helping with sponsorship or volunteering.

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