



# THE ULTIMATE wingman

For Joe Howley owning his own plane is not about luxury, it's about philanthropy. As a cofounder of Patient Airlift Services, the Greenwich resident has helped hundreds of sick and terminally ill people get the care they need

by JILL JOHNSON

Tom Daley\* desperately needed a lung transplant. He had been an urgent case on the organ donor list for four weeks. When he finally got the call that a lung was available at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Daley didn't have to scramble to figure out how he would get there from Bayside, New York. Within four hours of the call, a private plane was waiting for him at Westchester County Airport. Daley would not be billed a penny. The pilot would not be paid a cent for his time, the use of his plane, or fuel.

Daley's flight and hundreds more like it have been made possible by a new organization called Patient Airlift Services (PALS). PALS is made up of volunteer private pilots—forty at last count—who, as co-founder and Greenwich resident Joe Howley says, "have a passion for helping people." Most of the pilots have other jobs—many are high-powered executives—but they make time to fly for PALS. Moreover, they use planes that they own or rent themselves, and they absorb all the costs of the flights.

"That PALS was able to provide transport to Tom, in a lot of ways saved his life," says Jerry Cahill, Director of Education and Team Boomer at the Boomer Esiason Foundation, the organization that connected Daley to PALS. "With calls for transplants, often there is a sense of urgency. If you can't get to the hospital in a timely fashion, the organ will go to the next person," explains Cahill.

While not all cases are a matter of life or death,



Son of PALS' patient Peter Degennaro, who died shortly after this compassion flight that reunited him with his grandfather

most of the patients and families PALS helps are buried in medical bills. They need to travel great distances to seek treatment, but temporary housing and travel expenses usually aren't covered by insurance. They are financially and, often, emotionally tapped out. PALS swoops in, and according to several of its clients, gives them much more than a free flight.

Lisa Walpole is a single mom with two children. Her fourteen-year-old daughter, Taylor, has congenital adrenal hyperplasia with a rare #17 hydroxylase deficiency, a degenerative disease that affects growth and development. Her adrenal glands are not able to secrete hormones correctly, which affects her heart, kidneys and bones (she already has osteoporosis due to a lack of estrogen). Several times a year Taylor needs to travel from Oswego to Cohen Children's Medical Center on Long Island, which would mean a seven- to eight-hour drive each way in the family's pickup truck. Now it means an easy flight from Oswego to Farmingdale in a luxurious plane with her friend Joe Howley and a short car ride with "CarPal" and PALS's director of operations Eileen Minogue (whenever possible PALS arranges for a volunteer driver to take passengers from the airport to their destination).

"Joe was the first one to fly us," says Lisa. "He was absolutely wonderful with Taylor. Eileen picked us up and took us to the Ronald McDonald House. Taylor

*\*name has been changed*



One of Joe's many flights to Haiti transporting medical personnel

was really taken by both of them, and they by her. They have forged a very rewarding friendship. They help Taylor forget about the treatment, which is the greatest gift they could give her. I'll never be able to repay what they've done for Taylor. They make you want to be a better person." Sometimes Joe Howley's kids accompany him on his missions, and Lisa and Taylor have met all three of them. "They are wonderful," says Lisa. "One of his sons is Taylor's age and he's already setting goals to get his pilot's license and carry on his dad's work. That's a testament right there to the kind of man Joe is."

## THE MAN AND THE MISSION

A visitor to the Howley home—a stately stone Colonial tucked away in midcountry Greenwich—could get the wrong idea. One might assume the managing director with RBS Sempra in Stamford is just another banker with too much money to spend on walls of art and fancy toys, like his \$3 million-plus ten-seater Pilatus. But no doubt Joe's whimsical contribution to the otherwise refined décor—an antique plane chandelier, adorned with random kitchen utensils and strap-on metal rollerskates as landing gear, that spreads its nine-foot wingspan overhead in the entrance hall—would spark a conversation on aviation. Before long Joe would start talking about his passion, PALS.

“‘Would it make a difference if we told you the orphanage there has been out of food for eight days?’ I said, I guess I am going to Port-de-Paix’”

—Joe Howley on making the decision to fly into a dangerous airstrip in Haiti

Of course I knew whom I was dealing with when I sat down with Joe in his expansive living room: a rare find on Wall Street, someone deserving of good press. Without the mansion backdrop, Howley, in his khaki pants and black PALS polo shirt, could be your average Joe. He apologizes for the two small bowls of

Chinese rice snacks on the coffee table. "My family is away, so I'm a bachelor at the moment," Joe explains, chuckling. "I called my wife and said, 'I should get some food, shouldn't I?'" He shrugs. The lack of an elaborate spread is fitting. This isn't about pretense; Joe is eager to get down to business.

For the last decade, Howley volunteered for an organization called Angel Flight Northeast. "I became aware of it through aviation magazines and felt that volunteering would be a great way to use my skills as a pilot in a meaningful way," says Howley. However, he explains that "the owner and his wife had all the voting rights and there were some financial shenanigans" that led to an exodus of pilots, including Howley. He says, "We figured, let's make lemonade out of lemons and do it the right way, with good governance, good transparency and an organization that is as well positioned as it can be to help as many people as possible." Howley's motivation came from "seeing firsthand how much need there is out there and the qualitative difference we were making in people's lives." He also had a great role model: His mother was always involved in charitable work, including volunteering in a soup kitchen up until she passed away.

PALS was formed last May. Of the eleven board members (including seven pilots), three live in Greenwich—Joe, Peter Ryan (also a pilot) and Ruthanne Ruzika—and one, Scott Paige, works in



Joe on a recent trip delivering supplies to Haiti



*One of the many  
refugee camps in Haiti  
that benefited  
from PALS flights*

Greenwich and used to live here. “We have a balanced board—bankers, lawyers, real estate people, entrepreneurs—which means we have a broad range of contacts. In a short period of time, we have established a nice base to build a really significant national organization,” says Howley.

Currently PALS focuses on the Northeast, but affiliations with airlines such as Southwest help PALS extend its territory south to Virginia and as far west as Ohio. (For lengthy flights, patients may fly one leg on Southwest at no charge.) “The board pilots have done thousands and thousands of miles of volunteer flying,” says Howley. “We probably have landed at just about every airport in the Northeast.” He goes on

*In the future, Howley plans to add missions to aid veterans and to facilitate family reunions before soldiers deploy to Iraq. He hopes to increase PALS’ forty pilots ten or twenty fold.*

to explain the huge advantage of private planes: “We can land at virtually every one of the 5,000 airports in the U.S. Commercial planes can access 500 to 600 of them. [There are thirty airports in Connecticut, but Bradley is the only commercial one.] We are able to fly a patient from the airport closest to their home to the airport nearest to the hospital where they need care.”

PALS is running about 100 flights per month at the moment. “We’re doing a number of different missions,” says Howley. “We transport patients who have the ability to travel and need care on an ongoing basis [Taylor Walpole, for example]. Often if someone is sick, someone is losing a job—either the patient or the parent who has to care for a sick child. They find out the care they need is hundreds of miles away. It can be devastating. That crack is filled by PALS.” PALS also does emergency medical flights—not functioning as an air ambulance, but for patients on organ transplant waiting lists, like Tom Daley.

The third category is “compassion flights.” These are missions to unite terminal patients with loved ones. PALS flew brain cancer victim Peter Degennaro from Bangor, Maine, to Boston twenty times for chemotherapy. When he was given the news that he was terminal, one of his last wishes was to see his grandfather in New Jersey. “We flew him there. I actually flew him home,” says Howley. Degennaro died

several days later at the age of twenty-eight, leaving his wife Nicole and a four-year-old son. "PALS really helped us," says Nicole, "because I don't think Pete would have been able to make the drive. He got to see his grandfather and all his family down in New Jersey. That really put him at peace and at ease. Joe is just the nicest guy in the world. We became close with a lot of people at PALS—they're very caring people."

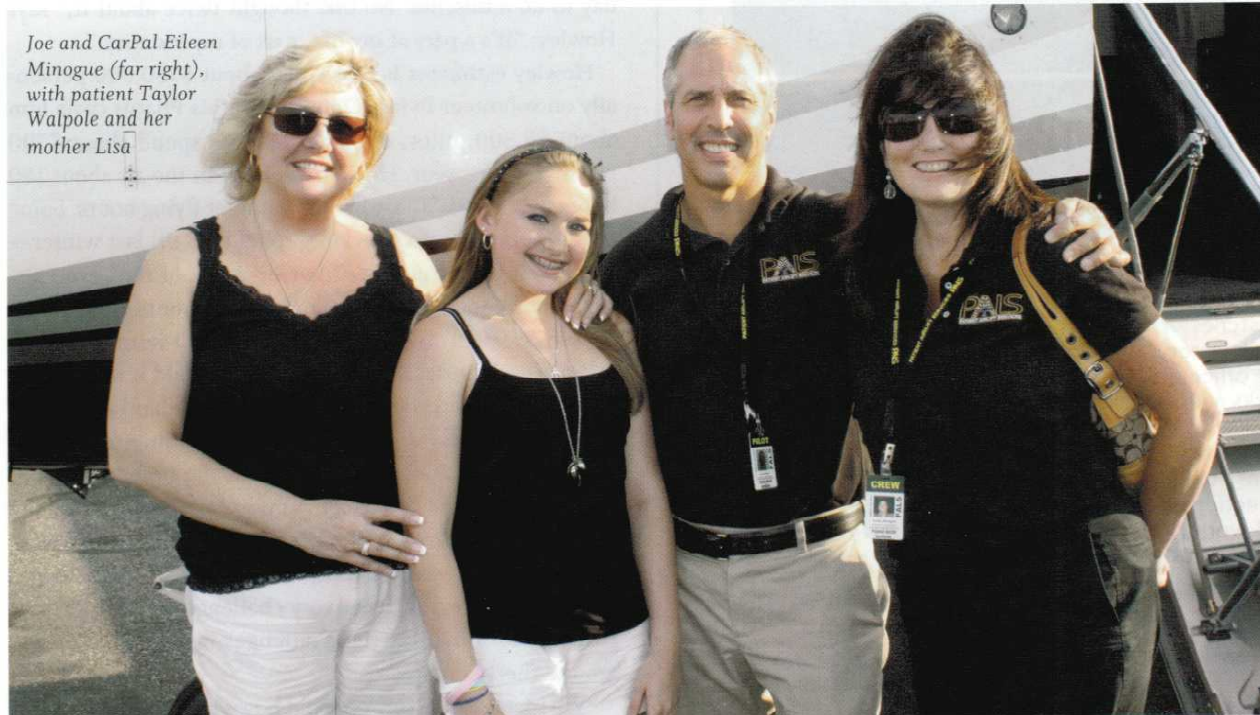
PALS also flies people who are unable to travel on commercial flights due to compromised immune systems or issues with enduring long waits or delays. When Wendy and Dan Schissel's twins were born prematurely via a surrogate in South Carolina, they had no way to get them home to Marlboro, New York. "The doctors said a commercial flight was out of the question due to germs," says Wendy, "and driving would mean too many hours in car seats." Thanks to PALS, three-week-old Michaela and Quinn went home in style. "The pilot and his wife, who came along, were amazing," says Wendy. "It was like having my grandparents there. They snapped pictures of the babies and brought us homemade lunches. When we landed, they gave us a tote bag of baby gifts. I can't express how thankful I am. They were miracle babies, and PALS is a miracle too."

PALS does not have a minimum income requirement for clients, but Howley says, "There must be



*PALS's patient Isla Landon on her way to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for her continual treatment*

a compelling need." The patient's doctor also must confirm that he or she is medically and physically able to take the flight. For patients who qualify, there is no waiting list. A bid sheet with the patient's flight need is put up on the PALS website, where pilots can access it and click a button to volunteer to do part or all of the journey. Balancing patients and pilots is a "management dance," says Howley. PALS is trying to reach out to patients by setting up affiliations with hospitals—getting in on the executive level, rather



*Joe and CarPal Eileen Minogue (far right), with patient Taylor Walpole and her mother Lisa*



Exit currently missing on Interstate 287 eastbound

X



Number of major professional sports teams that practice in Westchester

X



Route where British spy John André was caught with plans for West Point

—



Number of different major commercial airlines that fly out of White Plains Airport

+



Number of Metro North branches that go through Westchester but do not touch Connecticut

+



Number of former U.S. presidents who officially reside in Westchester

?

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than through social workers and doctors who change jobs frequently—and by teaming up with societies like Boomer Esiason (about ten foundations are linked to the PALS website now).

## EXCEPTIONAL PILOTS WHO GO ABOVE AND BEYOND

In the future, Howley plans to add missions to aid veterans and to facilitate family reunions before soldiers deploy to Iraq. He hopes to increase PALS's forty pilots ten- or twenty-fold. "Pilots have a gift," says Howley. "There are 600,000 in this country. The core of them really want to help—rather than just fly for the \$100 hamburger (fly somewhere, have dinner, fly home)." Not just any pilot is accepted by PALS though. "Our typical pilot has five years' experience, or about 500 hours," says Howley. "They must have sufficient flying time both as pilots and in the aircraft they are flying. They must be instrument rated. We are very stringent. The standard is 'Would I put my kid on this flight?'"

PALS pilots run the gamut from an entrepreneur who owns a pizza chain to high-powered financiers with very understanding employers. "RBS Sempra has really bent over backwards," says Howley. "I walk in with my PALS shirt on; they know I'm leaving at 3 o'clock." He'll do a leg of a mission in the afternoon and get home at 8:30. His three teenage kids and his wife of twenty-five years are supportive and each has accompanied him on missions. "My whole family was here visiting from Ridgefield and New Jersey one weekend. I left with my brother for a whole day to do a mission. No one thought twice about it," says Howley. "It's a part of my life, part of my identity."

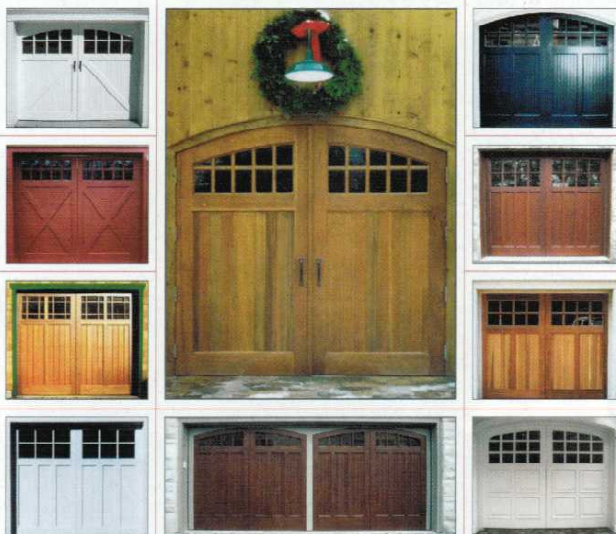
Howley estimates he has spent about \$750,000 personally on volunteer flying. One flight in his Pilatus costs him about \$2,500; pilots of smaller planes spend about \$700 per flight. This year, Howley has been in the air about 180 hours, with 170 of those being volunteer flying hours. Some of that time went to providing relief in Haiti last winter—seventeen flights worth. "I landed at six of the seven airports there, including Port-de-Paix," recounts Howley. "It has a tiny gravel airstrip, and I really didn't want to fly into it. I resisted for days, until they said, 'Would it make a difference if we told you the orphanage there has been out of food for eight days?' I said, 'I guess I'm going to Port-de-Paix.'" With his son, age seventeen at the time, as copilot, Howley navigated the short runway in the middle of the town. "It was hard to tell what was the runway and what was the road. It was very hot, which means it takes longer to land and take off. It was very challenging piloting," says Howley. Nothing like the challenges taking place on the ground there, though.

"We met a seventeen-year-old boy who my son and I will



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never forget. He was the only survivor in his entire school. He went home and everybody in his family was dead," says Howley. "We heard stories from doctors; a woman self-amputated her arm with a rock. We saw endless lines of people who had walked eighty miles for help." Bringing in food, doctors, an anesthesia machine, a birthing table that replaced one made in 1929—these were some of the ways Howley helped. With the supply and road system devastated in Port-au-Prince, small planes were crucial to bringing relief to the rest of the country. For his efforts, Howley received a service award from the Westchester Aviation Association.

Howley also has received recognition from patients: homemade cookies, handmade clothes, cute cards from kids. Those treasures and the self-satisfaction of knowing he's giving his most valuable resource—time—are reward enough for him. "Once you start spending your time helping," he says, "it makes all the rest of your time that much more rewarding because you know you're making a difference. I'm most proud of the time I spend on PALS, not the dollars. Anyone can write a check."

Of course writing a check helps too. While pilots pay the costs of the flights, private donations and grants fund the PALS coordination center. Each flight costs their center about \$300.

After finishing my interview, Howley gave me a personal tour of Million Air row at the airport, from the cozy four-seater Cessnas—typical of the aircraft PALS pilots fly—on up to the commodious Pilatus Howley bought four years ago. Being a stickler for safety, Howley, who's been flying since 1995, worked his way up gradually to this big daddy on the block. This was reassuring news, as was his tally of hours in the sky—2,800—when Howley gave me an extended aerial tour of Fairfield County. Especially when red lights in front of me on the control panel started blinking and a voice warned, "Traffic alert! Traffic alert!" Howley calmly adjusted our altitude away from the plane 400 feet below, and we continued our quest to spot my house in Westport.

The view from above is disorienting, but I finally saw it. I thought of my kids and how fun it would be to tell them I flew right over them today. I thought of the sick children and how high on life they must feel up here. "It's a cathartic experience for the patients," says Joe. "It's especially cool for young people to sit in the right seat, hold the yoke, talk to the controllers. For that time, they're not sick. It's really wonderful." **G**

PALS will be hosting a fundraiser at Tamarack Country Club on November 19. For more information on this or other upcoming events or to make a donation, visit [palservices.org](http://palservices.org) or call 888-818-1231.