



in the ... Arms of an Angel

Angel Flight West and Lions clubs combine efforts for children

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The Mariposa Airport was bustling with activity Sunday as 24 Angel Flight West airplanes dropped off 42 campers bound for Camp Pacifica, a California Lions Camp in Ahwahnee. The campers were then chauffeured from Mariposa to camp by Sierra, Bass Lake and North Fork Lions Club members for a week of camp for the hearing impaired.

"It was kind of an amazing day with the storm coming in and the kids were so excited to go to camp," said Diane Peterson, Bass Lake Lions Club member. However Sunday's thunderstorms put a little kink into flight plans and four campers' flights were cancelled until Monday when the weather had improved. Safety was priority for the volunteer pilots of Angel Flight West — a group of pilots who offer free flight services for those in need of health care and other compelling needs, according to the group's mission statement. Oakhurst Sierra Lions Club member Wayanne Markley said Angel Flight West pilots have been volunteering their airplanes, fuel and time since Camp Pacifica began 33 years ago and that their service is a huge asset to the camp. "There are so many kids we have that aren't necessarily from our local area," Markley said, adding that what would be a long car ride is now a short plane ride. "It's pretty exciting for the kids — sometimes it's their first flight," Markley said. "They (Angel Flight West pilots) do a huge service for these kids."

Mariposa resident Dave Lombard is one of those pilots. He has been flying with Angel Flight West for six years. When he saw a group of Angel Flight pilots land in Mariposa for Camp Pacifica, he started asking questions about the program and soon found himself involved. He now flies about one mission a month, transporting ambulatory passengers who can't afford transportation to see doctors primarily in the Bay Area and Sacramento. "I've been blessed and I love to fly so it's a great way to give back something useful," Lombard said. "It's not the government's job to take care of people, it's our job to take care of each other." Lombard flew two girls home to Los Angeles last Saturday and then flew up two girls from Livermore Sunday for a week of camp — the second of two weeks of camp for the hearing impaired held at Camp Pacifica every summer. Along with hearing impaired children ages 7 to 15, the camp also caters to siblings and children of a hearing impaired person.

Brianna McCarthy, 12, was nonchalant about the flight in. She signed, through interpreter Scott Yoneda, that the first time she flew into Mariposa for camp she was a little nervous about the flight, but now she's used to it and prefers small planes to large ones. This year marks McCarthy's sixth year at Camp Pacifica. "I like the fun activities and being with friends," she said. Although she attends school with many of the campers regularly, she said she has to wait a whole year to see some of her other friends.

Spezio Harmount, 12, was a little more enthusiastic about the flight. "I love airplanes," he signed. "I like it because it's more visual. You can see people driving, see lakes ... when you're driving you can't see a lot." Harmount has been coming to Camp Pacifica for four years and says he likes to come so he has something to do. "I like all the activities because typically, in the summer, I just sit at home being bored," Harmount. "I can keep myself busy here." Harmount added his favorite activities in the past have been boating and catching frogs. Catching frogs is a way campers can earn points towards an end-of-the-week auction held on Fun Day. Leading up to Fun Day, campers are able to collect points for the auction through a variety of activities.

Lisa Perez, camp program director, signed that campers volunteer all week to clean and do other tasks to help out and earn points. On Fun Day, campers participate in a watermelon eating contest, blind volleyball and swimming pool relay races, among a variety of other activities, to see who can earn the most points. The frog jump is also camp tradition — campers paint their faces to look like frogs and everyone votes on who does the best frog jump. Campers can even get their revenge on camp staff at the end of the week through a variety of options — they can douse staff in ice, cover staff in shaving cream, and even pick one staff member of their choice to throw into the pool. Perez has been director

of the camp for three years. A middle and high school teacher for the deaf in Downey, Perez recruits counselors from across the state. Her recruits are hearing impaired or deaf studies majors.

Yoneda, the camp interpreter, is one staff member who is not hearing impaired and instead has a bachelor of arts in deaf studies with an emphasis in American Sign Language and English interpretation. None of this would be possible without fundraising efforts from the Lions clubs. Now that the Lions Camp is paid for, funds raised by the club go to camp improvements and to "camperships" (scholarships), Peterson said. Throughout the year, when not used for deaf camp, Camp Pacifica is used as a rental facility.

"That helps us make the improvements so it can be a bigger and better camp for the children," Peterson said. "One of our goals is to eventually have it for blind children but that takes a lot more preparation. Our whole board is really excited about how things are going."