

in(t)-spe-'rā-shen n 1. a divine or supernatural influence 2. to be an animating, enlivening, or exalting influence on another; to spur one to act 3. to draw forth or bring out



## Kids in Flight TAKES OFF

by Kelly Desatnik

**Maria Weybrecht always knew she wanted to start her own non-profit organization. She figured it was something she would do when she was old and gray and had lived a full life. But fate had something else in mind for Maria when she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at age 19.**

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York where she was treated with radioactive iodine. She would return to New York every six months for treatment and later, once a year.

### Turning Point

To add to the stress of traveling to New York for treatment, Maria learned that her boyfriend, a US Marine and one of her greatest supporters, was called overseas. Shortly after a trip to Cincinnati to say goodbye to her boyfriend, she learned that her mother suddenly passed away. Maria didn't think things could get worse.

Instead of getting angry at her misfortune, Maria decided to take action. She decided to combine her passion for flying and love of children with her innate desire to create a non-profit organization. This is when the idea for Kids in Flight was born. Kids in Flight provides free sight seeing flights to seriously ill children and their families. The planes are flown by an experienced instructor and feature tours around the Cleveland area. According to Maria, "Providing experiences that make me smile is the best kind of treatment. My goal was to provide the flying experience for children to escape and persevere their problems."

Maria furiously contacted everyone she knew in the aviation industry and pulled off the first Kids in Flight event in only two and a half weeks. The first annual event took place at a local airport and was supported by several children's charities and hospitals, including the Ronald McDonald House. Of the 150 people in attendance at last year's event, 99 participants took to the skies. Since founding the organization three years ago, attendance has doubled each year.

### Present Day

The fact that Maria is a cancer patient has not slowed her down at all. She finished her bachelor degree at Cleveland State University and graduated valedictorian. She recently started graduate school and is working towards her MBA and graduate certificate in non-profit management. Maria was also voted one of Glamour Magazine's "Top 10 College Women of 2005" and one of Cleveland Magazine's "Most Interesting People of 2006." Maria spends most of her free time dedicated to Kids in Flight and looks forward to growing this incredible organization.

For more information about Kids in Flight, visit the website at [www.kidsinflight.org](http://www.kidsinflight.org). OA

### Diagnosis

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Maria was always enthralled with airplanes and the prospect of flying. Her dad would frequently take her to the local airport to watch the planes take off. When Maria went off to college at Ohio University, it seemed like a natural progression for her to major in aviation flight and management and join the Air National Guard. Life seemed to be going according to plan as she obtained her private pilot's license and prepared to leave for basic training.

Just two weeks before leaving for basic training, Maria went in to have her wisdom teeth taken out. The oral surgeon found some suspicious lumps in her neck and sent her to see an ear nose and throat specialist. Once the lumps were biopsied, the physician confirmed that Maria had stage four thyroid cancer. Her dream of flying a plane would have to be put on hold.

### Treatment

Maria was admitted to Hillcrest Hospital in Cleveland, OH where she underwent two surgeries to have the tumors removed. She was then admitted to The Cleveland Clinic where they devised an aggressive treatment plan. Maria endured a 12-hour surgery, then one month later, a six-hour surgery. Over the course of four surgeries, she had a total of 30 tumors removed from her neck. Maria reflects, "The tumors were like lightning. I would have tumors removed on a Friday and by Monday morning, there would be even more."

Maria's treatment regimen also included frequent trips to