

# Takeoff

## EARNED WINGS

# MANAGED HEALTH AIR

A group of volunteer pilots brings medical care to the neediest cases of Mexico's Baja peninsula.  
By Cristina Velocci

### PLANES WITHOUT BORDERS:

The Flying Samaritans decamp on the beach of Bahia de Los Angeles for a night of R&R before flying home from their clinic at Jesús Maria, Mexico.

In the rural town of Jesús Maria, Mexico, 80 percent of the population lacks health care, including a 13-year-old girl named Jasmine who has a growth in her mouth that has started to swell. Left untreated, this baseball-sized tumor is in danger of affecting her jaw, teeth, sinuses, and eyes and could eventually kill her.

Thankfully, none of this will happen — at least not if the Flying Samaritans, a 2,000-strong group of dedicated volunteer pilots, nurses, doctors, dentists and translators, has anything to say about it. Focused on the Baja peninsula, the 45-year-old organization opened and operates 18 clinics scattered throughout the region. Once a month, volunteers from Arizona, California and Mexico fly their own aircraft — mostly Cessnas, Pipers and Bonanzas — to provide up to 1,800 patients per month free medical care that they otherwise could not afford. “These people use what little money they have to feed themselves,” says Yehoram Uziel, the nonprofit’s president, an avid pilot himself. “Health care is a luxury.”

As a result, Uziel sees people nearly killed by easily treatable illnesses, such as ear infections, cough and the flu. “You walk around these areas and take a look at the people, and they look much older than their peers in the U.S.,” he says. “A 40-year-old woman looks 65.”

Last November, the “Sams” screened more than 600 members in the community of López Mateos for diabetes. “The number of people we found with diabetes, some severe, was mind-boggling,” Uziel says. “They had no clue they had it.” In addition to providing medication, the group set up classes to educate the community about maintaining a proper diet and lifestyle.

The Sams have also made other strides. At the specialty eye clinics held twice yearly in the towns of San Quintin and San Felipe, people with cataracts routinely enter wearing thick glasses, barely able to see, only to emerge the next morning with clear vision. “You see the joy and gratitude on their faces. It’s a great feeling,” Uziel says. “You come back home and appreciate what you have — the fact that you are fortunate to be a pilot, own an airplane and use it for good.”

And as for Jasmine and that baseball-sized tumor? It turns out it was benign. Over Memorial Day, the Sams performed surgery to remove the growth, and she’s now back to being just a normal 13-year old girl with an unusual appreciation for Cessnas. ■

### VOLUNTEER BOX

→ Want to become a Flying Samaritan and help Baja from above? The Flying Samaritans is seeking volunteer pilots from California and Arizona who have their own planes and a minimum of 500 hours pilot-in-command time. For more information, contact Yehoram Uziel (yehoram@soligen2006.com) or visit [flying-samaritans.org](http://flying-samaritans.org).

