

Pilots N' Paws: Uniting Love of Flying with Love of Animals

'Fabulous Hubcaps' Fundraiser Coming to Solomons

By Dick Myers
Editor

Southern Maryland is one of the stops on a unique underground railroad. Although that's how some of the folks involved in Pilots N Paws describe by analogy what they do, their volunteerism actually is quite above the ground, although the route they take is typically from south to north. In Southern Maryland the St. Mary's County Regional Airport is the hub of their activity.

Pilots N Paws, according to their website, is "an online volunteer organization where general aviation pilots can connect with rescue volunteers to transport animals in need to safe havens." It was founded 10 years ago. Since then, according to their website, "the number of small-plane general aviation pilot volunteers has climbed to over 1,800, with 8200 registered users participating on the website. Our goal is to have 10,000 pilots so that few transport requests go unanswered."

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the nation's oldest animal welfare organization:

"Approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters nationwide every year. Of those, approximately 3.3 million are dogs and 3.2 million are cats. We estimate that the number of dogs and cats entering U.S. shelters annually has declined from approximately 7.2 million in 2011. The biggest decline was in dogs (from 3.9 million to 3.3 million).

"Each year, approximately 1.5 million shelter animals are euthanized (670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats). The number of dogs and cats euthanized in U.S. shelters annually has declined from approximately 2.6 million in

2011.

Approximately 3.2 million shelter animals are adopted each year (1.6 million dogs and 1.6 million cats).

ASPCA says the decline in the numbers of animals entering shelters "can be partially explained by an increase in the percentage of animals adopted and an increase in the number of stray animals successfully returned to their owners."

No-kill rescue groups all over the country, such as the Humane Society of Calvert County (which adopts 300 animals annually), are a key factor in the reduction, although their work is costly and takes a significant fundraising effort.

Adoption is the goal of the Pilots N Paws volunteers, the rescue organizations and the pilots, and their efforts have also contributed to the reduction of the numbers of animals in shelters. More than 150,000 animals (mostly dogs but some cats, chickens and even a dolphin), have taken flight to new homes.

The organization was started with one rescue mission by a woman in South Carolina and has quickly expanded. There were some places in the country that were having a terrible time adopting all the animals they were taking in. Seventy-percent of animals in high-kill shelters in the south are euthanized. Other parts of the country seemed to not have enough for the demand. Thus, came the idea of transporting from the surplus areas to the deficit areas.

Pilots N Paws is also tapping the obvious – pilots like to fly. Sometimes they hop in their plane to fly to another airport to just turn around and fly back. Why not put those flights to some worthy purpose?

A small group of dedicated pilots at St. Mary's County

Regional Airport are part of this network. They are now busy helping to sell tickets to an upcoming fundraiser that will benefit Pilots N Paws and the Humane Society of Calvert County. They are bringing in the famous nostalgia band, "The Fabulous Hubcaps," to a concert September 8, 5-10 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Solomons Conference Center.

Deadline for purchase of \$50 advance tickets is September 1. Tickets can be purchased through the Humane Society of Calvert County website at <https://humane-societyofcalvertcounty.org/>. No tickets will be sold at the door.

The County Times interviewed Pilots N Paws volunteers Sandy Hunt and Ken Reed, who live in St. Mary's County, Randy Walton of Lusby, and Chris Scissel of Hughesville on Aug. 11 at the airport.

Hunt talked about how she got involved in Pilots N Paws: "I'm an animal lover. I love rescuing animals, dogs and horses." Affiliated with the pilots at the airport, she considers herself part of the ground crew for the operation. When the dogs arrive at the airport, she walks them, feeds them and waits for the aircraft participating in the next leg of the journey to arrive.

Instead of using ground transportation which can take longer and be more stressful for the animals, "These flights make it possible for them to get wherever they are going quickly," Hunt explained.

"Pilots love to fly and there's nothing better than having a mission," Hunt said. "I love to fly," said Reed, "As Sandy said, you can't get any better than having a good mission."

The St. Mary's airport is a perfect location for what they do, Reed said, because it's a two-hour flight from



At the St. Mary's County Regional Airport, (l t r) Sandra Scissel with Bandit, Sandy Hunt, Randy Walton, Ken Reed and Chris Scissel.

North Carolina where they pick up a lot of the dogs, and a two-hour flight from New Jersey or New York where pilots for the next leg come from.

Reed, managing member of S. Hunt Aero, LLC, which is developing the airport, said the pilots have built a relationship with a rescue organization in Oxford, NC and they regularly fly in and out of the airport there to pick up dogs. He said the airport in Oxford has adopted five dogs who act as greeters for visitors.

Walton is also an animal lover with two rescue West Highland White terriers and three cats at home. He learned about the organization at the air show and enjoys partnering with a pilot, sitting in the back and caring for the animals while in flight.

Scrisse said his wife, who is an animal lover, got him involved, because if he is making such a mercy flight she and their son will go along but may not be interested in a flight to see a ball game. He said it's a way of giving back. "We've been fortunate. You can't own an airplane without being a little fortunate along the way."

"I haven't met one dog who snapped at me, growled at me, anything," Scrisse said.

The Pilots N Paws website is an impressive logistics portal that matches groups needing homes for their charges with groups willing to accept them. It shows the transport needs and allows pilots to sign up to make that transport. It coordinates multiple pilots making multiple flights as long as 1,000 miles across country, while factoring in weather conditions. Everything is done online.



The Fabulous Hubcaps will appear Sept. 8 at Holiday Inn Solomons for the benefit of Pilots N Paws and the Humane Society of Calvert County.

"It may take a week to get things coordinated," Reed said because of the logistics complexity. "Usually, all it takes is just a day or two."

That site put Reed in touch with the rescue lady in North Carolina to pick up a black Labrador retriever. He and Walton went to pick up the dog and that trip solidified their relationships for future trips down there.

Those in the program don't have to make any particular time commitment. Pilots N Paws provides crates and other supplies, but the pilots are responsible for their gas. No small contribution, as Reed said the 200-mile flights to Oxford will cost the pilot \$300-\$400.

They were asked about their most rewarding trips and

they started rattling off the names of the dogs and the experiences similar to what people who foster dogs and then have to let them go experience.

"I find all the trips rewarding," Walton said.

"We pick up a dog that's a sad story and we transform it into a happy story. All of these dogs have been through hell. Not a single one has acted bad. They almost want to thank you," Reed said.

To find out more about Pilots N Paws, go to their website: <https://www.pilotsnpaws.org/>

dickmyers@countytimes.net



Randy Walton with an assistant on a return flight from North Carolina for Pilots N Paws.