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Delgado gives friendly skies new meaning

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Stacey M. Duck
Staff Writer

Montgomery Village resident Dwighd Delgado always wanted to fly. As a child growing up in the U.S. Virgin Islands, he watched planes flying in and out of the island port and dreamed of one day joining them.

Decades later, Delgado has realized his dream, and he is using his skill to help people in need of medical care reach their treatment destinations.

Delgado, 52, volunteers with AirLifeLine, America's oldest and largest nonprofit patient transportation organization. The program is available for patients who can demonstrate financial need or are unable to travel on commercial aircraft because of health concerns, such as an impaired immune system. Pilots who sign up for the program must provide a plane, either by owning or renting one, and cover the cost of travel for the patient, family member or support person who is travelling to or from the treatment center.

"This is all out of pocket," Delgado said. "We are prohibited from accepting anything from them."

Delgado received his pilot's license in 1998, and first heard of AirLifeLine about two years ago, when he picked up a flyer at the Frederick Municipal Airport where he often rents a plane to fly on weekends. The cost of each flight varies depending on the distance. Delgado said he spent close to \$1,000 to take a woman from Baltimore to North Carolina, but only spent about \$600 to take a woman to Pittsburgh.

Delgado is the vice president of manufacturing at Fusion UV Systems, Inc., a company that builds equipment to instantly dry the ink or protective coatings on products, such as beer cans, cell phone covers or golf balls. He said flying for AirLifeLine gives him a way to reach out to others while enjoying his hobby.

"There's a host of reasons why I like flying," Delgado said. "I'm doing something I like to do, it's a totally different skill set ... I gave [AirLifeLine] a call because I've always wanted to do something like that. It is something I can give back."

Although he's been with the group for two years, Delgado has only flown two solo missions - one taking a woman to Pittsburgh for an organ transplant, and another flying a woman on the first leg of her journey home from Baltimore to Georgia. Delgado said he has flown "a handful" of other trips as a copilot.

Every week, AirLifeLine publishes a nationwide list of patients who need flights. Pilots then look on the list to see if they can transport anyone traveling in their area.

When Delgado signs up for a mission, he receives a mission request form with the patient's details, such as weight, a brief description of the illness and specific information on where the patient needs to go. He then contacts the patient to arrange the transportation schedule and where they will meet. He also makes sure that any special needs are met, such as having a friend or family member along to help the patient in and out of the airplane, or coordinating schedules with another pilot if he is only flying part of the way.

Delgado usually flies a Cessna 182, a small plane that will seat four people comfortably and has room for a companion for the patient, he said.

After talking with the patient about special needs they will have during the flight, Delgado spends about two hours studying weather patterns and maps and preparing a flight plan, which he has to file with the Federal Aviation Administration.

When Delgado flew a woman to North Carolina on her first leg of a journey home to Georgia, the round trip flight took almost eight hours. Because of poor weather conditions, he had to fly for more than two



Dwighd Delgado of Montgomery Village volunteers his time and talents as a pilot to transport people in need of medical attention to their destinations.

Henrik G. de Gyor/The Gazette

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hours through thick fog, relying on his instruments because he could not see the ground or the horizon. Preparations helped make sure the trip went smoothly.

"I want to make sure that at least this is as uneventful as possible," Delgado said. "It took a lot of intense concentration, but it couldn't have been that bad, because she fell asleep in the back."

But Delgado said it was his first patient who helped him see the importance of his volunteer work. He was transporting a woman with cancer, and was surprised by her positive outlook and will to survive, despite her many surgeries.

"This time last year, I took a woman who was a cancer patient," Delgado said. "It was only halfway into the trip I realized what it meant to her. Turns out she'd had five organ transplants already ... I don't see how somebody who had gone through all that could be doing so well. It kind of drove it home for me."

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