

Hilo Charity Mission

PILOTS RISE TO MEET CRITICAL NEEDS IN HAWAII GA PILOTS PRODUCE, DELIVER SUPPLIES

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By Jim Moore

With hospital workers facing a critical shortage of protective equipment in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and stray cats facing starvation in shelters, Hawaii pilots swung into action in April and May.

Soon after the coronavirus pandemic took hold in March and hospitals across the country faced shortages of critical supplies including personal protective equipment, Nobi Buntin started sewing masks, and enlisted help from friends. The former Delta Air Lines flight attendant who is now working on her flight instructor certificate found willing hands among her colleagues, including current and former Delta staff, who pitched in to make masks for medical workers. Buntin, who was among the recipients of an [AOPA You Can Fly Advanced Rating Scholarship in 2019](#), made the first delivery in April, renting a Cessna 172 to fly handmade masks, and cat food, to the islands of Maui and Lanai with her aviation mentor, Lei Enoka.

The cat food was delivered to ease the suffering of animals starving to death in shelters after the barges (which Hawaiians living on islands around Oahu count on to deliver cargo shipped to Honolulu) ceased operation after the state locked down. Cats began starving, and medical workers faced a fearful risk of contracting the sometimes deadly disease.

The close-knit general aviation community in Hawaii took the urgency of both human and feline needs to heart, collecting donations and digging into their own pockets to pay for the supplies to make masks. (The cost of elastic shot up soon after the pandemic took hold.)

Buntin made a flight on May 6 with Abigail Dang, 18, who said in a May 19 video chat that her own [AOPA You Can Fly High School Flight Training Scholarship](#) had taken her well beyond her first solo on her sixteenth birthday. Now a private pilot working on her instrument rating, Dang was accepted to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University for the fall, though the pandemic has prompted a change in plan: Dang said she's going to defer her admission for a year, and meanwhile continue training with her Hawaii aviation family and her role models, including Buntin and Annie Domko, a retired U.S. Navy F/A-18 pilot now employed as a contractor who helps Navy pilots hone their combat skills by flying against them playing the role of an adversary. Domko met Buntin soon after she moved to Hawaii in 2016. The community of pilots is small, and the community of women pilots smaller still.

"We all became friends," Domko said. "I actually ... bought an airplane and started a flying club."

That's how Buntin and Dang wound up flying the Czech Sport Aircraft Cruiser in question, stuffed with masks, cat food, and survival gear, to Hilo on May 6.

Buntin said they took great care to comply with state guidelines and advisories. The pilots wore masks, never left the airport grounds, and called the destination airport ahead of each flight to confirm the arrival procedures. The supply handoffs at the security gate typically took less than a minute.

As Hawaii and other states ease the COVID-19 restrictions and advisories, something more closely approximating "normal" life has returned, Buntin wrote in a follow-up email June 3. Dang's flight instructors have emerged from "Covid Hibernation," Buntin reported, and she has resumed her training with an eye on an instrument rating and an instructor certificate. The supply shortages have also eased. Aloha Aviators is now turning its attention to planning other kinds of charity work, such as collecting donations of school supplies and food for food banks. (Anyone inclined to chip in can email the [group](#), or find them on [Venmo](#), @Fly-Girls.)

The fundraising on behalf of Aloha Aviators, Buntin said, referring to the group she created to manage the relief efforts, has been "just for the masks" and cat

food. (The local chapters of The Ninety-Nines and Women in Aviation International also use the same Venmo account for various fundraising efforts, including local scholarships.)

More than 40 million Americans have lost their jobs since the pandemic began, and Buntin is among them. Still, she covered the cost of aircraft rental and fuel, and spearheaded a group effort that produced and delivered more than 1,000 masks to medical facilities.

“I was denied unemployment,” Buntin said May 19. “I am by no means in a good spot, but I’m in a better spot than others.”

Dang said, “AOPA was a huge reason why I was able to even get into aviation,” and she is still planning an aviation career despite the massive disruption to the industry caused by the pandemic. Time will tell how quickly an airline job might be on offer, so she is looking at other ways to make a living in aerospace if such an alternative proves to be required.

Buntin and Dang got together May 31 to talk about recruiting other student pilots to ride along on future charitable flights, continuing to “expose them to aviation and our charity work.” A May 21 flight included just such a mix of aeronautical instruction and public benefit flying.

“I hope to emphasize the importance of thinking outside the box and ‘paying forward’ to the younger generation of aviators,” Buntin wrote in a May email. “The Aloha Aviators are forever grateful for fabric, elastic, and funding donations.”

She continued the thought on June 3: “Hopefully our efforts, no matter how small, help our community.”

The You Can Fly program, including various scholarship programs, and the Air Safety Institute, are funded by charitable donations to the AOPA Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization.

To be a part of the solution, visit www.aopafoundation.org/donate.