

Angel Arms

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By Hayley Shapley

In 2011, Clovis, N.M., native Esther Steinle was reading a novel that gave her the idea to send home a service member for the holidays. Her friends liked what she was doing, and that Christmas, eight couples got together to cover the plane trip to New Jersey for a young airman who missed the previous two holiday seasons with his family.

December passed, and her good deed was complete, but Steinle felt there was more she could do. "After Christmas was over, the thought wouldn't leave my mind," she said.

That's when she decided she would do the same thing in 2012—and go even bigger. She called the program Angel Arms and started working with Cannon Air Force Base to identify airmen who otherwise would not be able to travel home for the holidays.

The goal that first year was to raise \$3,000 and send six people home. Instead, Angel Arms raised \$11,000 and sent 22 service members home. Since its inception, the organization has helped more than 180 military members visit their families.

Senior Airman Valesia Williams, who hadn't been back home to Virginia in more than a year and a half, was one of the award recipients in 2018. For Williams, it was particularly meaningful to spend quality time with her loved ones, as she was just months away from changing duty stations to Korea.

"It was a good opportunity for me to be able to go home, see everyone before I leave, and celebrate my birthday with my parents, family and friends," Williams said. "It was amazing. I didn't think I would get the opportunity to do it."

Angel Arms has sent airmen all over the continental U.S. and to farther-flung locations such as Africa, Guam, the Philippines and St. Thomas. Once they've all returned to duty in New Mexico, there's a reception every January that brings together airmen, their first sergeants, and the donors.

"It's fun to hear their stories about their trips home and what it's meant for them," Steinle said. "Sometimes there's a really good reason for them to go home."

In one case, a young man traveled to see his family and had been back for less than a week when he got a call that his brother had been killed in a burglary. In another, it was an

airman's last chance to see an aging grandmother.

"It's heartwarming to know that there's always a reason why they're on the list and you just don't know it until afterward," Steinle said.

Angel Arms always raises as much as it needs in any given year, and so far, everyone whose name has been submitted has been able to get assistance. Donors are a mixture of individuals, businesses and organizations, many of whom Steinle said give year after year. She hopes to see the program extend to other communities.

For the airmen who get an opportunity to travel, Angel Arms brings tidings of comfort and joy at a special time of the year. "Especially as younger airmen, going home during the holidays isn't something that happens very often," Williams said. "It's really an experience I'll probably never forget."

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