



Angels in the hallways

Travel bartering company arranges free hotel rooms for patients in need.

Beth Kormanik



Dealing with a debilitating illness is difficult enough. Traveling for treatment and trying to arrange a hotel room in one of the country's busiest markets is another challenge altogether.

Enter the [ITM Hospitality Fund](#). The concept was founded in 2002 by Jody Merl, president of Innovative Travel Marketing, and Michael Stoler, an investment banker and health care philanthropist, to donate free hotel rooms to financially needy patients who travel to New York City for critical medical treatment. The fund is a private venture -- not a formal charity -- and patients are still responsible for taxes and incidentals from their rooms. But they still can save up to thousands of dollars on hotel stays, which eases the financial burden and stress of the trip.

"Medical stress is devastating to the family," Merl said. "The thought of having to make a phone call for finding a place to stay for loved ones with you is overwhelming: 'How do I afford this? Where am I staying?' Having loved ones around you in a more calming situation where they can be there to support you and help make good decisions during these critical times and have a speedy recovery is as important as a good doctor."

Merl provides the fund with most of its rooms through her company's barter inventory. Innovative Travel Marketing trades advertising and media services in exchange for hotel accommodations -- mostly at four- and five-star New York hotels. So far, Merl has donated more than \$300,000 in lodging from her inventory to the fund and she encourages Manhattan hotels to donate room nights to the fund, even as few as five nights a year. The fund's motto is *"an empty room is a terrible thing to waste."*

Patients and their families make requests for the free stays through the staff at more than a dozen New York medical centers. The hospital staffs vet the requests and work with the fund to organize the logistics. ITM grants a maximum stay of four nights for every ITM Hospitality Fund request, although the fund will provide a special rate to patients who need to stay longer.

The travelers come from all over the country and the world for treatment of illnesses including cancer, cardiovascular disease, and neurological disorders and for procedures such as organ transplantation.

Merl said the fund has helped more than 300 families so far, and it's their stories that make the effort worthwhile. One couple, husband and wife farmers from Western Minnesota, had made more than 50 trips to New York to seek treatment for the husband's asbestos cancer at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Before they learned about the fund, they had mortgaged their farm to finance the trips and the wife was sleeping on the hospital room floor. With the fund's help, she moved to a hotel room.



ITM has called on hospitality partners including Affinia hotels, Ian Schrager hotels and the Alex, a 203-room luxury hotel in Midtown. *"This is just an easy thing to do,"* said Mary Lou Pollack, general manager of The Alex. *"It's such a small thing to us and such a huge thing to reach out to someone who is at such a difficult time in their lives."*

Pollack said she hears from the fund a few times a year and her reservations staff is familiar with the fund. Some guests have made repeat trips as they returned to the city for second or third rounds of treatment.

"Our whole staff meets them," she said. *"I have a very personable front desk with two concierges who really get involved in whatever someone wants. We have met the families, and as terrible a time as it is, it's a joyous time if someone is there to welcome them at their hotel in New York."*

The hotel stay can create an opportunity to turn a stressful time into something that may resemble a vacation. With hotel accommodations in Manhattan, families can take advantage of their location in one of the busiest tourist destinations to shop, go sightseeing or enjoy hotel amenities such as the spa and restaurants.

"If they know they're coming to a place that has some invention and delight and well trained and gracious associates, to a degree it almost deflects some of that experience," Pollack said. *"It combines a little vacation with something they may have wanted to do but couldn't afford -- bring their family to New York."*

Some requests can come at the last minute, and Merl said hotels usually do their best to accommodate them. The fund plans to continue reaching out to New York hotels to get more support from the hospitality community.

"I hope that hotel owners will look upon this in a generous fashion," Merl said. *"There's a lot of need."*