

## LifeTown Comes to Livingston

By Henry M. Holden.

Most of us go to the supermarket, the mall, and handle money, in a routine way, without a second thought. But not everybody has this freedom to move about.

For children and teens with special needs, these routine trips are sometimes challenging, intimidating, and scary, but for some special needs' children that is about to change.

"LifeTown has been a decade-long project created by Friendship Circle, a non-profit organization which provides children and teens with special needs with real-life learning experiences while offering support to their families," said Rabbi Zalman Grossbaum, executive director of Friendship Circle.

Rabbi Grossbaum points out that while Friendship Circle offers Judaic programming, LifeTown is a separate entity with no religious affiliation.

LifeTown is taking a new approach to the traditional downtown shopping areas carving out a replica of a small town shopping mall in a 53,000 square-foot repurposed vacant factory. "Every square inch of this building has a meaning and purpose," said Rabbi Grossbaum. "This building is maximized in many ways. We arrange it so that everyone has an opportunity to be involved in a meaningful way.

The complex took over 10 years to build and cost \$18.5 million and was financed through partnerships and donations.

LifeTown's focal point is "Life Village," a simulated Main Street that will help prepare those with special needs for independent living.

"What we want to do is create a space where it's easy for those with special needs and the wider out-



side community can interact and learn from each other," said Rabbi Grossbaum.

Volunteers play the role of shopkeepers and help teach the students about shopping, budgeting and how money is used. Teens can buy food at the grocery store, get a manicure at the salon or go to a movie. If their money runs low, some of the teens have taken on jobs as "police officers" and cashiers. Part of LifeTown is a real bank where the children and teens can take out real money and use it at 15 different store fronts including a movie theater, florist and salon.

"What we really want is the interaction between the larger community and the special needs community, so that everyone is learning from each other," Rabbi Grossbaum said.

"We have a fully functioning medical center here, but we won't be practicing medicine, we'll be practicing practicing medicine."

The children and teens who have sensory issues can be intimidated by spaces such as a doctor's or the dentist's office. Actual medical professionals run the dentist and doctor's office.

Here students can become familiar with the instruments they might encounter, calming their nerves for when they have a real check-up.

"We'll have medical students come here as well,"

said Rabbi Grossbaum, "because they will be the ones interacting with these children and teens in becoming comfortable."

"It's all about giving them meaningful experiences, teaching them life skills and hopefully doing a project they can go home with," Rabbi Grossbaum said.

"Our distinctive approach of pairing participants with teen volunteers, motivates, inspires and enriches everyone involved. At the heart of all Friendship Circle programming is the belief that every individual can be a productive member of the community and benefit from inclusive programming."

"Our programs are based on hundreds of teen and adult volunteers. The students can learn and experience life skills and job training all in the safety of this environment and then they can go out in the real world and apply the skills they have learned."

"Five years from now, if everyone who comes to LifeTown considers it a success for individuals with special needs, where everybody feels welcome and can celebrate life together and to learn from each other and given an opportunity to blossom, then we will have been successful," said Rabbi Grossbaum.

More information can be found on the LifeTown website at [www.lifetown.com](http://www.lifetown.com)

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