

BEHIND THE STORY of what has come to be known as the "Flower" DC-3, are thousands of stories of children in hospitals throughout the United States. Stories of courage and pain, joy and despair, smiles and tears, and more than anything, their indomitable spirit.

Then there are the stories of the mixture of aviation and non-aviation people who pulled off this surprising feat. There were the artists who were clueless about navigating the regulatory labyrinth of the very cautious FAA, and there were the aviation-savvy people who knew how to get the regulators to say yes, even when they have just asked, "You want to do what?"

The "Flower" plane has to be one of recent aviation's most remarkable and bold projects, one in which thousands of kids fighting serious and sometimes terminal illnesses painted over 10,000 square feet of decals that were then used to cover a 1938 DC-3. During December 2003, and before hundreds of thousands of viewers, both in person and by way of broadcast throughout the world, the DC-3 was flown over the Wright Brothers Memorial at First Flight during the centennial of flight ceremonies. Almost immediately afterwards, the decals were scheduled to be removed, and the venerable old craft could return once again to its role as a trainer.

Just a few weeks before its debut at First Flight, the cadre of the flower plane project participants converged in a dented hanger at the Piedmont Triad International Airport (GSO) in Greensboro, North Carolina. After nine days, the transformed plane rolled out of a hanger into the warm, red light of the sun revealing its new colors. That may have been the moment in which the first onlookers were stunned speechless, but the story begins more than a year earlier.

A Little Bit of Sunshine at the End of the Day

Portraits of Hope (POH) is a California-based organization whose goal is to bring "creative therapy" into the lives of children and parents dealing with serious and life-threatening illness. After being founded by Ed Massey and his brother Bernie in 1995, its first major project involved 30,000 children throughout the



The Story of the
"Flower" DC-3

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY CHARLES H. STITES

Painted by Children



(L-R) Caleb Vaughn, Christy Hicks and her daughter, Courtney, painting one of the many petals required to cover 10,000 square feet of surface area on the DC-3.

Los Angeles area whose flower paintings formed the covering for the 165-foot-tall "Tower of Hope." According to Massey, it was the largest project of its kind ever attempted. Since then, POH has worked with young patients in over 170 hospitals throughout the United States so that "children will get a chance to see a little bit of sunshine at the end of the day."

Just over a year and a half before the flower plane became a reality, a represen-

tative from NASA happened to see a segment on Portraits of Hope on a national talk show and approached the California-based organization with the idea that NASA and POH could work together on a project to benefit children. That idea would remain dormant for a year until NASA's involvement with the First Flight Centennial Commission prompted them to call POH's Susan Nassberg.

Ed Massey states that without Susan Nassberg "the program wouldn't exist." After volunteering with POH during the tower project, Nassberg soon sold her interest in an advertising firm and began working full-time on POH projects. When NASA called in 2003 offering to help support an Anniversary of Flight Portraits of Hope project, she suggested having kids "paint" a large LA-area plane for a static display. Massey, in a burst of enthusiasm typical of an artist (his education and career are in fine art and writing children's books), made the well-intended, if naive proclamation, "No, let's make it

On December 16, 2003, and inbound to the Wright Brothers Memorial at First Flight, the "Flower" DC-3 is lit by late afternoon sun.

From overhead, the size of just one of the more than 100 petals required to cover the DC-3 becomes evident.



fly for the celebration." Anyone who has spent time in aviation is fully aware of the large economy-wide ramifications opened by those eight words.

Making a Crazy Idea Work

While fully capable of handling the logistics of working with children's hospitals, even for the massive task of "painting" a DC-3, POH now needed the help of seasoned and well-connected aviation professionals if such an ambitious (some would say outrageously ambitious) project would ever see the light of day. Fortunately such people exist in the form of Steve Merritt of the North Carolina Division of Aviation and DC-3 owner Dan Gryder.

Through their contacts with the First Flight Commission, NASA was told that if there was to be a realistic shot at pulling this off, POH needed to talk with Merritt, who was heavily involved in the planning of centennial events and had

eamed a reputation for having the ability to talk people into things.

Merritt remembers his first contact with Portraits of Hope: "I called them and they had in mind doing a T-27 and I talked them out of that. I didn't see how we'd get stickers to stay on at 400 knots. So we came up with the idea of a DC-3."

"I had been interested in getting a DC-3 type rating and found a fellow in Griffin, Georgia, who had an airplane that I thought might be available. So I asked him, and he said it's a crazy idea, let's see if we can make it work."

Enter Dan Gryder, Delta pilot, tail-dragger flight instructor, and owner of a classic DC-3 (see sidebar) in which he offers flight instruction and type ratings from his home field just outside of Atlanta. Sitting on a deck he constructed



With his aunt Christy Evans' assistance (top), 5-year-old Duke Hospital patient Bradley Reed concentrates on painting his flower for the DC-3.

to accompany his DC-3 for the week it was to be tied down at Manteo (the host airport for the First Flight celebration), Gryder remembered his reaction when he got the call from Merritt. "The NC DOT contacted us in May or early June and asked if we would be interested in contracting our airplane for Kitty Hawk. It took about three seconds to negotiate that. We wanted to go to Kitty Hawk anyway, but the chance to get to fly as much as we've gotten to fly in this kind of restricted airspace, with the airplanes we've gotten to fly with, has been an absolute honor."

"Originally the description was that there were going to be some kind of sponsor decals and that they didn't have all that worked out—what it was going to be covered with and how much of it. So, I never really did know what the whole idea was until pretty late in the game. It really didn't matter to us what we were covering it with as the NC DOT was handling all the details."

Young Artists Paint a DC-3

In the meantime, Nassberg and Massey of Portraits of Hope took a look at an LA-area DC-3 belonging to Clay Lacy and followed that up with a scale model upon which the organization's flower motif was painted. After a lot of measuring, they determined they would