

HEALTH

Wings of hope

Organization provides much-needed travel assistance for medical care

By **KRYSTIA COLBOURNE**

TRANSCONTINENTAL MEDIA—GRAND FALLS-WINDSOR

A familiar face in the local area and the provincial media, will be a face seen in many other places next month.

Gracie Reid, who turned one this past Friday, with her famous pink glasses, has been in the local media since she was four months old.

Gracie was diagnosed just weeks after birth with Persistent Hyperplastic Primary Vitreous (PHPV), a rare eye disease which has more recently been called Persistent Fetal Vasculature (PFV).

Gracie was born with a congenital cataract on her eye, which was noticed about a week after birth. Two weeks afterwards, she was off to St. John's.

While at the Janeway Children's Hospital, Gracie's mother, Laura Janes, was notified of Hope Air, which was formed 25 years ago to help low-income Canadians travel to get specialized health care not available in their local communities.

In October 2010, at five-weeks-old, Gracie flew to Halifax for what doctors thought was a surgery to remove the cataract. However, during the surgery they found out she had PHPV.

Janes said Hope Air paid for her trip to and from Halifax at that time, and again in March and May.

Gracie's trip in March was a followup because of her glaucoma, and the trip in May was to have glaucoma surgery and a shunt placed in her eye to drain the fluid from behind her eye.

Janes said Hope Air does so much for people all across Canada, and gets people to and from health care whenever the need arises.

"It's a lot of money saved, especially when you don't know usually until two days before that you have to go, and the prices of tickets two days before you have to leave are ridiculous," Janes said, adding the outcome would have been different without Hope Air. "I would have had to end up eventually cancelling all of Gracie's surgeries or appointments just because I have only ever been given the two days' notice to go and to pack up a family and drive, that's a day there. And with Bruce (Reid, Gracie's father) gone away, I would have had to cancel and reschedule everything, without a doubt."

Janes described Hope Air as "amazing" and she believes more people need to become aware of what it does, and help with out with donations.

"They are doing a lot for us," Janes said. "They have saved us a lot of money, a lot of hassle, and they have taken care of us, making sure we get back and forth fine on all of Gracie's trips. As a family of five having to travel, it has saved us a lot."

It has also saved the family a lot of stress, she added.

"Knowing that if I only get 24 or 48 hours notice I can call them up and within minutes they have a ticket for us to go, so it's good knowing that they are just a phone call away and with short notice they can get you there," Janes said.

Now Gracie is doing well, and there are no trips planned out of the province any time soon, thanks to the metal shunt.

"Just one more trip to St. John's next month and that's it for another six to 12 months," Janes said, adding the shunt is working great. "Because of that now she is only needing a check-up for every six months to a year, so it's great."

Though the family hopes the organization will not have to provide airfare for them again, or at least not for awhile, for all Hope Air has done for them, Janes agreed to use the family's story to help promote and bring awareness about Hope Air in Atlantic Canada.

Janes said she was contacted by Hope Air and asked if she could help.

"It's a good feeling knowing that they have done so much for us, the least I can do is help them out, especially for people down here," Janes said.

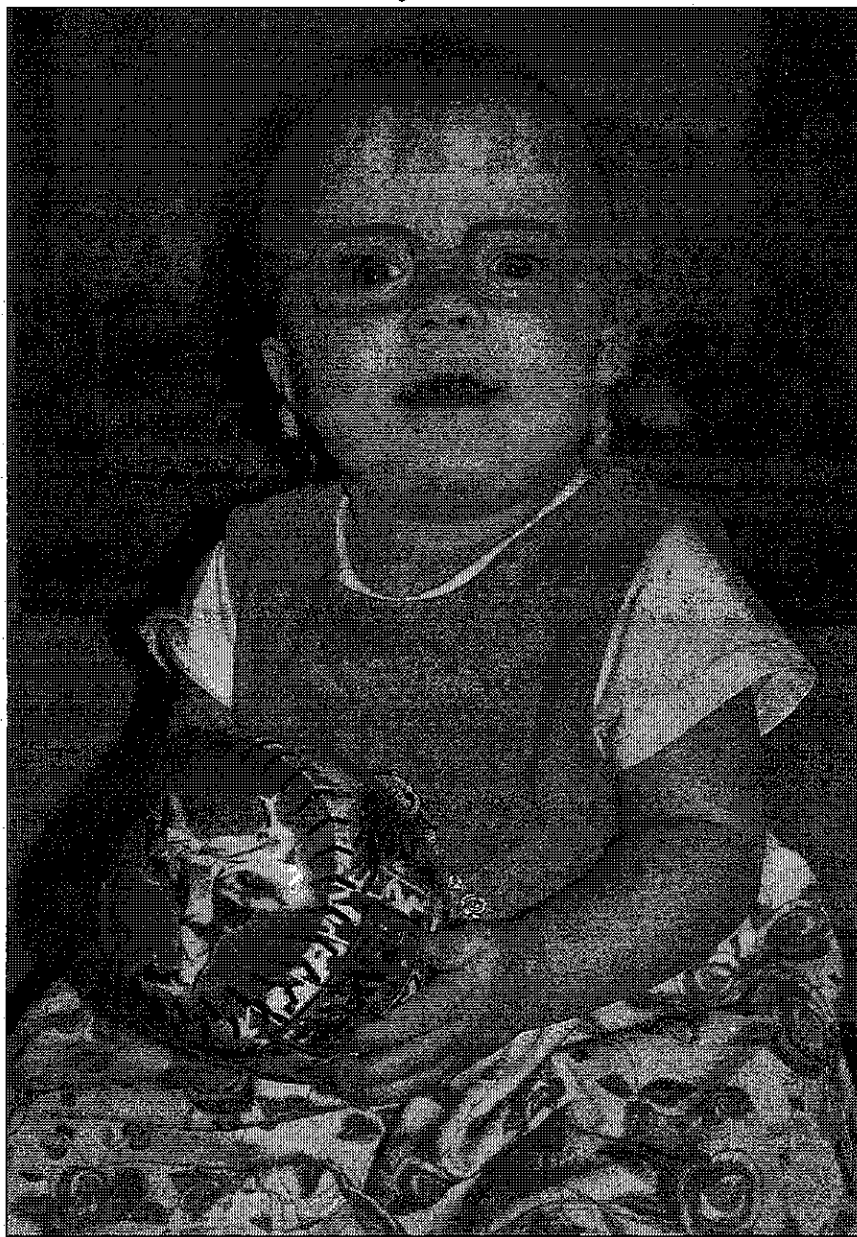
"From that, now WestJet has contacted us to use Gracie's story in their magazine for October," Janes said. "We always fly WestJet with Hope Air and because of that, now WestJet wants to promote Hope Air and use Gracie's story, too."

So Gracie's story will be in their "Up" magazine for the month of October.

"Any destination WestJet goes to in October, it will be in their magazine."

Hope Air Celebrates 25 years — 66,000 flights

Hope Air operates three different flight programs: the commercial airline donation program, with flights provided by many of Canada's national and regional air carriers; the volunteer pilot program, which has had more than 1,400 missions to date, and currently has approximately 300 private pilots contributing their skills and



One-year-old Gracie Reid of Grand Falls-Windsor and her family are helping to promote Hope Air, an organization that provides free airfare to help people who are financially challenged to travel for health care. — Photo by Krysta Colbourne/The Advertiser

planes; and the flight purchase program, which uses donated funds to purchase airline seats.

Jim Burton of St. John's joined Hope Air's national board of directors in March.

He said the hospital setting is not new to him, as he is on the board of directors with the Janeway Children's Hospital Foundation. He is also a pilot, and has been flying for 36 years.

"Hope Air really merges the two together and I am just so blessed to be a part of it and to be contributing in any area I can to add to the life and success of the organization," Burton said.

Twenty-five years ago, Hope Air was formed to get financially-disadvantaged Canadians to specialized medical care that is only available in larger centres. Since then, Hope Air has expanded to provide free flights for all illnesses, and recently celebrated 66,000 flights in Canada.

"In Canada, 20 per cent of our population live in the rural areas, and yet only nine per cent of the doctors are in rural areas," Burton said. "Ninety-one per cent of the doctors are in the cities. So to get all of our Canadian to have true universal health care, Hope Air fills that void to provide people the travel if they are financially struggling to reach health care. I think it's just an amazing organization providing and giving Newfoundlanders and Labradorians an opportunity to reach health care that they deserve."

Last year, Hope Air provided 3,675 flights. In the first six months of 2011, 2,499 flights were provided.

"Last year, we had 129 people that Hope Air actually moved outside the province so they could seek the health attention they need at the hospitals and so on," Burton said. "So far to date, we are around 77 people this year ...

and that is growing. It's getting bigger."

For its 25th anniversary, Burton said they are encouraging people to be aware of the organization, its website, to donate, and ask friends and family to do the same.

"It's a good charitable organization that helps all Canadians reach health centres that they need to access to make sure that they get the true universal healthcare that we all deserve," he said. "So many people I've talked to, have never heard of Hope Air, don't even know it's there."

Now, Gracie's story, and others from across the country will be used to help Hope Air get the message to the public that they are there to help.

"If there is anyone else out there that needs the assistance, please call us, contact us, email us," Burton said.

For more information, or to donate to Hope Air, visit www.hopeair.org, or call 1-877-346-4673.

"People say 'Hope Air, that sounds like an airline.' I say 'you know what, it's a lifeline,'" Burton said.

"It is actually a lifeline that provides complimentary, free airfare, no gimmicks, to those that are financially challenged to reach healthcare. To be able to access the healthcare and receive the medical attention they deserve."

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