

# Flying Angel

Mike Skinner's job is certain, but his hobby is sure up in the air.

That's because Skinner (McAlvay Class, 1984), whose job is Probate Court Judge for Eaton County (Michigan), flies planes in his spare time.

Skinner takes to the air a few times a year to fly missions for Angel Flight of America, a charitable organization that transports seriously ill patients or their families for free to medical facilities such as the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

Skinner became interested in flying because a number of his friends were pilots. He took an introductory flight lesson, really enjoyed it, and signed up for the six-month series of lessons. He has acquired an instrument rating since that time.

Together with five other people, Skinner bought a Piper Cherokee 6. The group keeps the plane at a nearby local airport, and members take turns taking it out for flights.

Skinner's missions for Angel Flight are scheduled, rather than on an emergency basis. The volunteer pilots are e-mailed a list of missions and sign up for the ones they can do. Typically, pilots will fly a couple missions per year. With flight time costing about \$70 per hour to operate a plane, and flight times averaging six to eight hours, a trip can hit the pilot's pocketbook. Fortunately, there are about 5,000 to 6,000 volunteer pilots nationwide, and missions are typically fulfilled.

Angel Flight also does emergency organ delivery, but Skinner has not flown those missions. His "cargo" is of the human variety, i.e., patients or relatives grateful they can accomplish their treatment without incurring further expense via commercial airlines.

"It's ordinary people in difficult times," Skinner said.

For Skinner, it's a chance to combine service and hobby. He loves to fly, and the missions give him a purpose for being up in the sky. And, except for bad weather, it's a

peaceful venture that eases the stresses of life and work.

Skinner's job is more "dream come true" than stress-producing. He thought about pursuing a post on the bench while working as Assistant General Counsel for Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan (BCBSM).

"I thought about it for a long time. I've practiced all over the state; always been a litigator," he explained. In doing this, he observed the judges, learning what worked and didn't, what he liked and what he wanted to avoid. For the 2000 election, he took on an incumbent in the Eaton County Probate Court and beat him, taking over as judge in January 2001.

"I'm finding the cases very interesting," he noted. He presides over abuse and neglect cases, and juvenile delinquency matters. Adoptions, however, are his favorite area.

Skinner has already made news in his judicial role, being named Boss of the Year by the Lansing Legal Support Professionals. Skinner was nominated by his secretary, Lou Holt, who moved with him from BCBSM to the court.

It's been a good year, but not without its challenges. On January 3, 2001, one day after he was sworn in, Skinner received a call from his doctor, telling him he had cancer. Skinner had surgery and has followed that up with chemotherapy, which will continue until November. Skinner is up-front about his condition, but it does not dominate his conversation.

Instead he is focused on achieving his goals at the court, which include implementing the various aspects of the Family Court Act.

Skinner earned his bachelor's degree in English, with a minor in secondary education, at Central Michigan University. He has taught at both the college and law-school level, with a specialty in insurance law. He has been working with Angel Flight of America for about a year and a half, and recently also signed on with Volunteer Mercy Pilots.

