

Forty-Five Minutes: How One Phone Call Changed Everything for Ashley and Lincoln

A routine doctor's appointment became the beginning of an eight-month journey that would take one North Bay family hundreds of kilometres from home — and remind them that even in life's hardest moments, no family should have to face them alone.
Ashley Whitwell remembers the phone call.

Earlier that day, she had taken her five-year-old son, Lincoln, to see their family doctor in North Bay. For weeks, she had been noticing things that didn't feel quite right. The lymph nodes along the back of his neck were swollen. His teachers had mentioned he wasn't himself. He looked pale. He was sleeping more than usual.
As both a nurse and a mother, Ashley trusted her instincts.

Bloodwork was ordered, and they returned home.
Just 45 minutes later, the phone rang.
"Pack your bags."

Within hours, Lincoln was on his way to Toronto for urgent medical care. What began as an ordinary doctor's appointment had become every parent's worst nightmare.

"It all happened so fast," Ashley recalls. "We were home for about 45 minutes after the tests when they called and told us we needed to go to the hospital."

Further testing confirmed the diagnosis: Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), Philadelphia chromosome positive — a high-risk form of childhood leukemia requiring specialized treatment at The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids).

Life was suddenly divided into a before and an after.
For Ashley, that meant leaving behind the life she and her husband had built in North Bay with their children, Lincoln and eight-year-old Norah. While Ashley and Lincoln relocated to Toronto for treatment, her husband and daughter remained at home so Norah could continue school and the family could preserve as much normalcy as possible.

"We're a really close-knit family," Ashley says. "It was important that Norah could stay in her school and keep that consistency, but it meant Lincoln and I had to be here."



For many Canadian families, specialized paediatric care means leaving home behind. With only 16 children's hospitals across the country, two in three families must travel to access care that isn't available in their own community. In Toronto alone, families can face more than $25,000 in out-of-pocket expenses during the first month of treatment while trying to stay close to their child's bedside.



Lincoln's treatment journey began almost immediately after arriving in Toronto. Over the next eight months, he faced each new challenge with remarkable courage and resilience — always with his mom, Ashley, by his side.





Between hospital visits, Lincoln found moments of childhood at Ronald McDonald House Toronto — playing foosball, celebrating his sixth birthday, looking forward to weekly woodworking with volunteer Alex and spending time with friends who understood the journey. Ashley, by his side.

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After spending their first week in hospital, Ashley and Lincoln moved into Ronald McDonald House Toronto. They didn't know it then, but Ronald McDonald House Toronto would become their home for the next 224 days.

What Ashley expected to be a place to sleep between hospital appointments quickly became something much more.

"Ronald McDonald House Toronto became so much more than just a place to stay," she says. "It gave me a community of people who understood what I was going through because they were going through it too. That support and connection has meant everything during such a difficult time."

Those 224 days became filled with far more than treatments and hospital appointments.
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Over time, Ronald McDonald House Toronto became the centre of Lincoln's world. He attended **Ronald McDonald House Toronto School**, where he could continue learning while receiving treatment. He challenged friends to games of foosball, proudly carried home handmade stuffies and woodworking projects, and found opportunities to simply be a child.

Those ordinary moments became some of the most meaningful.

Cancer treatment has a way of replacing childhood routines with appointments, medications and uncertainty. Here, Lincoln could still celebrate birthdays, go to school, laugh with friends and enjoy the everyday experiences every child deserves.

For Ashley, the House offered something equally important: connection.

"When I first arrived, everyone looked like they knew what they were doing and I felt like a lost kitten," she says with a smile.

Months later, Ashley had become one of the familiar faces welcoming new families as they arrived. She answered questions in the kitchen, offered encouragement and listened to parents whose worlds had also changed overnight.

"We all have different stories," she says. "But we're all away from home and dealing with things we never wanted to have to deal with."

While Lincoln attended school, Ashley found small opportunities to care for herself. She visited the gym, participated in a research study, looked forward to visits from her parents and found comfort in conversations with other families who understood the uncertainty they were living through.

Some of the greatest comfort came from simply being surrounded by people who understood. "It's not necessarily something people say," Ashley explains. "***Sometimes it's just seeing someone stay positive through everything they're facing. It reminds you there are still good things happening around you."***



They allow me to be emotional if I need to be," she says. "Or frustrated if I need to be. They lift me up."

Looking back, Ashley can hardly believe everything Lincoln endured during those 224 days away from home.

Over those 224 days, Lincoln underwent three central line insertions, battled two port infections, experienced blood clots, endured lumbar punctures, chemotherapy and three full rounds of Blinatumomab immunotherapy.

Through it all, Ashley has watched her son meet each challenge with remarkable resilience. "I have seen how strong and resilient he has been through every one of those 224 days," Ashley says.

Lincoln was able to fully participate in two community events honouring children and families affected by blood cancers. Through those experiences, Ashley says their family discovered the true meaning of community while gaining an even deeper appreciation for the importance of ongoing research.

"We have felt the incredible support, compassion and connection that come from people coming together for a shared purpose," she says. "Along the way, we have also been reminded how important ongoing research is — not only for finding answers, but for creating hope and a better future for those affected."

Today, Lincoln remains in remission and continues to do well on his treatment plan. In June, he completed his third and final round of Blinatumomab immunotherapy and has entered the second-last phase of chemotherapy before moving into maintenance treatment.

After 224 days at Ronald McDonald House Toronto, Ashley and Lincoln packed their bags one final time and returned home to North Bay.

Treatment continues, and there are still appointments ahead. But today, their family is together again under one roof.

In 2025, Ronald McDonald House Toronto supported 4,724 families, provided 31,126 nights of comfort, served 28,970 meals and helped families save an estimated $13.9 million in out-of-pocket expenses while their children received specialized medical care far from home.



Every morning, Ashley wrote a new message of encouragement on the chalkboard outside her room. What began as a simple ritual for herself became a source of hope for other families walking the same halls.



After 224 days at Ronald McDonald House Toronto, Ashley and Lincoln returned home to North Bay. While Lincoln's treatment continues, they returned home with lifelong friendships, cherished memories and a community that will always be part of their family's story.

For Ashley, those numbers represent something much simpler.

They represent the chance to stay close to Lincoln. A community that understood what her family was living through. And the freedom to focus on being his mom while others helped care for everything else.

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Ashley and Lincoln left Ronald McDonald House Toronto with more than medical updates and follow-up appointments.

They returned home with lifelong friendships, unforgettable memories and a community that carried them through one of the most difficult chapters of their lives.

Looking back, Ashley says the experience changed her in ways she never expected. "When your world is turned upside down, you stop planning too far ahead and start taking each day as it comes"

"This journey has taught me to slow down, live in the moments that matter and find joy wherever I can. To dance in the rain instead of waiting for the storm to pass. Life doesn't always go the way you expect, but even in the hardest seasons there can still be laughter, connection, hope and memories you'll carry with you forever.".

Forty-five minutes changed everything. The next 224 days became part of their family story forever.

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