

Starbright World

Computer network connects
hospitalized kids across the country

With a click of the mouse, a boy named Randy appears on the computer screen, wearing a red T-shirt, a baseball cap, and a surgical mask. He seems close enough to touch as he talks with Wadelynn Gray, 18, a patient at Loma Linda University Children's Hospital.

But in reality, Randy, age 12, is four states away at Children's Hospital of New Orleans.

In spite of the distance between them, the kids are able to talk with each other through a computer network called Starbright World, unveiled on August 12 at LLUCH. Wadelynn is helping to demonstrate the network for the unveiling.

The two children, both wearing headsets and watching each other on computer screens with the help of small cameras, talk about why they're in the hospital and what they like to do for fun. Randy has leukemia, while Wadelynn is hospitalized for sickle cell anemia.

Steven Brown, age 8, demonstrates the Starbright World network as he speaks with a boy in North Carolina. Both boys have cystic fibrosis. The boys talked about what they like to do on Starbright World. Steven says it's fun to talk to other kids who know what he's going through. This is the second time he's used Starbright World.

With the help of Wadelynn's camera, Randy even gets a glimpse at the guests present for the unveiling.

With the unveiling, held in the A. Gary Anderson Playroom, LLUCH becomes the 45th hospital to join the Starbright World network.

According to Chris Garvey, managing director for Starbright World, the network was created to counter the sense of loneliness and isolation that hospitalized kids sometimes feel.

"Isolation can come in a number of forms," Ms. Garvey states. "Many of the

With the network, which is in hospitals from Honolulu to Long Island, kids can video conference with each other, chat with other kids who have their disease, get health information in terms they can understand, and play games alone or with other kids on the network.

"Kids in Pittsburgh can be playing with kids in Loma Linda," Ms. Garvey points out.

Bringing Starbright World to Children's Hospital would have been impossible without Ron and Elaine Schurter of Yorba Linda, who donated \$25,000 to get the

The Starbright Foundation, chaired by director Steven Spielberg and General Norman H. Schwarzkopf, launched Starbright World as a pilot program in 1995. The network is made possible through the Foundation's corporate sponsors, Sprint and Intel.

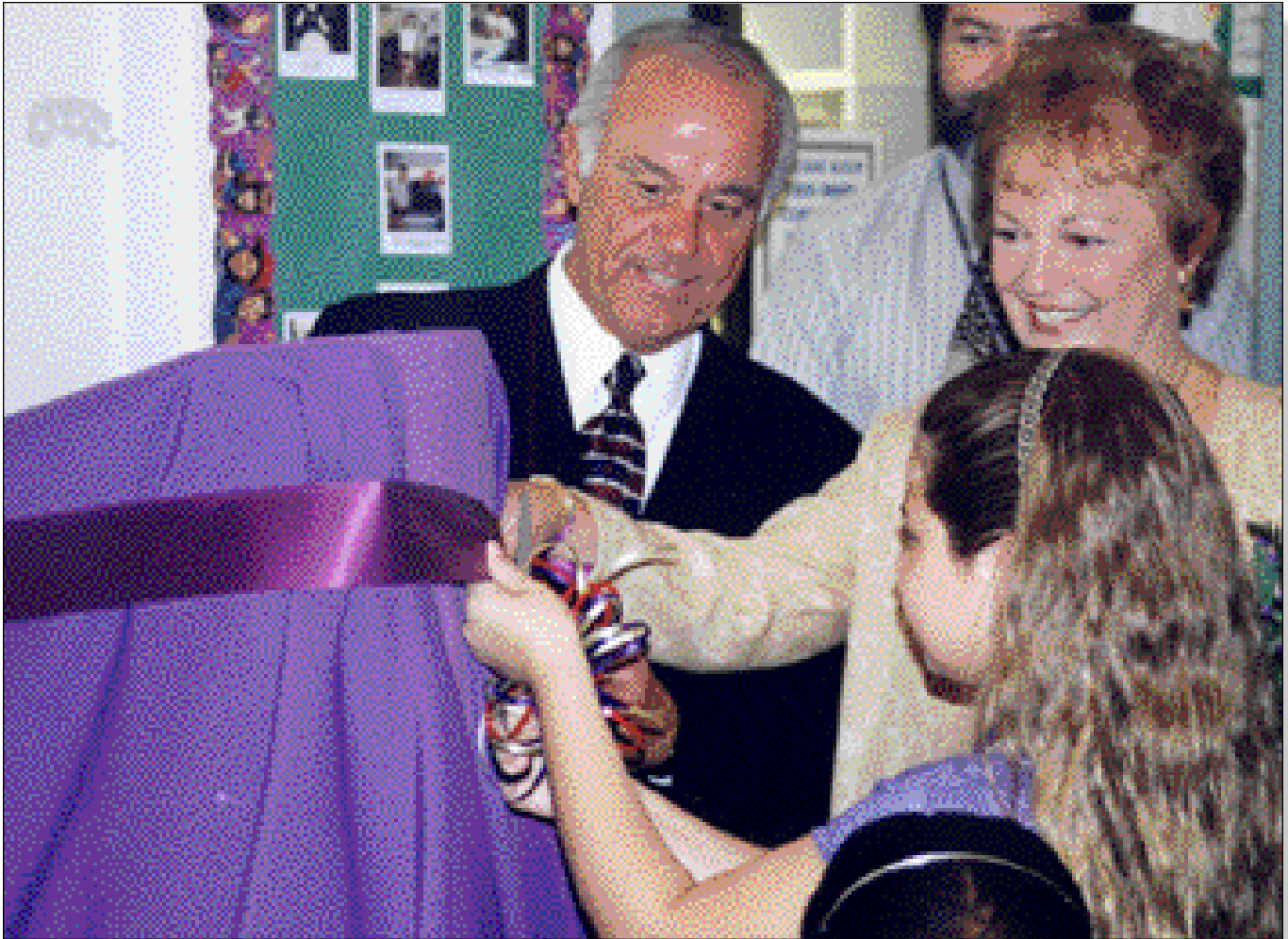
children are away from their home, friends, and family. They also have the challenges of their disease to deal with. We deal with it by getting them together with other kids."

Yet another benefit, according to a study at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, is that pain intensity decreases in kids who use Starbright World.

network up and running. The Schurters were honored at the unveiling with a framed poem decorated with the brightly colored handprints of LLUCH patients.

"We just thank God for giving us the ability to do what we did," Mr. Schurter readily affirms.

Children's Hospital will need to raise an additional \$15,000 per year to maintain



Ashley Greenwald, age 9, a frequent patient at the Children's Hospital, helps Ron and Elaine Schurter unveil the Starbright World computer. The Schurters donated \$25,000 to get the network up and running.

the network, says Reiner S. Roeske, CPA, director of the LLUCH Foundation.

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Starbright World is a private, interactive computer network designed for hospitalized children and teenagers. It is a place like no other—where children with serious and chronic health conditions from across the nation can interact within a community of peers, helping each other cope with the day-to-day realities of life with illness. The network is made pos-

sible through the Foundation's corporate sponsors, Sprint and Intel.

There are 500 web sites on the network that have been preselected to ensure that they're safe for kids. The kids can't access the Internet through the program.

"We have created a true virtual playground—a place that can help children recapture the joy of being a kid," Mr. Spielberg says. "Regardless of how far technology advances, it is the human connection that matters."

Mr. Spielberg and General Schwarzkopf often become personally involved in

Starbright World. The two log on the network using the online names "E.T." (Mr. Spielberg) and "4 Star Bear" (General Schwarzkopf).

"They like to come on and surprise the kids," reveals Ms. Garvey.

Other celebrities also pop in on occasion. For example, actor Robin Williams likes to stop by and always talks to each child waiting to video conference before he logs off the network.

Another highlight of Starbright World is the monthly theme. August's theme was the Virtual Road Trip. Beginning at Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women



Ashley, at Loma Linda, talks with Randy, at the Children's Hospital of New Orleans, following the unveiling. Sitting right below the computer monitor is the small camera that allows Randy to see Ashley on his computer screen.

and Children in Honolulu, Hawaii, "Buzz_99" (a virtual Volkswagon Bug) crossed the country and visited 10 host hospitals in 10 different cities. "Buzz_99" was a hit.

Kids from each of these hospitals talked to other kids around the country about what their city or state is most known for.

One of the chats, hosted by Sunrise Children's Hospital of Las Vegas, featured Marilyn Monroe and Elvis impersonators, plus kid-appropriate showgirls from the Stardust Casino.

The Starbright Foundation is currently working to install the network at 26 additional hospitals. They are also considering the logistics of making the network avail-

able at home for children who have been discharged from the hospital but want to stay connected with the friends they've made online.

"The thing that's most amazing to me is when I see the kids interacting," says Ms. Garvey. "When I see them giggling and laughing about very serious topics, I know I've done the right thing." > SCOPE