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Bridget's Cradles

Ashley Opliger

Taking Flight & Spreading Hope

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Cradle Cargo: Hope Takes Flight

From the Air Capital to Grieving Families Nationwide



In the Air Capital of the World, airplanes have long carried people and products around the world. Now, Wichita-based nonprofit Bridget's Cradles is inviting the aviation community to help carry something else: hope.

Through its new Cradle Cargo program, volunteer pilots transport handmade cradles and bereavement resources to hospitals nationwide, ensuring families receive compassionate care after pregnancy loss. The program brings together two worlds connected to Wichita — aviation and a hometown ministry with a nationwide reach.

Bridget's Cradles currently serves more than 1,700 hospitals in all 50 states, providing knit and crocheted cradles for families to hold and bond with their babies after second-trimester stillbirth. However, more than 1,000 U.S. hospitals with birthing units remain unreached.

"It took us 11 years to reach the first 1,700 hospitals, and we want to reach the next 1,000-plus much faster," said Ashley Opliger, founder and executive director of Bridget's Cradles. "I began wondering what could happen if volunteer pilots carried cradles on flights they were already making, utilizing empty legs and available cargo space."

A Love of Father and Flight

For Opliger, that idea grew from a deeply personal connection to aviation.

Her father, Steven Golik, was a former pilot who spent his 36-year career as an engineer at Beechcraft and later Textron Aviation, working on aircraft programs including the JPATS T-6 Texan II, King Air, Citation Longitude, and SkyCourier. After he was tragically killed by a drunk driver in 2024, Opliger found herself drawn to the world he loved. Aviation became a part of her grief journey — a way to feel connected to her dad while discovering a love of flight for herself.





A full-circle aviation connection: Steven Golik with Piper Cherokee Warrior N2122J at the 1980 Buckeye Air Rally in Ohio (top far left), and his daughter, Ashley Opliger, in the cockpit of the same airplane in Iowa more than four decades later (right).

She began flying in small airplanes with flight instructors and connecting with the aviation community. Somewhere between those flights, new friendships with pilots, and a growing appreciation for aviation, an idea began to form: Airplanes could help Bridget's Cradles reach hospitals faster.

That idea took flight this summer when Opliger traveled to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh with Cradle Cargo's first volunteer pilot, Kelly Nimmo-Guenther, vice president of the Cirrus Owners and Pilots Association (COPA), with 200 cradles on board. Opliger delivered several boxes to Wisconsin hospitals, while other pilots flew the remaining cradles home from Oshkosh to hospitals in their own communities — launching the first Cradle Cargo missions across the country.

Spreading Hope Across the Country

From Oshkosh, the cradles began fanning out across the country. Fellow COPA Women Pilots Megan Vande Voort, a grieving mother, and Helena D'Angelo flew Cirrus aircraft carrying cradles to families in Iowa and Montana. Texas-based pilots Drew Laughlin and Alex Graf of Aetos Aviation Network continued the mission south, flying another shipment by Cirrus to Dallas. Surgeon Patrick Larreategui transported cradles to Ohio in his Bonanza, while retired anesthesiologist Rolf Wallin delivered them to a hospital in North Carolina in his Cessna 182.

Oshkosh also opened the door to a partnership with Angel Flight Central, whose volunteer pilots provide free flights for children and adults traveling for medical care. Back in Kansas, Angel Flight Central board member and pilot Dr. Darryl Nelson carried eight boxes to Kansas City.

Other missions continued taking flight from Wichita. Pierce Ahart, founder of Aetos Aviation Network, transported 15 boxes from Wichita to Texas aboard a Citation jet during a business trip. And after EAA Chapter 88's September 5 fly-in at Jabara Airport, pilot Art Tangen carried another shipment from Wichita to Albuquerque in his Bonanza.

Those early flights demonstrate exactly what Opliger envisioned for Cradle Cargo: There doesn't have to be one type of pilot, airplane, or mission.

"Sometimes it might be a pilot with room for one box in a small airplane, and another time it could be a business jet with room for 15," Opliger said. "We want pilots and aircraft owners to think of Bridget's Cradles when they have an empty leg or extra space and ask, 'Could I carry hope somewhere I'm already going?' "

One Airport and One Hospital at a Time

Bridget's Cradles tracks active hospitals receiving cradles, lapsed hospitals needing replenishment, and unreached hospitals that haven't received them. Pilots share where they're headed, and the team matches their routes with hospitals that need them. Pilots may deliver directly to the hospital or hand off the final miles to a local Cradle Carrier volunteer.

"Two people I love and miss in heaven are now woven into this story."
— Ashley Opliger, Bridget's Cradles founder and executive director



Pierce Ahart, founder of Aetos Aviation Network, departs Wichita's ICT Airport with 15 boxes of Bridget's Cradles aboard a Citation jet, transporting them to Austin and Houston, Texas, during business trips.



Bridget's Cradles founder Ashley Opliger and Cirrus Owners and Pilots Association (COPA) Vice President Kelly Nimmo-Guenther on the first Cradle Cargo mission to Wisconsin during EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2026.

Opliger envisions the Air Capital becoming the hub of a nationwide network of volunteer pilots and hopes Wichita's aviation community will help carry that vision forward. Because the cradles are lightweight, even small aircraft can carry enough to serve many grieving families.

Each cradle will ultimately be placed into the hands of grieving parents, giving them the opportunity to hold, bond with, and make memories with their stillborn baby — while connecting them to continued support through Bridget's Cradles, including support groups, remembrance events, and the "Cradled in Hope" book and podcast.



Nursing staff holding a box of Bridget's Cradles at Mercy Health Hospital in Janesville, Wisconsin

Each flight extends the reach of a Wichita-born ministry one airport — and one hospital — at a time. Opliger dreams of one day following in her father's footsteps by earning her pilot's license and flying Cradle Cargo missions herself.

And her aviation dreams extend beyond the cockpit. Bridget's Cradles currently operates from a rented 1,000-square-foot space in Kechi, but Opliger hopes to establish a permanent home for the growing national ministry in northeast Wichita or the surrounding area — with aviation woven into its future.

"We have a God-sized dream of building a headquarters for Bridget's Cradles on land with room to grow," Opliger said. "Someday, I would love for that vision to include access to a runway, and maybe even a mission aircraft and hangar. I know my dad would be so proud to see airplanes carrying Bridget's Cradles across the country. It's incredibly special to carry on his aviation legacy through the mission that began in memory of my daughter, Bridget. Two people I love and miss in heaven are now woven into this story."



Texas-based pilots Drew Laughlin and Alex Graf of Aetos Aviation Network bring Bridget's Cradles home from EAA AirVenture Oshkosh and deliver them to a Dallas-area hospital.



Angel Flight Central partner and pilot Dr. Darryl Nelson and his wife carry eight boxes of Bridget's Cradles from ICT to Kansas City.



Grieving mom and pilot Megan Vande Voort flies home from EAA AirVenture Oshkosh with a box of Bridget's Cradles to deliver to families in Iowa.

For Opliger, that is what Cradle Cargo is ultimately about: using aviation to reach more grieving families with comfort and compassion. Airplanes are already going places every day. Cradle Cargo simply asks: What if they carried hope with them?

Hope in Every Hold

Follow the mission. Learn more about Cradle Cargo at **CradleCargo.com.**

Get Involved

Pilots and Aviation Partners

Pilots can volunteer to carry cradles on existing flights. Aviation companies, aircraft owners, FBOs, flying clubs and flight schools can support the mission through flights, sponsorships, pilot connections and other partnerships.

Visit cradlecargo.com

Volunteers and Supporters

Knit or crochet cradles, volunteer, or give to comfort grieving families nationwide.

Visit bridgetscradles.com

Wave of Light

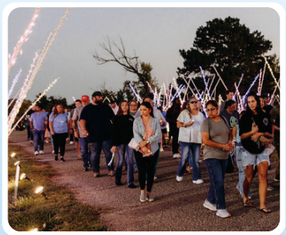
2026

BEECH LAKE | THURS, OCT 15 | 6:00 PM

PREGNANCY & INFANT LOSS REMEMBRANCE DAY

• *Candlelight Vigil* • *Water Lantern Release* • *Music*







Bridget's Cradles

LEARN MORE + REGISTER FOR FREE

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