

Taking the injured under her wing

Gail Courneyea evolved from nurse to air transport expert — and conquered her fear of flying

BY GORDON GIBB
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Gail Courneyea, a petite, Peterborough nurse and grandmother, speaks in short, crisp sentences. Behind her thick glasses, blue eyes blink rapidly, mirroring a mind — and body — that's constantly on the go.

Courneyea is founder and CEO of Angels of Flight Canada, a company that moves 2,000 sick and injured patients a year between points all over the globe.

"The farthest we've been is Ushuaia," she says. "That's at the southernmost tip of Argentina."

Back in the 1980s, after 16 years serving in the Intensive Care Unit at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre, Courneyea had no desire to become an entrepreneur. She also had a distinct fear of having anything to do with airplanes.

But fate had other plans.

"In 1986, I agreed — reluctantly — to accompany a patient on a flight to Toronto," she recalls. Afterwards, she vowed never to fly again.

Her resolve was short-lived. Courneyea, now 54, was back in the air a few months later. That time, she began to analyze her fear. "The key was that I didn't know a thing about the

environment I was in — the aircraft. But more importantly, I was transporting a critically-ill person in an environment I knew nothing about. That's a serious issue for a nurse."

To pursue some answers, she and several other nurses enrolled in flight school.

"I remember that first day when the instructor was outlining the course — the fact that it could lead to a pilot's licence and, after so many hours in the air, we would be doing our solo," she says. "I turned around and looked at the nurse beside me and said, 'Boy, that'll never be me!'"

As it happened, Courneyea did fly solo and earned her wings.

"What pushed me forward was, ultimately, my concern for my patients," Courneyea says. "But the more I learned, the more fascinated I became. Earning my pilot's licence meant I had conquered my fear. I don't actually use it now — and I still don't enjoy flying. But at least I understand it."

With a handful of colleagues and some venture capital, Courneyea founded Angels of Flight in 1988.

The service offers hospitals an alternative to giving up valuable equipment and nursing staff. And hospitals seemed eager to delegate the sometimes onerous task of arranging transfers.

"A foreign patient is not funded by the Ministry of Health," Courneyea adds. "If that patient has no insurance, it puts the onus on the hospital to continue patient care indefinitely or cut its losses and pay to have the patient returned home."



SHERRIE LE MASURIER FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Most of the existing air ambulance services — there are a handful in Canada, according to Courneyea — provide their own aircraft and pilot. Angels of Flight doesn't own any aircraft. It provides staff and equipment. A patient's condition and the distance involved will dictate the mode of transportation used, from land ambulances to commercial airlines.

One of her most memorable

patient transfers involved an Iranian hospitalized in Toronto for several months.

"The hospital had spent \$200,000 caring for this man with no hope of compensation," she says. "After trying to get him home without success, they called us in. We had him home within a week."

The British Airways flight involved a layover of six hours in London, but the patient was not welcome in Britain.

"We got around it by setting up a secure area at a hotel in London close to the airport," says Courneyea. That — and the fact the patient was bedridden and unable to move — satisfied immigration officials.

Nowadays, private insurance companies are increasingly using her company to transport clients who have fallen ill while on holiday.

And over time, Courneyea began to notice an emerging

TIMELY TRANSFER:

Gail Courneyea of Angels of Flight Canada checks her patient.

trend: the special request.

"We flew one fellow to the Philippines," Courneyea says. "It was his dying wish to return to his birthplace near Manila."

Then there was the cancer patient who got tickets to see Shania Twain in Ottawa, only to be hospitalized in Renfrew two days before the concert.

"We drove out from Peterborough with a paramedic in our own ambulance," Courneyea recalls.

"The whole family, including his two young children, rode out together and the guy had a great evening. Shania even spent time with the family backstage and the fellow was thrilled . . .

"Thirty-six hours later, he was gone."

There have been setbacks for Courneyea. For example, the bankruptcy of a private carrier left her with a huge debt that almost cost her the business about 10 years ago.

But the cruellest blow of all came in 1993, when leukemia claimed the life of her 22-year-old daughter Carol, a member of the Angels team.

"It was hard," Courneyea says. "But you have to go on. If anything, it made me work that much harder."

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