

# City skyline blinks in nightly ritual to cheer up sick kids

September 30 2016, by Matt O'brien

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In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, hospital patient Olivia Stephenson, of Lincoln, R.I., covers the lens of a flashlight as she messages back two light pulses, meaning thank you, to people in surrounding buildings from her room, in Providence, R.I. Businesses around the children's hospital flash their lights on and off every night as a way to say goodnight to sick children inside. Skyscrapers, a nightclub, tugboats and hotels are among the places that flash their lights to communicate with the children. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

For one sparkling minute each night, skyscrapers, tugboats, hotels, a yacht club and police cruisers send a blinking goodnight message to sick kids inside a children's hospital.

A gesture that began with a single light six years ago has become a nightly display along the Providence River—and a highly anticipated ritual—inside Hasbro Children's Hospital.

"It's special to know that people I don't even know will take the time" to flash the lights, said 13-year-old Olivia Stephenson, who has been admitted to the hospital three times since June, most recently last week.

To thank the invisible strangers shining their lights at her and fellow patients, she blinks her own flashlight back toward the downtown skyline, using a two-flash response that means "thank you."

"They don't know me; they could skip the step of flicking the flights, but they do it anyway," she said after seeing the Good Night Lights display for the first time in late August. "I hope they saw the thank you."

Some of Providence's bigger hotels have installed permanent signals that automatically turn on flashy messages at 8:30 p.m., to the delight of giddy toddlers and older children who can spot them from their windows.

But most of the lights are hand-held. One volunteer group gathers near the top of a 28-story office building to flash their lights. The farthest signal comes from a church group blinking from a dark shoreline 2 miles downriver in East Providence.



In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, a flashlight, with a "Good Night Lights" sticker on the lens, rests on a table in the room of hospital patient, Olivia Stephenson, of Lincoln, R.I., who lays in bed at right, in Providence, R.I. Businesses around the children's hospital flash their lights on and off every night as a way to say goodnight to sick children inside. Skyscrapers, a nightclub, tugboats and hotels are among the places that flash their lights to communicate with the children. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Olivia began her summer looking forward to lazy days at the beach and pool, but she collapsed the day after school got out, and her life turned upside down. Doctors diagnosed her with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease.

She was adjusting to a more complicated life—diet and lifestyle restrictions, medication that puffed up her face—when chest pains took her to the hospital again in August. Tests found big blood clots in her lungs.

She saw Good Night Lights for the first time after she was released from a five-day stay in a windowless intensive care unit.

"It's so nice to see a genuine smile on her face, because it's been a while," said her mother, Beth Stephenson, who has spent the hospital visits sleeping on a chair by her daughter's side. "It's genius. It totally brightens the kids' spirits and it doesn't even really cost anything."



In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, skyline lights illuminate downtown seen from Hasbro Children's Hospital, in Providence, R.I. For one sparkling minute each night, blinking lights from skyscrapers, tugboats, hotels, a yacht club and police cruisers send a goodnight message to sick kids inside the children's hospital. Giddy kids inside the Hasbro Children's Hospital wait for 8:30 p.m. each night, when invisible strangers flash lights from high-rise buildings and waterfront decks and parks. The kids get their own flashlights to return the message. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

The idea began with the hospital's resident cartoonist, Steve Brosnihan, who has spent 26 years regaling [sick kids](#) with on-the-spot drawings and word games. Brosnihan, who gets to the hospital by bike or bus, noticed one day in 2010 that he could see his route home from inside the six-story hospital. Using his bike light and flashlights, he began sending simple messages tailored to individual kids. Late last year, he appealed to local businesses to send a joint message: Goodnight, Hasbro, using four flashes to represent each syllable.

The first business to participate was The Hot Club, a waterfront nightclub and restaurant. Along with flashing its large neon sign, patrons gather on the deck each night, even in cold weather, to wave their flashlights and cellphones. Following the nightclub were the tugboats of the Providence Steamboat Company. They shine their powerful searchlights at the hospital and occasionally blow their horns. A yacht club, restaurants and police officers have also joined in.

About two dozen kids who can range in age from 2 to 20 are in the hospital on any given night.

"The first time a kid sees this, when it happens, they're like, 'Are you kidding? That's for me?' There's a joyful surprise in it," Brosnihan said.





In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, hospital patient Olivia Stephenson, of Lincoln, R.I., smiles after experiencing a goodnight signal from her room, in Providence, R.I. Businesses around the children's hospital flash their lights on and off every night as a way to say goodnight to sick children inside. Skyscrapers, a nightclub, tugboats and hotels are among the places that flash their lights to communicate with the children. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

The anonymity of the exchange is what Brosnihan finds most beautiful.

"No one knows who's on the other side of the gesture," Brosnihan said. "People often say, 'I get goosebumps hearing about this.'"

Brosnihan said he dreams of what he calls the "minute of magic" catching on in other cities with children's hospitals. But he also notes that Providence's pediatric hospital is peculiarly suited to the phenomenon because it has an open view of a harbor and the city's downtown skyline.

Once Olivia gets back to being a "regular girl"—she aims to return to her school in the town of Lincoln in January—she wants to help work with younger kids and expand the Good Night Lights ritual.

"It's special. I'm not going to forget this experience," she said.



In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, hospital patient Olivia Stephenson, of Lincoln, R.I., uses chocolate ice cream to help ingest her evening medication prior to witnessing a goodnight signal from her room, in Providence, R.I. Businesses around the children's hospital flash their lights on and off every night as a way to say goodnight to sick children inside. Skyscrapers, a nightclub,

tugboats and hotels are among the places that flash their lights to communicate with the children. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 photo, hospital patient, Olivia Stephenson, of Lincoln, R.I., adjusts her wrist bands prior to witnessing a goodnight signal from her room, in Providence, R.I. For one sparkling minute each night, blinking lights from skyscrapers, tugboats, hotels, a yacht club and police cruisers send a goodnight message to sick kids inside a children's hospital. Giddy kids inside the hospital wait for 8:30 p.m. each night, when invisible strangers flash lights from high-rise buildings and waterfront decks and parks. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)





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