

Finding A “Home Away From Home” In the Midst of Transplant



“Philadelphia is the place for second chances,” says Renee, a Family House guest and caregiver to her husband awaiting a life-saving lung transplant. “I had no idea. It’s the city’s best kept secret.”

Hundreds of people seeking a second chance at life through solid organ transplant come to Philadelphia each year to be treated at one of the city’s world renowned transplant hospitals. Gift of Life Donor Program, the nation’s leading organ procurement organization (OPO) serving Delaware, southern New Jersey, and the eastern half of Pennsylvania, helps facilitate these life-saving transplants.

Transplant patients often make the trip with family or friends who have become their caregivers and for many, Philadelphia is a long way from home. To be away from work and normalcy during a medical emergency like transplant can be overwhelming and put families under heavy emotional and financial stress. While patients receive care in the hospital, there are few places where family members and caregivers can receive the support they need.

Thankfully, eligible families can stay at Gift of Life Family House, a “home away from home” for those receiving transplant treatment in Philadelphia. The Family House is the first hospitality house of its kind to serve multiple transplant centers and represents Founder & President Howard M. Nathan’s vision for completing the circle of care for transplant patients and their families.

“When I think about the Family House, I remember when my sister was listed for a transplant,” Nathan says. “The journey we embarked on together gave me a deeper understanding of the obstacles transplant families encounter. They need a place like the Family House.”

Founded in 2011 by Gift of Life Donor Program and its affiliate the Transplant Foundation, the Family House is a 30 room (soon to be 32) facility offering transplant families who live at least 25 miles away highly subsidized temporary lodging and supportive services. Families are asked to pay just \$40 per night to receive a private room and bathroom, a warm meal each evening prepared by volunteers, and transportation to and from transplant centers despite actual costs totaling \$185 per night. They also have access to a licensed social work team and a supportive community of other transplant families to support them. No eligible family has ever been turned away from the Family House due to an inability to pay its nightly fee.

When Tibor and Bridget learned their infant son John Paul couldn’t receive the life-saving liver transplant treatment he needed near their home in Virginia, they came to Philadelphia. They stayed at the Family House several times, sometimes with their five other children, and felt at home immediately. “This House provided not only a bed—it provided hope for us, it provided understanding, it provided a place of peace, and it provided love,” Tibor says. “I didn’t know it at the time, but we needed all those things.”



The Family House is more than a source of support for transplant families—it’s an anchor that engages and strengthens the transplant community. Through its various volunteer opportunities, members of the transplant community can interact, educate, and support one another. For example, transplant professionals who care for patients in the hospital have the opportunity to serve a warm meal at dinnertime to Family House guests.

“Dinner is always made every night, which is wonderful,” says Kendra, whose infant son received a heart transplant. “The last thing I want to do is cook when I get back from the hospital.”



The Baksy Family

Transplant recipients and donor families can celebrate their second chance at life and honor their loved ones’ legacies by coordinating fundraisers or Wish List drives to stock the Family House with important supplies. They can also help give tours of the Family House or bring our guests to and from the hospital in the shuttle. Many times, recipients volunteering at the Family House form friendships with guests currently waiting for or recovering from a transplant and offer support and guidance. Additionally, other volunteers from the community who may have little understanding of donation and transplantation often leave the Family House eager to educate others about what they learned.

Since opening its doors in 2011, the Family House has made the transplant journey a little easier for more than 2,000 families.

After seeing the impact a place like the Family House has on the transplant community, other OPOs have been inspired to consider creating a similar facility in their service areas.

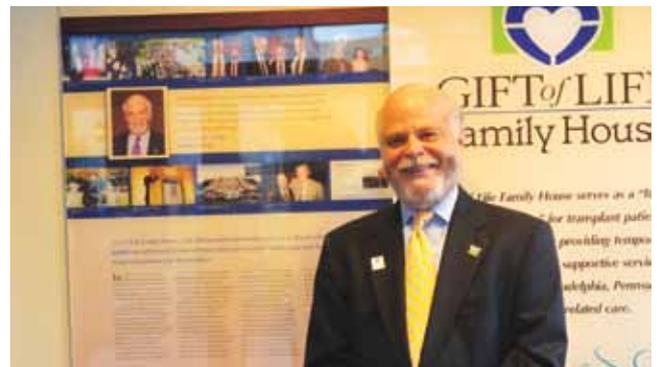
“I just love being here at the Family House,” says Janice, a caregiver to her son who recently received a liver transplant. “I hold everything in because I don’t want him to worry about me. I need him to worry about him—making sure he takes his medicine, that he’s getting rest. Talking with the [Family House] social worker is great for me. It helps a lot.”

“A lot of people don’t realize that being a caregiver comes with a tremendous amount of stress,” says Richard, a caregiver. “It can be so overwhelming, but the Family House took the worry out of my day so I could focus on caring for my wife.”

“The shuttle is a lifesaver for people,” says James, who stayed at the Family House and cared for his wife while she was in the hospital. “Drivers drop you right in front of the hospital entrance and people on the shuttle have either been through or are going through the same things as you.”

The Family House steps in to provide care so caregivers can focus on what’s most important—caring for their loved ones and themselves and getting through the transplant journey together.

Learn more about Gift of Life Family House and its services at GiftofLifeFamilyHouse.org. 



Howard M. Nathan, Founder and President