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# It's always sunny in Life Town

The mocked-up village square allows children with disabilities to learn the skills they need in daily life.



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Siobhan Amette, 15, left, enjoys getting her fingernails painted by Becky Armstrong, center, and Cindy Phillips at the Salon in Life Town.

By Jason Shough  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

**W**hile winter briefly returned last week, no traces of snow could be found on the bank, the movie theater or the pet shop in Life Town.

Children wore no coats and smiled widely as they visited the bank, viewed movies and petted the gentle snake named Sid in the pet shop.

Life Town is a mock-up of a village square, in a gymnasium-size room, at the new Lori Schottenstein Chabad Center for a Jewish Tomorrow, a spiritual and community center that serves the central Ohio Jewish community.

The town is where children with



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disabilities from all religions can practice the skills of daily life, said Rabbi Areyah Kaltmann, head of the Chabad Center. "Life Town gives children the skills to interact in society, the skills to

become independent. Kids learn by doing things for themselves."

A normal day includes withdrawing \$12 from the bank so the children can buy real things and attend real events from plans they make with their teachers, said Esther Kaltmann, who is Kaltmann's wife and the director of Life Town. "We try to make it as real as possible," Rabbi Kaltmann said, although, in Life Town, you can get a movie and popcorn for about \$4.

Students practice handling money, being on time to events and avoiding hazards such as ladders and yellow floor signs. They make crafts for other

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## LIFE TOWN

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students, to practice friendship-building.

The town was conceived by Bassie Shemtov, the director of the first and only other Life Town, which is in Detroit. She created 40 lesson plans that special-education teachers can choose from before taking their classes to the town.

Seventy-six central Ohio schools, most of them in Columbus, use the program; nearly 50 students visit the New Albany Life Town every weekday.

"It's a great way to work on skills in an authentic environment," said Jessie Zimpher, who has taught special education at Hastings Middle School in Upper Arlington for five years.

For example, students can hone their time-management skills by making sure they aren't late to movie showings, said Julie Fishman, who has been volun-



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Special-needs children learn life skills as they move through the shops that make up Life Town at the Lori Schottenstein Chabad Center for a Jewish Tomorrow.

teering at Life Town since it opened, in 2008, at the former Kent Elementary School on Gault Street.

The New Albany location, at 6220 E. Dublin-Granville Rd., is more elaborate, with the shops all in one room rather than in separate classrooms, as they were at

the school.

The endeavor requires about 20 volunteers each day, who come from all walks of life, Mrs. Kaltmann said.

Leah Carmean, who volunteers at the pet shop, said she has seen it help children overcome their fears. One

boy who had trouble managing his anger stopped by the pet shop in poor spirits until Carmean let him put a lizard on his shoulder.

He left in great spirits, she said, and a supervisor told her, "I have never seen him like this."

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