

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## At NIL event at Lifetown, Ohio State players bond with kids learning real-world skills

By Adam Jardy

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The money was real. So were the smiles, the hope and excitement on the faces of several dozen elementary-aged kids from Columbus City Schools.

It was Wednesday morning, and bus after bus rolled up to the Lori Schottenstein Chabad Center in New Albany for a day of real-life experience. Inside the building sits a simulated city, one complete with stoplights, businesses, stores and a working bank. And one by one, children with disabilities learning basic life skills via a hands-on approach received their \$12 to spend however they wished.

As they visited the marketplace, worked on projects in the art studio or hung out with the pet rabbit or guinea pig in the pet place, they were greeted by a few extra-tall new faces. As part of their partnership with The Foundation, a collective founded to allow Ohio State student-athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness rights, four members of the Ohio State men's basketball team spent an hour here at Lifetown Columbus.

Gene Brown III, Isaac Likekele, Zed Key and Justice Sueing shook hands, posed for photos and shared their time with children who, not too long ago, would have been marginalized rather than preparing for the real world. At Lifetown, they are learning about independence and self-worth.

The experience left an impression on the Buckeyes.

"For me, it was the reality of the real world, how far things have come," Likekele said. "Elementary school, kids that needed extra assistance or special help, it was so isolated into this fake kind of world. Here it's like their mini reality. It's like they're tackling reality here first and then they can learn how to do it on a bigger scale."

Alongside Buckeye Cruise for Cancer and A Kid Again, Lifetown Columbus is one of three charity partners for The Foundation. It's one that Brian Schottenstein, co-founder of The Foundation and President of Lifetown, personally selected to partner with as the collective got underway.

Schottenstein, along with rabbi Areyah Kaltmann, helped lead the players around the



L-R: Ohio State's Isaac Likekele, Justice Sueing, Gene Brown III and Zed Key pose with two children at Lifetown Columbus as part of an NIL event sponsored by The Foundation on Oct. 19, 2022. [ADAM JARDY]

simulated city that features nine venues. Kaltmann enthusiastically introduced them to the volunteers working in each business and repeatedly thanked all four players for helping to validate the kids in attendance, telling them they are "holy people" for spending time with the children.

"We want to level the playing field and these guys make such a big difference," Kaltmann said.

That much was true inside the nail salon, where one boy insisted on fist bumping each player before posing for a tough-looking photo with his arms crossed in front of his chest. As they visited the doctor's office, pausing to duck their heads under the shortened doors of the miniature city build for kids, Likekele sought out each kid and shook their hands. Key held one boy while hanging out in the deli, put him down and had to pick him back up again when the boy insisted.

"These guys are stars in their eyes," Schottenstein said. "They look up to them. They watch the games and to have them here, to be able to hang out with them, take pictures with them, it gives them something to really be proud of and gives them some confidence."

Brown in particular enjoyed seeing the kids, who start preparing for their trip weeks in advance by working on lesson plans in class, spend time in the bank.

"I think when people think NIL they just think straight money but things like this are really the true aspects of NIL," Brown said. "Giving back to the community, being able to build bonds and connections with people that you wouldn't normally see in your everyday life as a student-athlete. For the Foundation to be able to connect us to opportunities like this is amazing."

After an hour passed, it was time for the Buckeyes to depart. Training-room sessions were looming, as were the day's preseason practice. The kids, who will visit as many as a half-dozen times a year, are halfway through their two-hour session. There are bikes to be pedaled, snacks to be purchased and more opportunities to learn real-world skills.

Before they leave, one little girl rushed in with her teacher. A huge Buckeyes fan, she wanted to make sure she got a photo too.

"It warmed my heart a little bit, for real," Likekele said.

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