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After flying to specialized treatment, Nicholas Bush receives help from Lezlie Adler, director of rehabilitation therapy services for Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

Helpful pilots land medical aid

Volunteer programs link Mich. patients with what they need

By LAURA POTTS
FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER

As 5-year-old Nicholas Bush prepared for a trip to the Mayo Clinic last fall, he was scared.

It wasn't of getting poked and prodded, or of all those tests.

He was frightened of the single-engine airplane that would take him to Rochester, Minn.

His eyes widened at the prospect of a three-hour ride in the loud, rattling four-seater.

Luckily for the Novi boy, pilot Phillip Hecksel knows how to deal with kids. As a Mercy Med-Flights volunteer for three years, Hecksel has learned to put nervous children and adults at ease.

Now Nicholas hopes to be a passenger again next month with Hecksel through southeast Michigan-based Mercy Med-Flights, one of six volunteer flight programs in the state.

Patients pay nothing. The pilots usually use their own planes and cover costs of transporting patients, personnel, equipment and transplant organs and tissues to medical centers in Michigan and surrounding states.



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Mercy Med-Flights' Phillip Hecksel, who flies from Oakland County Airport, said, "I get a great satisfaction out of helping other people."

In 1998, the six groups made a total of 390 trips to help patients receive treatment or vital transplants, said Ken Osman, founder and president of the Lansing-based Volunteer Mercy Pilots.

Nick was born three months premature. His parents were told he would never "walk, talk, sit up, do anything," said his mother, Melinda Bush. He weighed less than 2 pounds and was diagnosed with epilepsy, cerebral palsy and a growth hormone disorder, along with enough other medical problems to fill a hospital storage

room with his medical charts.

Bush, a high school teacher, learned of Mercy Med-Flights after seeing a magazine advertisement and hearing about it on a Detroit radio station.

Initially, she and her husband, Jeff Bush, were apprehensive about asking for help from strangers. But Nick's hospital bills and the Bushes' medical leaves were making it increasingly difficult to afford the trip to Minnesota. And the 14-hour drives to the Mayo Clinic were hard on Nick, whose fragile

health made the drive risky.

"Jeff and I are very independent people and asking for help has been a tough thing to do," she said. "When you have a child like Nick, you have to ask for help. It really takes a whole team to handle his problems."

The Bushes were put in touch with Hecksel. Though he was unemployed at the time, Hecksel didn't hesitate to donate his time and skills for the boy he'd never met.

"In my case, life's been good to me," said Hecksel, who is now a project planner working in the metro Detroit area. "I saw Mercy Med-Flights as a benefit to people who really need it."

Hecksel and Osman say the programs need more volunteers to do everything from making flights to helping in the office.

"If Nick didn't have access to Mayo, I know his health wouldn't be what it is," said his mother. He is now able to walk and do other things for himself.

And Nick seems to have conquered his fear of small planes. At a recent meeting with Hecksel, the boy lit up and exclaimed, "You're my buddy, Phil."

LAURA POTTS can be reached at 1-517-372-8660. For more information about Mercy Med-Flights or to volunteer, call 1-248-879-2146.