

Catalyst Profile
George Pankiw

The career of George Pankiw, the WCU alumnus of 1979, has been, quite literally, up in the air for nearly 30 years. In 1986, this former Catamount established Mission Hospital's first air ambulance program. Today, the Mountain Area Medical Airlift, better known as MAMA, provides services to 17 counties across Western North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee, Northeast Georgia, and Northern South Carolina.

Before taking his professional pursuits to new heights, however, Pankiw was a student at WCU. In 1973, he graduated with a dual degree in history and political science. Years later, he returned as a nursing major, quickly finding the program to be "strong" and "well respected" within the community.

After bidding farewell to the Whee six years later, he pushed up the East Coast to Loretto, Pennsylvania. There, with hopes of advancing his education at another institution, Pankiw earned a graduate degree from St. Francis University, a Catholic liberal arts school.

In the early 1980s, with three degrees under his belt, the alumnus became interested in establishing an air ambulance program. Though the concept was initially met with criticism, he continued to argue his case until MAMA became a reality. Meanwhile, Pankiw also began collaborating with Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Now, several decades later, Mission Hospital has two forest green choppers capable of covering 10,000 square miles per day. With bases in both Asheville and Franklin, the air ambulance program has transported more than 21,000 people since its inception.

Erlanger Hospital is also home to Life Force, a medical air division offering trauma service, heart and stroke intervention, and high-risk obstetric care. The Tennessee system even keeps several units of blood, groundbreaking cardiac drugs, and an in-flight fetal monitoring system aboard their two aircrafts, a Bell 407 and a Eurocopter EC135.

Reflecting back on his "wonderful and diverse" career, Pankiw know his progress in the medical field was the result of commitment. Though his idea was originally rejected, he kept on pushing for the air ambulance, adamant that the program could bring something to the community.

"Embrace the opportunity to get the best out of your curriculum," said Pankiw. "And don't let anyone discourage you in your ideas and goals."