



## Pilots' group helps woman make journey home

By Michael Fitch  
Staff writer

Norma Phillips flew in a plane for the first time last month.

"I saw the clouds," she said. "I thought I was in heaven."

The flight brought her home to Fayetteville for the first time in 18 years.

Chances are it was a one-way trip.

Phillips is fighting cancer that has spread to her liver and lungs and into her bones. Doctors discovered it while she was undergoing back surgery about five months ago. At the time, a rod was inserted into her back. She still can't walk, and she has been bedridden for nearly a year.

Truth be told, things look bleak, and Phillips has returned home where members of her extended family can help her through the darkest hours.

Pilots for Christ made it possible. The organization that calls itself "Our Lord's Air Force" flew her in a private plane for free. A commercial flight for someone in her condition could have cost thousands of dollars.

"Whatever you're doing with these people, you're flying them like you're flying Christ himself. There's eternal pleasure there," said Tommy Lee, the pilot who sat behind the controls for Phillips' flight home.

"We do a lot of taking them home to die," he said. "Most trips, by far, is cancer. Cancer is just overwhelming."

Despite the poor prognosis, Phillips isn't ready to say she's home to die. She's just glad to be home.

Phillips, who is 44, grew up in Hollywood Heights on the west side of Fayetteville, the eighth of 10 children and the youngest daughter of Norman and Marie Phillips. Norman Phillips was a staff sergeant in the Army preparing for a tour of Vietnam when he was killed by a drunken cab driver on Fort Bragg in 1966.

Marie Phillips chose to remain near her hometown of Raeford and raise her brood in Fayetteville. Most of the family, including 77-year-old Marie, still lives around Fayetteville.

"My childhood was beautiful," Norma Phillips recalled. "I came from a big family. I did well in school. Just growing up back in those days, it was fun and safe."

She went to Seventy-First High School, where she was a guard on the basketball team during the 1980s.

When Phillips was 26, she started a new life in Montgomery, Al. For whatever reason, she took almost two decades to come home.

As day turns to night and night folds into day, Phillips lies in a bed in Room 128 of the Carrol S. Roberson Hospice Center on Legion Road.

When family members — sons Ramone and Anthony, sisters Shelia Fraley and Dorothy Albritton, niece Keisha Fletcher — aren't visiting, Phillips sometimes lies on her side, peering through the open blinds.

"It's a beautiful day," she said last week, a couple of days after her arrival at the center. "So beautiful in the morning. That Carolina sun."



Phillips doesn't offer much of a reason why she left North Carolina and her family in the first place, only saying she was "just venturing." A single mother, she gave birth to her two children in Montgomery, and she paid the bills and took care of the boys by working a couple of Krystal hamburger restaurant jobs.

She wants to take care of things again.

"My goal is helping my family," she said. "With the help of them, I plan on getting up again. I got all the support I need. There's so much love in my family. You don't run from love. You stick with it."

Phillips used to dream of becoming a singer. Someone like her favorite, Anita Baker.

In high school, Phillips sang in the chorus. "Back in those days," she said, "I could blow, if you know what I mean."

Now, her dreams are simpler: She wants to get up, get well, get her life back together.

Don't even think about telling her that she's dying. She's not accepting her diagnosis.

"My mom will fight death like a dog," offered her 13-year-old son, Ramone.

"It's been such a beautiful life. Why have I gotten in this situation?" Phillips questioned aloud, with some of her family gathered by her side. "The worst thing I'd ever been in the hospital for was having these children. And that didn't hurt. Not like this."

Her arms are bony, her hair thinning, and she's unable to turn over in the hospice bed without pain and without help. Family members say the doctors have said she won't last six months.

She, however, remains defiant.

"It's dark in here," Phillips blurted out at one point. "Like a funeral. People saying, 'She is such a nice person.' I'm not dead!"

Home had been tugging on Phillips' heart.

Dr. Gary Davis, her physician in Alabama, told her that she needed to be with her family. Besides, she felt guilty that folks had to drive 10 hours one-way to visit her at Jackson Hospital in Montgomery. She had been hospitalized for a couple of months.

She wanted to be home, and her family wanted her here.

But no one was sure how to get her home. She couldn't ride in a car. An ambulance or medical flight was too expensive.

They turned to God.

The answer came through Wanda Odom, a local social worker, who happened to mention Pilots for Christ to Phillips' social worker in Montgomery.



“Pilots for Christ — they were a blessing in disguise,” said Keisha Fletcher, Phillips’ 29-year-old niece. “They were saying it was going to cost between \$4,000 and \$10,000 to get her here (by ambulance or medical flight). That’s a lot of money. We prayed for my aunt. We joined hands and prayed for her. Everybody prayed for a miracle.”

Phillip Allen, coordinator of the south Alabama chapter of Pilots for Christ, took Phillips’ plight to heart.

“She’s really such a young person at 44 years old,” Allen said. “I know the hardship for the family to move her. It was a unique situation. Normally, we find another group in North Carolina to come down and meet us halfway. It may take three planes to get from one point to another.”

Fayetteville lies outside the chapter’s service area, which is typically within a radius of 350 miles. But the group agreed to bring her home, at no cost to the family.

The flight from Montgomery on that Saturday morning took one hour and 46 minutes.

“It was perfect,” said Tommy Lee, the 53-year-old pilot who flew Phillips home. “That early morning ended up being a great time for her. We took our time to load her. It was a smooth flight. She said, ‘I don’t know why I waited this late to fly.’”

Fletcher and her aunt, Dorothy Albritton, accompanied Phillips during the flight.

Fletcher works as a physical therapist assistant at CCRC Physical Therapy on Legion Road. She and her husband, who have two children of their own, now have guardianship over Phillips’ sons to get them into school.

“They fit into my routine,” she said. “I’m going to do everything I can to help my aunt. She’s my family.”

Phillips’ stay at the hospice is temporary. Patients usually stay no more than two or three weeks.

“We find a place to get them placed, or they go home, or they go to heaven,” said Odom, the social worker who helped link the family with Pilots for Christ.

“She’s got a strong will to live,” Odom said. “I think it’s because of a mother’s instincts with her children. She wants to fight this thing.”

Phillips, her tired head pressed flat on a pillow, faced the window and the oaks just beyond.

“I’ve got a lot to do,” she said.

Her family might say she’s done enough by coming home.

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