

## THE UPSIDE

# Hosting hope: Bala family opens home to Carolina couple with sick child at CHOP

by **Alfred Lubrano**, Updated: April 7, 2019- 9:33 AM



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The kitchen is radiant and welcoming, like the finished product at the end of a TV makeover show, when the contractor asks the homeowners how they like it, and all they can do is sputter: “Awesome!”

Presiding over the center island, nearly big enough to have its own flag and system of currency, are Page Talbott and Jim Gould, owners of the kitchen and the 7,500-square-foot Bala Cynwyd house around it.

Page and Jim are kind — unconditionally, beyond-mere-decency kind.



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Page Talbott and Jim Gould in their Bala Cynwyd home.

What they do with all that goodwill and that big house is host people from distant places whose loved ones are hospitalized in Philadelphia. For 16 years, they've been part of [Hosts For Hospitals](#), the local nonprofit that matches residents with out-of-town families that are enduring the worst days of their lives.

It's not for money; host families aren't paid. Page and Jim, who've raised four children, have hosted 30 families over the years, because..., "Well, it's hard to explain," said Jim, 72, a retired banker. "Any host family will say we get more out of it than the patient family."





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Jim Gould (far left) and Page Talbott (far right) in their kitchen with Adayna and Travis Commodore.

For the last year, the couple has opened their home to Adayna Gonzalez Commodore and her husband, Travis Commodore, of Indian Land, S.C., 30 minutes south of Charlotte, N.C. Their daughter, Elsie, 2, has lived her entire life in [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#) except for two weeks, battling a rare lymphatic disorder. Another daughter, Nila, 8, lives at home during the school year, and in the nine-bedroom Bala house during the summer.



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Travis and Adayna Commodore with daughters Nila and Elsie at CHOP.

“We’re very fortunate to have them in our lives,” said Page, 66, project director of the [Philadelphia History Museum collection evaluation](#), a cataloging of the shuttered museum’s 100,000 artifacts. “These parents are so wonderful.”

Babies in distress move her. After her now 42-year-old daughter, Jody, was born at 26 weeks weighing 1 pound, 10 ounces, Page started a support group of parents of high-risk infants.

Adayna, who sometimes sits in the glorious, light-filled kitchen to share coffee and confidences with Page and Jim, appreciates Page’s empathetic connection.

“There’s a lot of good in this world,” said Adayna, a Wells Fargo bank executive and, at 42, the same age as Jody.

“But until you’re in trouble, you don’t realize how much.”





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Nila Commodore has become good friends with Colin Dilenschneider, grandson of Page Talbott and Jim Gould.

## ‘A feeling of home’

Hosts for Hospitals was cofounded by its executive director, Mike Aichenbaum, in 2000 after he faced down leukemia in a New York hospital for six months while his family ran up \$40,000 in hotel bills (in today’s dollars).

In Philadelphia, more than 500 hosts have lodged around 3,500 patient family members since 2000, saving guests about \$12 million, he said.

Always in short supply, hosts must provide a clean bathroom, a comfortable bed, and a “feeling of home,” according to the agency website. Guests, who pay around \$20 a day to the organization, are responsible for their own food and transportation.

What fuels Hosts is “kindness,” Aichenbaum said, referencing Page’s and Jim’s essence. “It’s incredibly powerful.” To explain why people welcome strangers into their lives, Aichenbaum quotes a long-time host: “I get to be the kind of person I want to be.”

## ‘Unplug my baby?’

Adayna and Travis met-cute on a road trip to President Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009. Travis, 39, born into a middle-class family in South Carolina, earned a master’s degree in public administration, worked in politics, and ran his dad’s flooring business. Adayna, raised by her working-class mother in Manhattan, displayed intellectual acumen early and won a scholarship to George W. Bush’s alma mater, Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., regarded as the best private high school in America. She went on to earn an MBA.

After Nila, Adayna suffered three miscarriages before giving birth to Elsie on March 28, 2017. She was diagnosed with [generalized lymphatic anomaly](#), a rare condition of unknown cause. The lymphatic system transports a fluid containing white blood cells throughout the body to clear out toxins. In Elsie, the fluid leaks, causing build-up that has to be drained, then replaced, constantly.





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Elsie Commodore at CHOP.

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Hooked up to machines in a Charlotte hospital after her birth, Elsie crashed and was resuscitated four times in a single night. The doctors had no more wisdom or medicine to dispense, telling the Commodores all that could be done was to “make the child comfortable.”

“You want me to unplug my baby?” Adayna nearly screamed, before, she said, “*really* getting hysterical, then giving myself a pep talk in the bathroom mirror, then calling CHOP.”

Adayna had interned at the Harvard School of Public Health when she was 16, and can decipher the arcane vernacular of medical journals. She’d read something about CHOP doctors working on the condition plaguing Elsie.

A team from CHOP flew Elsie from Charlotte to Philadelphia on April 12, 2017: “The cavalry,” Travis said. Elsie’s been in a hospital bed ever since. She’s awake, full of laughter, sometimes grumpy, “loving and adorable,” said Page. A doctor told Adayna, “Elsie is thriving on the edge of a cliff.” Her prognosis is unclear. But no one’s surrendering hope.

Because the West Philadelphia [Ronald McDonald House](#) in which the Commodores first lived allows only one-year stays, Adayna and Travis needed new accommodations last April. Page and Jim offered their hospitality.

“The New York City in me asked, ‘What do these people want?’” Adayna said. “‘How could anyone open their home to you with no end date in sight? My God, they must want money!’”

“But they do this out of love. For them, it’s important we meld into their lives. At the holidays, they got us monogrammed Christmas stockings and sang carols with us!”





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Page Talbott watches her grandchildren, Megan and Colin Dilenschneider, play outdoors with Nila Commodore.

## A new country

For the parents of long-sick children, it's as though they've left America for a new country of fear and fatigue. The landscape's a mystery, and no one can control which way the bus goes. "For the first time in my life," Adayna said, "I can't use my intelligence to get what I want. I can only pray God's will is what I want."

Travis agreed: "This is a journey; we're on God's GPS now." During the school year, he and Adayna live 600 miles apart, one of them with Nila in Charlotte, the other with Elsie here. They switch every two to three weeks, flying back and forth, rarely seeing each other for more than 15 minutes in the airport as they hand off Nila.

"They lose out as a couple," Page said. Still, she and Jim leave the kitchen lights burning for them.





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Travis Commodore with Elsie at CHOP.

Adayna works 40 or more hours a week remotely, sometimes conducting online meetings in Elsie's hospital room. When Travis is in Philadelphia, he drives his 2013 Nissan Altima for Uber, making bank for all those Frontier flights.

The stress is insane. "This could break someone," Adayna said. Work helps. So does time on Jim's rowing machine. To cope, Travis talks with Jim and Page, his "Philadelphia parents": "We cry, we laugh, I get wisdom." He'll sometimes watch movies in what Page dubs the downstairs "man cave."

Page said she can handle the strain that she's invited into her home:

"It doesn't bog me down to have this family in crisis. It's uplifting. We take on their burden, but don't feel burdened by it."

By now, Nila considers Page and Jim relatives. "They're kind and loving," she said. When she grows up, she promises, she'll be a Philadelphia doctor, maybe with a hot tub like at the Bala house.

She looks forward to school ending, when she and both of her parents can live together, all of them gathered around Page and Jim's huge kitchen island, united in love and support of Elsie.

"It'll be great," Nila said.

***To learn more about hosting patient-families, go to [hostsforhospitals.org](https://hostsforhospitals.org) or call 484-380-2999.***





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Adayna Commodore with daughters Nila and Baby Elsie at CHOP.



Posted: April 7, 2019 - 5:00 AM

**Alfred Lubrano** | [@AlfredLubrano](#) | [alubrano@phillynews.com](mailto:alubrano@phillynews.com)