

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

## These santas fly to bring good cheer

Flying, said Wickham, is "good stress relief. I laugh at people in long lines on 1-75.

Another large part of Opora-tion 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.

BY SANDRA ARMBRUSTER OAKLAND COUNTY EDITOR

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Santa Claus isn't the only one taking to the skies this holiday senson. Mere than 200 pilots scoomed 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 Sheriffa 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 jointed the towns with 1989 and her bear or the story of the course with 1989 and her bear or the course of the course o

wanted to share with children less fortunate. Cason jointed the program in 1989 and has been a yearly participator ever since.

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

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

In the first year of Operation
Good Cheer, 66 children were
helped. In 1997 that number has
jumped to 2,592 foster care children, teenagers and developmentally delayed/diaabled adults
participating. Some clients have
minimal family contact, while
others have none.

This year's program involves 26 private, non-profit agencies participating, 55 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 Satur-

were answer to my, one to Sauria day's untimely snow storm.

The snow was no problem for Cason on his way to a Washte-naw location. "At 5,000 feet, the sun was shiming," he said. Wickham's destination was "not too far and just far enough" with the snow and ice in the clouds.

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

octonic to this."

Operation Good Cheer means alot 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."

Besitles serving as a sheriff's

distances."
Bestides 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, helt, you can participate, too.'
Like Cason, Wickham now has reommercial pilot's license and instrument rating.



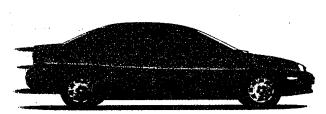
Welcome gifts: Dale Cason loads holiday gifts for children on to trucks with destinations throughout the



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Triple Crown

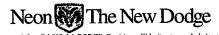


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