

Pinkie Promise | IlliniBoard



By Robert [@alioneye](#) | Feb 3, 2023

I get on the bus and I immediately feel the need to let the players know I'm not a narc. There's ten guys all between the ages of 19-23 and then some random 50 year-old (me) riding with them. I know several of the players from interviewing them in the past, and the last thing I want is for them to think I'm there to write some "and then I heard Josh McCray say a bad word" article.

So I tell them the truth. Which, honestly, came out more like a "look guys, I'm the cool dad" speech. I'm riding along because A) I'm writing an article about the event, B) I live in Champaign and need a ride to Chicago, and C) the Illini Guardians asked if I could ride along as the chaperone for the event. Which is nothing more than "if anything goes wrong, or if the bus never shows up, we need someone there we can text and coordinate alternate plans."

But I made the point very clear: be yourselves. I'm not some reporter embedded within a political campaign secretly plotting to write a tell-all book. I'm a fan, and I'm wearing Illini gear, and I'm headed to Joe's Bar to cheer on the Illini just like them. The super cool dad.

Keith Randolph, seated the closest to me, extended his pinkie to me. And I immediately went Dad Level 9.5. I...

- Thought he was making the "hang ten" hand motion so I responded with the same, thinking that's what the cool kids do these days.
- Then, after briefly thinking "wait, is that the 'call me' symbol?", I thought he might be going for the fist bump with his pinkie out so I fist bumped him back.
- Casey Washington, seeing my plight, offered "no, pinkie promise" and I finally caught on so I hooked pinkies with Keith for the pinkie swear.

I, Robert The Blogger, do solemnly swear to not write some big expose about what everyone said and did on the bus. I'm simply here to tell the story of the day.

And I was immediately needed as a chaperone because the food that was supposed to be delivered to the bus hadn't been delivered. Once that was sorted out, our driver pointed the bus north to Chicago. Our destination:

I vs W
Watch Party



Saturday, January 28 @ 1:30 p.m.
(2 p.m. tip-off)
Joe's on Weed St.
940 W. Weed St. Chicago

Join us to cheer on the
Fighting Illini Basketball Team with
food, drinks, raffle prizes and more!!

And, with appearances by
Illinois football players including:

New QB Luke Altmeyer	Casey Washington
Reggie Love	Isaiah Adams
Josh McCray	Keith Randolph
Caleb Griffin	Johnny Newton
Pat Bryant	Henry Boyer

Presented by



The ride up was mostly uneventful. I guess the bus could be described as a "party bus", but from the outside it looked like more of a nursing home bus. Botanical gardens here we come.

Inside, the rows of seats of a typical nursing home bus had been configured into a "U" shape, and that gave it a "wedding party takes the bus from the wedding to the reception" feel. There were colored lights in the ceiling, but during the day, you couldn't really see them. And, of course, there was an aux

cord for the sound system. On the way up, Johnny Newton was our DJ.

We arrive at Joe's and find our way to the back room where we're the guests of honor. Well, they're the guests of honor. I'm just the chaperone. So it's now time to assume the position every chaperone assumes on every field trip in history: stand over in the corner by myself.

See, the players are there to make an appearance. So now is the time for them to be front-and-center. They're each getting an appearance fee for this event, which is probably a good way to pivot here and talk about NIL for a bit.

Everyone has their own take on NIL. Some see it as college sports losing its purity. Some have been waiting years for EA Sports to re-release a college football game and are overjoyed that we've found a system where players can be compensated for their likeness. Some boosters in the state of Florida, apparently, approach NIL as legalized Pay For Play.

Whatever your view towards it, I want you to set it aside for a minute. I want you to keep an open mind for a moment. Just hear my story and then you can go back to arguing over this new phase of college athletics.

Signing Day was this week. Most of the drama has been removed from Signing Day by Early Signing Day in December when the vast majority of recruits will sign, but the first Wednesday in February (traditional Signing Day) is an anniversary for me. My first article on the blog was Signing Day 2009, so I've now been doing this for 14 years.

And in those 14 years, I'm not sure I've ever seen Illini football players having more fun than I did on Saturday. Maybe the cold tubs at Camp Rantoul in 2013. It's either Saturday or the cold tubs at Camp Rantoul in 2013.

College football is a grind, man. A year-long grind. Yes, the players get a free education for grinding like that, but the stipulations around that scholarship (due to NCAA rules) prohibited them from having much of a college experience. They couldn't get a part time

job to have spending money. They had to say no to every Instagram DM offering them money to post one pic holding a certain product. The system was "here's your scholarship money, and we'd better not see you with one extra dime."

The true core of NIL, well, it's in the name there: Name, Image, and Likeness. The players can now benefit from their celebrity. That gymnast at LSU (Olivia Dunne) with a bazillion TikTok followers would have probably skipped gymnastics in college simply because it wouldn't have allowed her to monetize an ounce of her following. Now, with NIL, she can make money like any other influencer *and* compete in her favorite sport.

That's probably the thing about NIL that most people get wrong. Most people hear "NIL" and think "OK so now Texas A&M can legally buy recruits." That's, uh, all part of the upcoming legislative battles (and enforcement battles) as the details of all of this get hammered out post-inception. But at its core, NIL is a massive boost for athletes like Olivia Dunne (and thousands of others). Huge social media followings can now be monetized by NCAA athletes just like all non-athletes in their 20's with huge social media followings.

So think of this in terms of, say, appearance fees. Some dude will be eliminated in the third week of The Bachelorette but because he said that one line in episode two, he gained a huge following. And suddenly his DM's are full of requests from clubs to make an appearance for a fee. Saturday night at Enigma, from 11:00 to 1:00, come party with Brayden J from The Bachelorette. And Brayden J gets a check for \$25,000 simply to show up for two hours and say his famous line "bro, you better go the other way or you're gonna get stuck in this traffic jam."

Now take that concept and scale it for college athletics. In the same way that people will pay \$26 per Vegas Bomb to party with Brayden J, making the club way more money than the \$25,000 appearance fee they paid him, Illini fans will show up to a bar in Chicago if they can snap a photo with Johnny Newton & Keith Randolph. Why shouldn't Josh McCray and Reggie Love sign that one fan's jersey? Fans love to interact with

players, and players couldn't benefit from fan interactions in the past, so why not change the rules?

That's what NIL provided on Saturday. The event was put on by the Illini Guardians (our NIL collective), the Chicago Illini Club, and Joe's Bar. Through the collective, the players are able to earn an appearance fee. And the fans came out in droves to watch the Illini beat the Badgers alongside the football players.

Where do the Guardians get their money to put on events like this? Hopefully, you. That's the whole idea behind a collective. Instead of individual NIL deals brokered by the players, the collective accepts donations and then sets up deals with the players. This deal was for 10 players to bus to Chicago, attend the event and interact with fans, and then bus back to Champaign.

And it allowed the players to have a really fun Saturday (while making a little money off their celebrity). I'll get back to the story now.

During the game, the players had a table at the center of the party. They took photos and signed autographs. The scene:

After the game, my chaperone duties began once again. The bus driver had come in to tell me they asked him to move the bus, so he gave me the path to walk to find out where he parked. My new task: get the players from the bar to the bus by walking through the snow. (I asked Luke Altmyer if he'd been around much snow. "Maybe once per year in Mississippi", he said.)

Once we got everyone on the bus, it was time to head back to Champaign. And this time, it was Keith Randolph on the aux. I was at the front of the bus (chaperones are always front right seat, don't you know?), so I wasn't part of this but here's my guess as to how this happened. I believe he built a quick group chat for the 10 players. And then

he had them all request one song. And then they went through playing everyone's songs. Henry Boyer's song choice was... wait, I probably can't tell you. Pinkie promise.

After that - and this part I *can* tell you because the players started taking videos and sharing them - Keith took them all back to their childhoods. It was dark at this point, we were somewhere outside of Kankakee, the interior lights of the bus were now in full effect, and it was time to go back to the late 2000's/early 2010's. Yes, that's "childhood" for these guys.

I won't share all of the details, but to give you the vibe, here's the 10 players while Keith was playing "The Climb" by Miley Cyrus:



Let me pause for a moment to editorialize.

I don't think it's possible for anyone to understand how much I enjoyed that bus ride home. I always talk about watching Illini athletic events like I'm a parent, so let me Dad for a second.

The 85 scholarship players and 20+ walkons work so incredibly hard the entire year. Yes, it's the game they love, but it's the game I love to watch, and they're doing it for my enjoyment. Which means getting to observe *their* enjoyment of a Saturday evening on a bus ride home means a lot to me. I had moments like that in college. My trip to my junior year fraternity formal was in a party bus similar to that. So I'm thrilled to see these guys enjoying college in that way.

Hate NIL if you must, but it's impossible for me to not see a connection between the loosened rules for college athletes and the amount of fun those guys were having right there. NCAA rules restricted so many of their movements in the past. And now, as celebrities, they get to celebrate it.

As a fan, I'm also thrilled that they have more moments available where they can bond as a team. Don't think my football brain wasn't thinking "you know, Luke Altmyer is gonna throw to Pat Bryant and Casey Washington -- and hand it off to Josh McCray and Reggie Love -- a lot next season so it's great that before spring ball they have the opportunity to get to know each other off the field." This is a "no negatives" situation where an NIL opportunity allowed them to A) actually have spending money for once, and B) be 20 years old on a bus driving to Chicago with their friends.

I can't share much more (you know - pinkie promise). I wish I could tell you about the Disney portion of the evening because you really haven't lived until you've seen Keith Randolph paddling an imaginary canoe while Johnny Newton sings "How Far I'll Go" from Moana, but alas, I promised not to tell you that. So I'll just close by telling you what NIL really means.

NIL means that you - yes, you, the man or woman reading this - can now get directly involved in boosting these players' college careers. Yes, the pitch remains "we can't allow Iowa to out-raise Illinois", but after my story, I hope you see that all of this is more than that. We the people of Illini nation need to continue to open doors for these players to have opportunities like Saturday.

The Illini Guardians have a monthly subscription structure, which you can read about [here](#), and they also have a one-time contribution option. Want to *directly* help Illini student athletes while they're in school? [Go to this page](#) and make that one time contribution. Every dime of that turns into spending money for Illini athletes (and if you subscribe, you get monthly/yearly benefits). No, these kids don't have time in their day for a part-time job, but they can find a spare Saturday to bus to Chicago, make an appearance at a gamewatch, and make a little money. These events plus dozens of other events (such as a toy drive with Tracy Abrams' foundation and a food drive headed up by the Illini offensive linemen) are all part of the Guardians' structure.

Which is just how college sports will work from here on out. Personally, I'm a huge fan. These kids have lived under so many restrictions in the past, what with the NCAA constantly peering over their shoulders and saying "you better not have more than \$6 in that wallet of yours", that I'm thrilled to see them out from under that. They should be able to have some fun while making money off their stardom.

What's that? You're in? You're going to contribute? Love that. Thanks for doing that. Really hope you follow through and donate.

Pinkie promise?

Originally published in IlliniBoard.com