

For a fee, firms make skies friendlier for seniors

By ALLISON ROSS

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When **Ruth Sprinkle** began planning to travel from Atlanta to her annual family reunion in Palm Beach last December, she found herself with a problem: how to get her older brother down to Florida with her.

The family usually drives to Florida so they can bring their bicycles, but her 63-year-old brother, who also lives in Atlanta, has health problems and couldn't handle the 10-hour drive.

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Then Sprinkle saw an ad for **Flying Companions**. Owned by Atlanta resident **Doug Iannelli**, the company flies with elderly or disabled travelers and helps them navigate the airport.

"It was a leap of faith to hire him, but everything turned out exactly how he said," said Sprinkle, who paid \$2,200 for the trip, which included round-trip airfare for her brother and two round-trip tickets for Iannelli. "My brother felt very much taken care of the entire way."

As the elderly population grows, so does demand for services to aid those travelers.

An ongoing study by **Dr. Eva Kahana**, director of the **Elderly Care Research Center at Case-**

Western Reserve University has found that more than half of the respondents - whose average age is 92 - still frequently take long-distance trips to visit family.

According to statistics from New York-based **JetBlue Airways Corp.** (Nasdaq: JBLU), the percent growth of customers' requests for wheelchair assistance during booking has grown, surpassing overall passenger growth since 2004.

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And since our region is a retiree haven, **Palm Beach International Airport** has the highest percentage of wheelchair customers of all JetBlue airports.

Businesses like Illinois-based Travel Care and Logistics, which specializes in helping elderly travelers with medical needs, cater to this market. The company flew with more than 100 elderly clients in the past year.

~ *Allison Ross*

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