



**EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE**



*Angel Flight has taught  
Larry Camerlin, above,  
“to be grateful for who  
we have in our lives  
as opposed to what  
we have.”*

Heroes who make a difference  
in our darkest hours

# Angels *in* America

REPORTED BY AMY PATUREL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON HAVIV/VII

## THE GIFT OF FLIGHT

**L**arry Camerlin knows what desperation sounds like. Each week, his small Massachusetts office answers dozens of frantic phone calls from families of very sick people who hope Larry and his team can help.

What they need are flights—to a liver or kidney transplant, to receive ongoing chemotherapy and radiation, or to treat severe burns or other crippling diseases at medical centers far away from home.

As the founder of Angel Flight Northeast, a group that connects patients in need with volunteer pilots who shepherd them, Larry, 68, has never turned away a request.

“People come to us at some of the most frightening times of their lives—they’re running out of money, out of time, and out of faith,” says Larry, who pilots some trips himself while also overseeing scheduling, fund-raising, and other administrative responsibilities. “We help replace that fear with tremendous healing and hope.”

Larry, a father of four and grandfather of six, has spent his entire career providing hope during trauma. He and his wife, Ruth, built a successful ambulance company, and after they sold the business in 1994, Larry got his pilot's license. Then he read a magazine article about a pilot in California who flew a ten-year-old boy to receive cancer treatment and immediately knew what his next chapter would be. "This enormous emotional wave hit me," Larry says. "This is what God wants me to do."

The first Angel Flight NE trip took to the skies on May 31, 1996. Today, Larry relies on a network of nearly 500 volunteer pilots who donate their own time, planes, and fuel. Larry's crews on the ground, Earth Angels, drive patients to and from the airport. To date, Angel Flight NE has helped 65,000 people. Bonds between patients and pilots can last for weeks, months, or longer. One cancer patient took more than 585 trips over ten years. And every single one—for every single patient—is free of charge.

"Sometimes patients can't talk to their family about their fears, but being up in the heavens, it's therapeutic to talk to a pilot helping you get better," Larry says. "Mothers, if their children are asleep, may break down about how difficult it is to see their

kids so badly hurt." Not every journey, of course, has a storybook ending. Larry had been flying a boy with a life-threatening genetic disorder from Maine to Boston for years.

"He was witty, fun, and insightful—an 11-going-on-40-with-a-PhD-from-Harvard type," says Larry. One day,

he got a call from the boy's mother: "Benjamin [*name has been changed*] is dying, and he would like to see you." Larry flew there the next day.

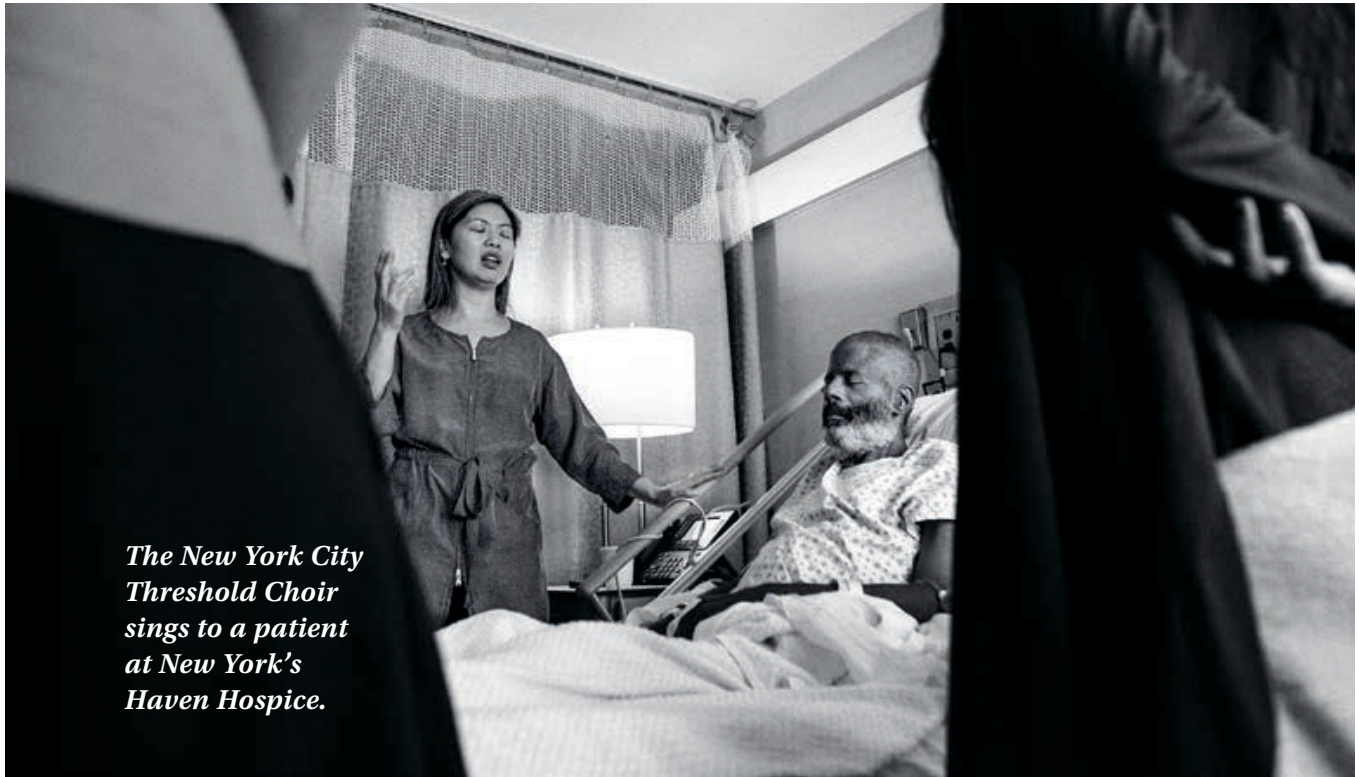
"Why does God hate me?" Benjamin asked Larry. "I'm only a little boy, and I'm dying. I shouldn't be dying as a little boy."

Larry thought for a second. "Look how smart you are, how good you are, how many people you've touched," he said. "God needs you to be one of his special angels. He loves you so much; that's why he wants you."

That flight home from Benjamin's house felt different from usual. "The closer I got to home, the sky became more flushed with yellow and orange," Larry remembers. "The sun dipped below the horizon as I touched down my wheels. Everything was so ethereal. It was like God was telling me everything was going to be OK."

Visit [angelflightne.org](http://angelflightne.org) for more information.

“**People come to us when they are running out of money, time, and faith. We replace their fear with hope.**”



*The New York City Threshold Choir sings to a patient at New York's Haven Hospice.*

## SINGING TO THE SUFFERING

**H**er friend was dying of AIDS, and Kate Munger didn't quite know how to help. She volunteered for a shift at his Petaluma, California, home. "When it was time to sit by his bedside, I was terrified," says Kate, 66. He was agitated, thrashing under the sheets. So Kate did what she always did when she felt afraid—she began to sing:

"There's a moon / There's a star in the sky / There's a cloud / There's a tear in my eye / There's a light / There's a night that is long / There's a friend / There's a pain that is gone."

Kate repeated the lyrics over and over, singing for two and a half hours. "It calmed me down, which calmed him down," she recalls. "I knew I had given him the very best gift that I could. And by the time I finished

singing, I knew this was something that would be shared." And the Threshold Choir was born—now a group of 1,300 volunteers in 120 chapters around the world who provide comfort through song to people on the threshold of life.

"We're death- and tear-phobic in our culture," says Kate, who lives outside San Francisco, where the first choirs were founded in 2000. "We tend to make ourselves busy when we should sit down or pray or hold someone's hand." Singing gives a patient's family "permission to be authentic with their tears, their laughter, their sorrow, their grief," says Kate.

When invited to a bedside, choir volunteers select from a repertoire of about 300 songs, many written by Kate and other choir members specifically to convey presence, peace,



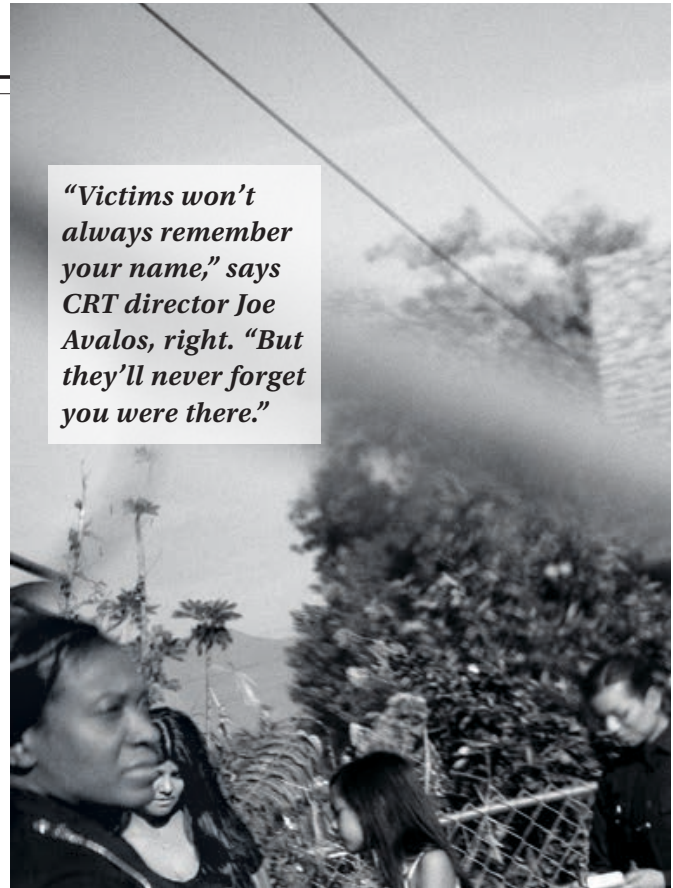
and comfort. “We sing very softly and quite close,” says Kate. “We’re trying to re-create the distance between a mother’s mouth and a baby’s ear.”

Kate, who has sung at hundreds of bedsides, recalls singing to a newborn daughter of a Cuban musician two days before the infant died at 17 days old. The choir started with all the Spanish songs its members knew but finished with an original piece whose last line was “May you find all the love that you needed was here.”

“It inspired the mom and dad to recognize that they had given this baby everything they could,” says Kate. “They heaped love on her and received love from her. That really helped them grieve and heal.”

Choir singers join to make a difference but remain dedicated volunteers because of the group’s deep sense of community, which is especially apparent when a volunteer’s own loved one falls ill. Kristin Masters asked her Santa Cruz choir members to sing nearly every day throughout her partner Claudette’s final months (she died of brain cancer in 2013). “I didn’t have to hold everything together,” Kristin says. “Being surrounded by love and support let my heart relax.” Claudette’s last days were rich, warm, and sweet. “It was like a sanctuary in there,” Kristin says. “I got to give her that kind of death.”

Visit [thresholdchoir.org](http://thresholdchoir.org) for more information.



*“Victims won’t always remember your name,” says CRT director Joe Avalos, right. “But they’ll never forget you were there.”*

## COMFORT AMID CHAOS

**T**hey wanted a midnight snack. Marlene Alatorre and her sister, Michelle Gonzalez, drove to a taco truck in the parking lot of a nearby strip mall on a June Saturday night in Los Angeles in 2012. Michelle, 22, sat in the car, while 19-year-old Marlene waited in line. Moments later, during a high-speed chase with police, a drunken motorist careened into the food stand at 62 miles per hour, killing Marlene and a second woman on impact.

A few miles away, Joe Avalos was settled in at home when his cell phone started buzzing. He was on call for a shift with the mayor’s Crisis



Response Team (CRT), volunteers dispatched with police, firefighters, and other emergency responders to scenes of deadly accidents and crimes. He got in his car and rushed to the site.

The first thing Joe, 47, remembers is the screaming. Marlene's mother, Holivia, was on the ground wailing in the intersection, a few feet away from the yellow crime-scene tape she was not allowed to cross. Joe kneeled next to her and introduced himself. "I'm going to do everything I can to help you get through this," he said, speaking softly but firmly.

In the aftermath of horrific trauma, the CRT serves an unusual civic duty: supporting victims no one thinks about—friends and family left behind.

"We wake up at all hours of the

night to be with people at the worst moment of their lives," says Joe, who spent nine years as a volunteer before becoming the group's director in 2013. "Victims feel helpless, confused, and out of control. We let them know that we're there to be their advocate."

In the incident that inspired the founding of the CRT, two couples had finished dinner at a San Pedro restaurant and were crossing the street when three of the people were hit by a speeding car. One died immediately; another, a few days later. The third was in critical condition for many days.

"[The ambulance crew members] did what they had been trained to do for the three victims who had been hit by the car," explained LAPD captain Tim King in a letter he wrote a couple of weeks later, recruiting the group's first volunteers. The police, he explained, fulfilled their responsibilities, protecting the crime scene and investigating the accident.

"Unfortunately," King went on, "there was no one to respond and assist the uninjured party who had watched the terrible incident happen before his eyes. His needs, although not physical, were as important as the three victims who had been hit by the car."

King suggested a solution: a volunteer group that could provide emotional assistance to victims' loved ones. Nearly 24 years after the CRT was founded, groups of its 320 volunteers show up at almost every tragic

death in the city of Los Angeles, from shootings to suicides to fires. Ready at a moment's notice, they each keep their car trunk stocked with a "war bag," a duffel packed with items as diverse as blankets and teddy bears. Volunteers liaise between families and investigators, crossing crime-scene tape to share information and answer questions. They might notify schools that kids will be absent or give families referrals for therapy.

Their most important job is just being present. "Standing there and handing someone a bottle of water can be pretty powerful. Victims just want to tell us their story, especially if they witnessed [the incident]," says Joe, who credits the 20 years he spent as a social worker for teaching him how to listen. "We

don't have to say much. We call it sacred silence."

Not long after Joe arrived to help Marlene Alatorre's family that June night, another car pulled up. A young woman jumped out, trying to rush the

crime scene—the daughter of the other woman killed. "She kept saying, 'I was pissed off at my mom. I ignored her calls,'" Joe says. "Now her mother was lying several feet away from her under a white sheet.

"It broke my heart," he continues. "No matter how upset you are, let it go, because

tomorrow, or even the next hour, is not promised to us." The CRT, Joe says, "constantly reminds me how precious life is." **R**

“*Just standing there can be pretty powerful. We don't have to say much. We call it sacred silence.*”

E-mail [lacrt@lacity.org](mailto:lacrt@lacity.org) for more information.

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## PARENTAL ADVISORY

Just taught my kids about taxes by eating 38 percent of their ice cream.

CONAN O'BRIEN

I'm at my most hostage negotiator when I see my three-year-old holding a permanent marker without the lid.

[@SIMONCHOLLAND](https://twitter.com/SIMONCHOLLAND) (SIMON HOLLAND)

Asked to switch seats on the plane because I was sitting next to a crying baby. Apparently, that's not allowed if the baby is yours.

[@MOMMYSHORTS](https://twitter.com/MOMMYSHORTS) (ILANA WILES)