



**Upward bound:** Carl Schultz (left) helps Dale Cason load gifts for children on to Cason's plane for a Washtenaw County destination. The event was called Operation Good Cheer, and Saturday marked the 26th year for the program.

## These santas fly to bring good cheer

BY SANDRA ARMSTRONG  
OAKLAND COUNTY EDITOR

Santa Claus isn't the only one taking to the skies this holiday season. More than 200 pilots zoomed out of Oakland County International Airport in Waterford Saturday, bearing gifts for children around the state.

"It's really a good thing," said pilot Dale Cason, an Oakland County Sheriff's Deputy working out of the Lake Orion subpost. "It gets bigger every year."

Known as Operation Good Cheer, the project began in 1971 with a group of volunteers who wanted to share with children less fortunate. Cason joined the program in 1989 and has been a yearly participant ever since.

This was the first year that pilot and Sheriff's Deputy Mike Wickham joined a friend to fly a Piper Archer to Harry Brown Airport, about seven miles southeast of Saginaw. The two men are part of flying club at the airport.

"It's a good program with a way to get a couple of hours flying in plus help out kids who don't get much of a Christmas," said Wickham, who has been a deputy for 24 years and currently works in the traffic division in the main sheriff's office on Telegraph in Pontiac.

In the first year of Operation Good Cheer, 66 children were helped. In 1997 that number has jumped to 2,692 foster care children, teenagers and developmentally delayed/disabled adults participating. Some clients have minimal family contact, while others have none.

This year's program involves 26 private, non-profit agencies participating, 65 donor groups, trucks that delivered 3,500 gifts and, of course, the pilots who delivered 4,500 gifts to 17 airports.

Pilots munched donuts and sipped coffee Saturday as they waited for clearance to take off. Only instrument-certified pilots were allowed to fly, due to Saturday's untimely snow storm.

The snow was no problem for Cason on his way to a Washtenaw location. "At 5,000 feet, the sun was shining," he said.

Wickham's destination was "not too far and just far enough" with the snow and ice in the clouds.

Six persons from Children's Family Services met his aircraft, took pictures and gave a good welcome, Wickham said. "There was real appreciation of pilots getting to do this."

Operation Good Cheer means a lot to Cason. "People contribute to a lot of charitable causes, but often there isn't a tangible item that you see go to a victim," he explained. "By grabbing those packages and loading them all wrapped up with a kid's name, you know who gets a gift."

Cason said he got into flying because he likes to travel and found it a "good way to go short distances."

Besides serving as a sheriff's deputy, he has been a commercial pilot for four years and a flight instructor for three years.

"I enjoy teaching," Cason said. "I always mention when I have students that, hey, you can participate, too."

Like Cason, Wickham now has a commercial pilot's license and instrument rating.

Flying, said Wickham, is "good stress relief. I laugh at people in long lines on I-75."

Another large part of Operation Good Cheer is the Children's Entitlement Fund. It enables foster children and youth to have needs met throughout the year. In 1996, more than \$11,500 was distributed to foster care youth.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

**Welcome gifts:** Dale Cason loads holiday gifts for children on to trucks with destinations throughout the state.

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