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TOP STORY

WIRE

## **Pilot flew Iowa woman to Fremont during the flood to visit her dying mom**

By Chris Peters

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Brenda Bolkema, left, poses with pilot Jim Hassenstab, who stands next to her, and another couple at the Fremont Airport. Hassenstab flew Bolkema to Fremont for free during the flooding on March 17 so she could care for her mother. Bolkema's mother died the next day.

Courtesy Brenda Bolkema via BH News Service

When floodwaters cut off roads in and out of Fremont, Nebraska, they also threatened to maroon a woman on her deathbed and keep her daughter from visiting during her final days.

A selfless pilot brought the two together.

Brenda Bolkema regularly drove the 2½ hours from her home in Sheldon to a Fremont nursing home to visit her adoptive mother, Vicki Anson, who was battling lung and bone cancer.

Just as the flood isolated Fremont and cut off access to roads in and out, Anson's condition worsened.

Anson was told she had only days to live. Her daughter wasn't sure she would see her mom again.

Bolkema frantically called around on Sunday, March 17, searching for any way into town. It took only a couple of hours before she found Jim Hassenstab.

A man at the Fremont Airport kept a list of people who needed to travel to or from Fremont, either for a medical need or simply to return to their homes. When Bolkema called, that man relayed the message to Hassenstab, the Omaha-based chairman of DMSi Software and a board member of Angel Flight Central.

He offered to pick her up in his hobby airplane and fly her to her mother. No charge.

“I was dumbfounded,” Bolkema said. “I said, ‘I at least have to pay for your gas.’ He said, ‘Nope, if you want to make a donation to Angel Flight, that’s totally fine.’”

Angel Flight Central is a group of private pilots who volunteer their planes, their gasoline and their time to transport people around the Midwest, often taking patients to appointments at hospitals.

Hassenstab was one of dozens of private pilots who volunteered to fly people in and out of Fremont that day. Each time he touched down at Millard Airport, he asked for another person in need of help. He spent all day that Sunday and much of the following day making flights to and from the isolated city.

“It felt good to pitch in and help people who had a need,” he said. “It was a constant flow of planes coming and going. It was cool to see.”

He picked up a couple in Omaha who wanted to return home to Fremont, then he flew to Sheldon to pick up Bolkema and took all of them to the Fremont Municipal Airport. Helping Bolkema was just one of about a dozen flights he made that day, shuttling people and supplies both directions.

By early Sunday afternoon, Bolkema, who is a nurse, was by her mother’s bedside, providing relief to an understaffed nursing care facility and a break for her dad, who had been with his wife around the clock.

“Knowing that she had somebody there 24/7, I think she was able to relax,” Bolkema said. “She could let go and pass in peace.”

Her mother died the next day.

## MORE INFORMATION





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