

Young NY Mets fans get a chance of a lifetime thanks to Tuesday's Children and the Cory Lidle Foundation

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Marc Levine/NY Mets Mike Bazter and Tim Teufel take time out to talk to kids teach baseball while youngsters get to watch batting practice and meet players.

Through a partnership facilitated by the Mets between charity organizations Tuesday's Children and the Cory Lidle Foundation, young baseball fans were given a once-in-a-lifetime experience on Wednesday at Citi Field.

They were treated to a full day of events - an on-field clinic with Mets players and coaches, a Q&A session with Ron Darling, watched players take batting practice and then participated in a meet-and-greet with Mets Players before they took on the Marlins.

Tuesday's Children is a non-profit organization that helps families and first responders who were directly affected by the 9/11 attacks. The Cory Lidle foundation was founded after Lidle died in 2006 - while he was a member of the Yankees - after a plane he was on crashed into an

upper East Side condo.

Players from the Lidle Baseball team, based in Lidle's hometown of Convina, Calif., travelled to assist the more than 80 kids from Tuesday's Children with the afternoon clinic. Lidle began his major league career with the Mets in 1997.

"I think it's awesome the kids get to experience being on the field, meeting players, meeting people from the foundation and vice versa," said Kevin Lidle, Cory's twin brother. "It's special for our organization to meet these guys too."

Tuesday's Children is one of the few 9/11 organizations still around since it began in 2001. Its goal was to provide support for the long term.

"Some of these kids that are out here that are 14 and 15, would have been 4 or 5 (during 9/11,) said Brian Curtis, an author and former sports reporter who's now a Tuesday's Children board member. "We have all age ranges, and the children of Tuesday's Children, some of them are off to college and married now."

The clinic began around 1 p.m. with Mike Baxter, Jeremy Hefner and Tim Teufel conducting drills in the outfield focused on fundamentals. Johnny, a 10-year-old member of Tuesday's Children from Rockville Centre, L.I., said he learned to keep his glove all the way down on ground balls.

The young Mets fan was thrilled to be at Citi Field.

"It's fun. It's like feeling you're in the major leagues. It's awesome," he said.

Baxter enjoys interacting with the kids from Tuesday's Children. Having grown up in Queens and being there during 9/11, he feels he can connect well with them. The Whitestone native was a 16-year-old at Molloy High School in 2001. He recalled hearing the announcement on the PA system and becoming more conscious of the magnitude of the situation throughout the day.

Baxter lost a cousin as a result of the attacks. He enjoys talking and working with kids who have been affected by 9/11, knowing he can lift their spirits.

"Every time we get kids out here, I think it's exciting," Baxter said. It's exciting for us to see them

because we see how happy they are, and it's just so fun to watch them run around. To be apart of that means a lot to me. It's just great to have that opportunity to interact with them on our field because I know when I was a kid, I would've died to get on the field at Shea. So anytime we get kids out here it's a fun day for everybody."

At around 3:15 p.m. Darling gave a speech in the fourth-floor auditorium and took questions from the kids on subjects ranging from his relationship with Tom Seaver, his nemesis Tony Gwynn, the balance of fun versus work in baseball, his favorite Mets this year - he mentioned Kirk Nieuwenhuis and Johan Santana - and his experience on the '86 championship team.

He spoke of his connection to Cory Lidle, their interactions in Oakland and how they both began their careers with the Mets.. He called Lidle a "pretty special person," admiring his love for baseball.

Darling said he was proud of the kids for the way they've been able to deal with tragedy, and noted how the legacy of their lost loved ones lives on because of them.

"You guys are living memorials for Cory, living memorials for your parents," Darling said.

After watching the Mets and Marlins taking batting practice, the kids went into the press conference rooms for dinner, followed by a 5:30 p.m. meet-and-greet with six Mets players: Ronny Cedeno, Josh Edgin, Scott Hairston, Rob Johnson, Garrett Olson and Justin Turner.

The smiling kids jumped up and crowded around the players to get autographs on baseballs, shirts, mini bats and hats, all of which were gifts from the Mets. Jacob Grijalva, a 17-year-old who plays for Lidle Baseball, loved meeting major leaguers.

"It's a dream come true of course," he said. "Every kid playing baseball has a dream, a vision to be that guy. So it's awesome. And seeing David Wright and Jose Reyes and all those guys taking batting practice, it was great."

He was even more excited for the kids of Tuesday's Children to have such an opportunity and to be able to work with them on the field.

"That's the whole reason why we're here. That's the biggest part," Grijalva said. "Some of them never played baseball. It's really cool meeting the kids and interacting with them."

Finally 7:10 p.m. came and everyone got to sit, relax, and take a ballgame on a beautiful summer night. David Bletcher, who helps run the Cory Lidle Foundation, was very appreciative of the efforts by the Mets and Tuesday's Children, and expressed a desire to work with them again.

"This is something that I hope we can continue to do, and I hope the organizations want to reach out and do more in the name of charity," Bletcher said. "That's what we're doing, and what Tuesday's Children is doing, that's what we're all about."