



Travis Kelce has had an incredible breakthrough in KC — and not just on the field

Nate Taylor

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — When he heard his own voice on the JumboTron, Travis Kelce moved his eyes upward.

In the midst of another Chiefs comeback victory last month, the star tight end was in the huddle, awaiting the next play, when the franchise used a stoppage in the game against the Atlanta Falcons to recognize him. The video displays inside Arrowhead Stadium displayed a clip, narrated by Kelce, to show fans why he was the Chiefs' nomination for the NFL Man of the Year Award, the league's most prestigious honor for a player's excellence on and off the field.

Within those 92 seconds, Kelce didn't watch highlights of himself catching touchdown passes. The images in the video — of Kelce at his charity event, his foundation's next project and the joyful experiences he has had with children — allowed him to reflect on the impact of his maturity and generosity since 2013, when he joined the Chiefs.

Kelce felt pride. He was also grateful that the video featured two children, brothers he has built an indelible relationship with since he met them five years ago: Amare and Amir Kane.

"Those guys will light up the room every single time they walk in it, man," Kelce said of the brothers. "They just love life."

Kelce, 31, was introduced to Amare, 13, and Amir, 12, at Operation Breakthrough, a non-profit educational and social services center that, per their website, "provides safe, loving and educational environments for children in poverty."

From the moment they met, Kelce has been an inspirational figure for the brothers, a charismatic friend and mentor. At Operation Breakthrough, where the boys are empowered to grow through education, Amare and Amir are known for their smile and jovial demeanor. The brothers built their connection with Kelce through several interactions, learning their shared similarities quicker than they anticipated.

Since then, the brothers have received wisdom, motivation and affirmation from Kelce.

"Operation Breakthrough has done a lot for me, and without it, I probably wouldn't have met Travis," Amir said. "He's been helping us a lot, helping us stay active and to keep trying our best."

As Amare and Amir have grown, they have seen Kelce become an example of diligence and perseverance. Once an immature player known for his antics and emotional outbursts, Kelce has become one of the Chiefs' best leaders.

“Knowing that I can put a smile on somebody’s face, it’s a blessing,” Kelce said of Amare and Amir. “I’m very fortunate to be a Chief. I’ve grown up in Kansas City.”

Kelce knows his personal growth has blossomed parallel to his partnership with Operation Breakthrough. One reason the Chiefs nominated Kelce for the award — the winner will be announced the evening before the Super Bowl — is because of his newest community service project: creating a state-of-the-art STEM workspace, called the Ignition Lab, for Operation Breakthrough.

Over the years, Kelce has donated close to \$1 million to the center, with the intention to provide educational resources to help propel the success of underprivileged students. Some of the first students to galvanize Kelce’s efforts for such an endeavor with Operation Breakthrough were Amare and Amir.

“They appreciate what Operation Breakthrough is and everybody that’s in that building that helps them,” Kelce said of the brothers. “It’s a beautiful thing.”

One afternoon in 2016, a little more than a year into building his foundation Eighty-Seven & Running, Kelce wanted to surprise the Operation Breakthrough students. He arrived at the playground with three items that served as icebreakers: pizza, cookies and a football.

“He came up to us,” Amare said of Kelce. “We played catch and just started talking.”



Amare Kane with Travis Kelce at Operation Breakthrough in 2017. (Courtesy of Lindsay Clarke.)

Kelce enjoyed each brother’s outgoing personality. Amare and Amir weren’t afraid to ask questions, which often led to laughter. Kelce responded with questions to the brothers about the center and what they found most interesting.

“They just had a way about them,” Aaron Eanes, the director of Kelce’s foundation, said of the brothers. “You really wanted to be around them and see them succeed.”

The moment led to Kelce thinking about his own upbringing in a diverse neighborhood in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. The difference, though, was that Kelce’s childhood neighborhood didn’t have a place similar to Operation Breakthrough, which hosts more than 650 children, many who come from families that live below the federal poverty guidelines.

In March 2015, the Chiefs introduced Kelce to Operation Breakthrough. Kelce, wearing his red No. 87 jersey, volunteered by reading to a group of preschool students. He and Eanes were each given a tour from Mary Esselman, the center’s president and CEO. In starting his foundation, Kelce wanted to amplify Operation Breakthrough’s mission.

Since 1971, the center has taught students — including Quinton Lucas, Kansas City’s mayor — core subjects while having them explore extracurricular subjects such as STEM, art, music, construction, cooking and gardening through hands-on experiences.

“How they educate the kids and how they don’t allow the kids to use their situation as a crutch really resonated with me,” Eanes said of Operation Breakthrough. “You would never know what they were going through because they’re so nice, so upbeat, so happy to be in the environment that they’re in and they’re so smart.”

Amare and Amir were enrolled in Operation Breakthrough’s afterschool program in the summer of 2015 under an excruciating circumstance.

On the morning of Jan. 11, 2015, the brothers’ oldest sister, Alexis Kane, was beaten and killed by gunshots at the age of 14. Alexis’ body was found at The Bay Water Park, just four miles from where she attended Smith-Hale Middle School. The three suspects, all of whom were older than Alexis, were convicted after being charged with first-degree murder.

“A tragedy I had never experienced before,” LaShonda Kane said of her daughter’s death. She added of Amare and Amir: “I didn’t know how it would affect them as they grew older.”

After LaShonda moved her family, including her two youngest daughters, Aniyah and Alaysia Jones, into a different neighborhood,

Operation Breakthrough, through donations, furnished their apartment. The center has also provided therapy sessions for LaShonda and her sons.

“They’ve just helped us so much,” LaShonda said of Operation Breakthrough. “I love the way they teach and take care of the students, as well as the parents.”

After their first interaction, Kelce knew he wanted to spend more time with Amare and Amir, to be a positive influence in their lives.



Amir Kane, Travis Kelce and Amare Kane with other students from Operation Breakthrough during the annual “Walk the Walk” charity fashion show in 2018.

(Courtesy of Lindsay Clarke)

As expected, Amare was nervous during his first few weeks at the center. Once he felt comfortable and safe, he began showing interest in learning more about robotics. But Amare acknowledged to Kelce that he struggled with anger. Kelce shared that he has always been an emotional person, which has led him at times to make unwise decisions. Earlier in his career, Kelce committed several unsportsmanlike-conduct penalties. He was also suspended for the 2010 season at the University of Cincinnati for violating team rules.

“When he’s sitting down with kids, he can be like, ‘I was the class clown,’” Eanes said of Kelce. “The reason he’s effective in the community is because of the struggles he went through. As an African-American myself, when you see a white person dealing with inner-city kids, they generally can’t relate because they haven’t grown up in that environment. The best thing about Travis is his ability to empathize with people but to never make excuses.”

Since his first visit, Kelce has never worn his Chiefs jersey again at Operation Breakthrough. He wanted to be intentional with how he related to students, especially Amare and Amir.

“I really want them to look at me as Travis,” he said. “Then we can have a real conversation and I can really give them my point of view on things — and I’m not going to lie to them.”

Esselman appreciated that Kelce realized, rather quickly, that developing genuine relationships with students, including Amare and Amir, was going to take multiple visits. Kelce shared a story with Esselman from when he was a child. As a young fan of Cleveland’s baseball team, Kelce was heartbroken when one of the athletes declined to give him an autograph. Kelce told Esselman that he would never let one of her students feel that they weren’t important to him.

An early example occurred a few weeks later, when Kelce made another visit to the center. Amare was excited to see Kelce. But Amare wondered if Kelce would remember his name. The moment Kelce noticed his friend’s face among the crowd of students, he flashed his smile and shouted, “Amare!”

Before Kelce left that day, Esselman watched him take photos with any student who asked for one.

“He’s always willing to take that extra step, and I think that matters a lot,” Esselman said of Kelce. “That’s what the kids remember. He came at a time when it was really good for the boys.”

By the start of the Chiefs’ 2016 season, Amare and Amir were thrilled to watch Kelce play. They loved it whenever Kelce danced in the end zone after scoring a touchdown.

Tickets that were donated to Operation Breakthrough led to the brothers watching Kelce perform in person that November against the Jacksonville Jaguars. Early in the fourth quarter, Kelce became enraged. He felt a defender committed pass interference to prevent him from catching a pass in the end zone. When the officials didn’t throw a flag on the play, Kelce responded by shouting before throwing his towel at the referee, who then ejected him from the game. Kelce apologized after the game for his unprofessional behavior, and Esselman explained to Amare and Amir that everyone, even adults, can struggle to maintain their focus and discipline.

A few days following the game, Kelce received encouraging notes written by the brothers.

“Football is just a game,” Kelce said. “Granted, I can put a smile on somebody’s face by doing a touchdown dance on Sundays. But being able to actually help somebody in their situation, that’s everything for me. I feel like it’s a duty of mine to make sure I’m helping out as much as I can.”

One way Kelce rewarded the brothers for their success in school in 2017 was by having them participate in his annual charity event, a fashion show called “Walk the Walk,” which benefited Operation Breakthrough. Amare and Amir kept the T-shirts from Charlie Hustle, a Kansas City vintage clothing company, that they modeled in the show.

Toward the end of the show, with Kelce watching in the front row, the brothers received an ovation from the crowd when they imitated Kelce by performing one of his touchdown dances. Kelce high-fived Amare and Amir and joined them in dancing on the runway.

“It was a great experience for the boys,” LaShonda said. “They were so excited to do it. We had never gotten a chance to experience anything like this before. They were just full of smiles and proud of themselves.”

A few months later, Amare and 10 other students watched the Chiefs’ final preseason game inside one of Arrowhead Stadium’s private suites, which Kelce purchased for them. The students met other Chiefs players prior to the game, and they each received an autographed ball. When the group took a photo, the student closest to Kelce was Amare.

Before a game that season, Kelce received a video through a text message from Lindsay Clarke, who worked at Operation Breakthrough. Inside of Clarke’s message was a 30-second video of Amare giving Kelce a pep talk.

“Have a good game, beat Washington and keep dancing,” Amare said in the video. “Be confident. And when you don’t make a catch, still be positive.”

Amare and Amir agreed that the most fun they have had with Kelce was July 14, 2018. The brothers ran, jumped and caught passes in Kelce’s football camp, a three-hour session where they received his coaching on how to be better athletes. The day ended at Dick’s Sporting Goods in Leawood, Kan., as Kelce helped each student from Operation Breakthrough shop with a \$150 gift card. Amare left the store with basketball apparel. Part of Amir’s purchase included a red No. 87 Kelce T-shirt that he wears during every Chiefs game.



Amir Kane with Travis Kelce at Dick’s Sporting Goods after the football game in 2018. (Courtesy of Operation Breakthrough)

“The impression that Travis has made on these boys is beyond what we can understand or know,” Clarke said. “Travis knows his impact can be really significant.”

Kelce enhanced his partnership with Operation Breakthrough two months later. He donated \$45,000 to open and sponsor the center’s robotics lab for students to learn about technology and engineering.

Toward the end of 2019, Kelce held a robotics tournament with the students. The objective: steer their robot from one end zone of a mini football field, the size of a foosball table, to the other end zone to win the race. In exchange, the students taught Kelce how to build a robot, as he learned each step and piece of equipment.

“These kids are way smarter than I was at their age,” Kelce said.

Kelce played against a few students, too.

“He wasn’t there to let them win,” Esselman said of Kelce. “He was there to challenge them to be their best. That’s where his personal side comes out. It was fun to watch him interact with them and talk about the robots.”

Meanwhile, Amare and Amir have been excelling with their schoolwork at Hogan Prep Middle School. Amare has taken an interest in robotics, coding and music production. He also became passionate about studying culinary arts; his favorite experience was cooking crab rangoon for the first time. Amir relishes engineering and construction.

Last month, LaShonda became tearful when expressing her thankfulness for the support Operation Breakthrough and Kelce has given her family. She is eager to see what future careers her sons will pursue.

Another satisfying experience for LaShonda was watching her sons' reaction to the Chiefs reaching the Super Bowl last year, their first appearance in 50 years. Kelce helped the Chiefs rally for a dramatic comeback victory with a touchdown reception in the fourth quarter. Minutes later, Kelce celebrated by hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy, an image that Amare and Amir cherish because of how much it inspired them.

Three days after the Super Bowl, the brothers were among the thousands of fans who attended the celebratory parade for the Chiefs' championship. For a few minutes on that cold day, Amare and Amir saw Kelce and waved to their friend.

“He helped me be more motivated about my potential,” Amare said of Kelce. “He’s like, ‘If there’s something out there and you want it, go get it.’ Now, I just don’t give up. I keep going.”

Eanes was honest when reflecting on last year: The coronavirus pandemic messed up his and Kelce’s plans for how they could continue to support Operation Breakthrough.

When the pandemic started in March, Kelce called Esselman to find out how he could help the students. Esselman asked Kelce to donate money to the center’s pantry to ensure families would have enough food for at least eight weeks. Kelce responded by donating enough money for 15 weeks.

His next idea, in an effort to remain committed to the students, was hosting a Zoom call. Each student could ask him three questions.

Amare and Amir made sure to ask Kelce their usual questions — on football, fashion and food.

“Travis would be the first to tell you that he wishes he took school more seriously,” Eanes said. “Part of what he does at Operation Breakthrough is instilling in kids that school is cool.”

Although he wasn’t sure when he would next see the students in person, Kelce promised them that he would continue to invest in their education. Even before the pandemic, Kelce was thinking of how he could solve one of Operation Breakthrough’s biggest problems: its capacity.

Once students reached age 14, they could no longer be in the program, based on the center’s space. When contemplating the future, the first students that Kelce and Eanes thought of were Amare and Amir.

“We didn’t want them to age out, but we know they’re going to need different tools,” Eanes said of the brothers. “Seeing them transition to different stages in life, and be able to provide even better opportunities, is just really cool.”

One option for how Operation Breakthrough could expand to include high school students just happened to be right across the street, a vacant auto repair shop. In August, Kelce signed a four-year contract extension with the Chiefs worth \$57.25 million. The following day, he purchased the building across from the center to renovate it into Operation Breakthrough’s Ignition Lab.

When LaShonda heard of Kelce’s contribution to the center, she felt relief and joy. She knew where Amare and Amir were going to be after school.

“It’s quite poetic that these two kids are going to be able to be in the program,” Clarke said of the brothers. “We don’t know what type of impact that’s going to have as they transition to be young adults. I’m so excited to see what they’re going to do.” “Before we came to Operation Breakthrough, we were all down,” LaShonda said. “It’s even brighter for me to see them get the things they need to help them be successful as they grow. I don’t think I could’ve done it by myself. It’s just a great feeling, and I’m proud of them.”

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Amare Kane at Operation Breakthrough last month. (Courtesy of Operation Breakthrough)

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The lab, Esselman said, is scheduled to open in September. High school students will be able to study and apply their entrepreneurial skills in coding, computer technology and multimedia production. Kelce is optimistic that the lab will be so pivotal for students that some will be able to earn a college scholarship or an internship to start their careers.

"Football is just a game," Kelce said. "We're talking about life, and to be able to help somebody have a better future, being able to lend a helping hand so somebody has a better situation, that's making a difference."

"They'll have somewhere that they can go and collaboratively connect and design. That's something that I really wanted to do."

Of course, Amare and Amir are eager to see the lab, but they're even more eager to see their buddy Travis. The brothers haven't seen Kelce in almost a year, but they know, when the pandemic is over, that he will return to Operation Breakthrough, further strengthening their bond. Amir's belief for such is simple.

"He cares," Amir said of Kelce. "He's a good man."