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Valentine's Day rescue flight carries dogs north from Williston



Jessica Quinn (right) and Jessica Kiener look over travel containers next to the airplane.

Story and Photos By Terry Witt

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WILLISTON -- A dedicated pit bull mamma dog and her 10 playful puppies were among the 35 canines airlifted out of Williston Municipal Airport Tuesday (Feb. 14) for a four and a half-hour Valentine's Day flight to Reading, Pennsylvania.

All the dogs were brought to the airport by Lucky Puppy Rescue of Bonifay, a small Panhandle city. They were put on a plane flown by FlyPups rescue owner and chief volunteer pilot Matthew J. Kiener of Pottersville, N.J.

The dogs were formerly strays or had been given up by their owners. They were sheltered by Lucky Puppy Rescue until they could be placed in foster care by rescue groups and later adopted by their new pet parents up north.

Kiener removed all the seats in his airplane except for the pilot's seat and the front passenger seat for his wife Jessica. The rest of the plane was filled with dog crates for the flight to Pennsylvania.

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Two pit bull puppies peer at a photographer from their crate shortly before being loaded for the flight north.

FlyPups owner and volunteer pilot Matthew J. Kiener gives his pet dog Piper a hug. He met Piper as a puppy on her first rescue flight.



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Leah Zimoski of Williston Municipal Airport gives an adorable Dachshund a kiss before the flight north.

“For me it’s the greatest,” said Kiener. “I love flying and what better way to spend the day.”

FlyPups is a pet rescue service created pretty much by accident.

Kiener said a friend of his was using his airplane for pet rescues and asked him to fly five dogs to New York state several years ago. The friend’s airplane was temporarily out of service. Keiner turned down the offer at first. He owned a two-seat aerobatic airplane at the time. He thought it was too small for five dogs.

When his friend told him the five dogs were puppies, he agreed to the flight.

Kiener said he met his dog Piper on the flight. After delivering the puppies to New York, he was walking out the door to get some paperwork when one of the puppies followed him out.

He picked her up. She licked his face. It was love at first sight. The puppy became his pet. He said he named his puppy Piper because he knew he needed a bigger plane.

“Each time I called her name I would stay focused on what I had to do and within six months I had the plane,” Kiener said. He purchased a Saratoga Piper Cub. The seats in back are removed for flying rescued dogs.

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He has flown 50 to 100 rescue flights since that time. He also flew supplies to flooded areas of Louisiana and flew out dogs and cats that were found without homes in the flood zone.



Kiener said his rescue also provides dogs to veterans who want one. There is no cost.

“We think the veterans have already paid the price. It can be real rewarding,” he said.

Jessica Quinn of Lucky Puppy Rescue stands by the side of Stella, a friendly female dog, with the rescue plane parked behind them.

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A sleepy pit bull puppy fell sound asleep between a visitor's feet waiting for the flight north.



Two puppies remain temporarily in a cage waiting for their flight.

For more information on FlyPups, go to www.FlyPups.org or send an email to Kiener at Matthew.Kiener@gmail.com.

Lucky Puppy Rescue
At Williston

Municipal Airport, the 6-week-old pit bull puppies were playing while they waited for the flight to Pennsylvania. Their watchful mamma kept counting noses, which was no easy task.

She had nursed them earlier. The puppies seemed willing to adopt anyone who petted them, or they would plop down on short notice for a nap or to play with their siblings.

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The 35 adult dogs and puppies were brought by van to Williston Municipal Airport by volunteers Jessica Quinn and her father James Holeyfield. They work for Lucky Puppy Rescue in Bonifay.

Bonifay is located in Holmes County in the Florida Panhandle. Quinn said the Bonifay area has a big problem with unwanted dogs and cats wandering the countryside.

“People will get a puppy and won’t get him fixed. He roams and roams. If it’s a female that doesn’t get fixed, it begins having litters of puppies,” she said.

Terri Mattson, founder of Lucky Puppy Rescue said she started the rescue 12 years ago in response to all the roaming dogs she found near her farm. At the time of this phone interview, Mattson was bottle-feeding nine orphaned puppies on her farm.

“We started it by accident on our farm with all the drop-offs,” she said referring to dogs that are taken to rural areas and dumped by their owners.

She said Holmes County has started a small animal services shelter but most of the time the county government refers pet owners to Lucky Puppy Rescue if a pet owner wants to drop off a dog or a cat.

Eighty percent of the dogs from Lucky Puppy Rescue are sent to Pennsylvania or Massachusetts where spay and neutering laws are strong. Rescue groups work hard to find homes for pets.

“This is our solution; send our dogs north. They have spay and neutering laws,” she said.

Lucky Puppy Rescue is careful to obtain travel certifications for the animals it sends north. She said the organization needs a kennel license to ship the animals to another state.

Mattson said there’s no shortage of dogs needing homes in the Bonifay area.

“It’s just never ending here,” she said. “We’re in a small town. The only donations we get are from people who drop off dogs.”

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Jessie Kiener (kneeling) and Jessica Quinn coax a dog into the container at the airport.



Two puppies take a nap in the van before leaving for Pennsylvania.