

Women in Business winner 2003

Gail Courneyea

CEO and Owner Angels of Flight Canada Ltd.

BY TRACY HANES
Examiner Features Editor

In 1986, Gail Courneyea was working as an intensive care nurse at Civic Hospital when she reluctantly agreed to accompany a patient on a flight to Toronto.

"Once I got on the airplane, I had no knowledge of the environment I was working in or what was expected of me," recalls Courneyea.

Courneyea's concern prompted her to take air medical courses in the United States. To overcome her fear of flying, she decided to learn more about airplanes. In 1987, she received a certificate in aeromedical care and her private pilot's license.

"I wanted to work as a flight nurse, but I discovered no such job existed in Canada, so the only way was to create one for myself," Courneyea says. Sensing a need for such a service, she founded Angels of Flight Canada in 1988, providing medical accompaniment by caregivers specifically trained to work in the air.

"You don't have the equipment, resources, lighting or space you do in a hospital. And you're usually the sole caregiver in the environment," says Courneyea. "You have to recognize the risks the patients are subjected to, such as thermal effects, vibration and altitude. Often you're the only caregiver on a flight and you have to be able to make appropriate decisions."

In the past 15 years, Angels of Flight has provided care for thousands of patients in Ontario and worldwide, to destinations like Japan, Korea, Israel, the Philippines, Morocco and Europe. It now employs close to 40 part-time and fulltime staff, including nurses, paramedics, secretaries and medical director Dr. Robert MacMillan. In 1995, Courneyea expanded the business to include a land transportation service and has built a fleet of six medically equipped ambulances, Jeep and mini-van. In 1996, Courneyea started providing Sir Sandford Fleming College nursing students with the opportunity to spend two months working and learning about her field and developed the Exodus Academy of Aeromedical Studies, to provide specialized training in transportation care.

Courneyea is proud of her company's 100 per cent success rate; not a single patient's life has been lost during a



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Gail Courneyea's Angels of Flight offers medical care in the air and on the road.

transit.

Angels of Flight uses commercial airlines to provide air transportation and makes all flight arrangements for the patient and family, as well as supplying the equipment, medical supplies and one or two nurses and seeing to all required documentation, such as visas. Paramedics accompany nurses on flight and land transfers. She can offer basic nursing teams or specialized teams, such as those trained in advanced cardiac care.

While hospitals remain a hard sell for Angels of Flight services "because they are a publically funded system and we're a private company", Courneyea has acquired a substantial number of hospital clients. By using her service, hospitals don't have to tie up their own staff or ambulances. She also works with three levels of the Canadian government and insurance companies. A

large part of the international business is transporting patients back to their country of origin because their visas have expired or they have no health insurance coverage, or bringing ill Canadians back home. The Angels of Flight nurses stay with the patient from departure from the Canadian hospital to their admission into the health care facility in the country they arrive in. As much as Courneyea works to ensure patients' safe transport, she also looks out for her staff.

"A priority is safety for the nurses," she says. "They only stay in good, safe hotels, for example. The nurse has to come first in her safety for the patient to be safe."

Courneyea carefully selects crews which she feels will be most compatible together and with the patient. Her passion for her work is evident when she talks about memorable Angels of Flight

trips, such as flying a terminally ill patient to the Philippines because he wanted to die in his country of birth. Angels of Flight also helped to grant another dying wish: a 36-year-old Ottawa area man wanted to be able to take his family to see Shania Twain in concert. He attended the concert on stretcher, met the country star backstage, then died 30 hours later. Another time, two nurses and one doctor accompanied a very ill patient to Korea and kept busy during the whole flight working to keep her stable. Passengers would come up in small groups, watching the caregivers at work, to show appreciation.

"Things like make this so rewarding. We deal with all kinds of situations and cultures," says Courneyea. "It is a lot of work to do it and you have to really dedicated. It's not the type of business you get into to get rich at."

Courneyea, who is married and has a grown son, doesn't do international flights herself anymore, but still serves as a nurse on land and Canadian flights. She's up at 5 a.m. and often puts in 70 hours a week. This year, her goal is to have Angels of Flight certified ISO 9002.

And she still finds time to participate in community activities. She is president of her 775-member nurses' alumnae, a member of Women's Entrepreneurs Canada and fund-raises for Casa Maria, a shelter for refugees. In 1993 she was recognized for volunteer and healthcare services when she was named Women of the Year by the Peterborough YWCA.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

- Don't let fear stop you
- Create your own opportunity
- Provide a unique service
- Love what you do
- Think globally