

GOOD NEIGHBOR

Ai Vu and Yosuke Tanaka

When Ai Vu and Yosuke Tanaka heard about Angel Flights West — the nonprofit that connects volunteer pilots with those who need medical transportation — they were immediately on board.

“We were like, ‘Sure! We would love to do it!’” Vu recalls.

The husband-and-wife team were an ideal fit. Tanaka is an airplane and helicopter pilot, and Vu rents out vehicles through Turo. In Angel Flight West parlance, he’s the Air Angel flying patients from the neighbor islands to O‘ahu, and she’s the Earth Angel driving them from the landing area to the hospital for life-saving treatment.

Like all Angel Flight West volunteers, they do it free of charge.

It’s a big relief for those who are ill and struggling with medical bills. These patients live on the neighbor islands but rely on major medical facilities on O‘ahu. Flying via a commercial airline would add significantly to their expenses.

Since he and Vu began volunteering in 2021, Tanaka has flown close to 100 Angel Flights missions — maybe more than 100 by now. According to Angel Flights West, he completed 80 missions in a single year.

At the time, he jokingly told the organization that saying yes to flying was easier than saying yes to going to the grocery store.

Vu, who has completed at least as many missions on land, confirms that her husband has a passion for flight and a talent for mechanics. She says back in his home country of Japan, he was a professional dirt bike racer who also worked on and test drove race cars. He even built a custom engine for one of Usain Bolt’s Lamborghinis.

“His specialty is engine and break suspension,” Vu shares. “You know how a Lamborghini is already fast, right? Well, he removed the engine and made it even faster.”

Just as rewarding as building engines and taking to the sky is bonding with passenger-patients. Tanaka flew most



Photo courtesy Ai Vu and Yosuke Tanaka

of the missions for a young boy fighting brain cancer on Maui. After more than 40 flights together, the pair became friends, and it was heartwarming for Tanaka to see his condition seemed to be improving with medical treatment.

“I knew I had to help this boy and his family,” Tanaka told Angel Flights West.

Together, Tanaka and Vu own the Flying Mermaid, a company that rents out small airplanes and helicopters, and repairs aircraft. If another pilot wants to rent a plane for an Angel Flight West mission, the pair are willing to work it out so that it isn’t cost prohibitive.

“There’s no such thing as there’s no help,” Vu says, summing up their outlook on life. “There’s always help out there. There are always people you can reach out to. That’s the aloha we have here in Hawai‘i that you cannot find everywhere else.”

Angel Flight West serves patients in 12 Western states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai‘i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. While it does its best to help all in need, the nonprofit does have some ground rules: Patients must be able to get in and out of a plane on their own and show financial need for the service. The organization supports shorter flights only — generally less than 1,000 miles, although there may be some exceptions.

To learn more, visit angelflightwest.org.

— Karen Iwamoto