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Anaheim Ducks take kids from local nonprofit under their wings

By Scott Burnside

IRVINE, Calif. - Christian Cirese and [Cam Fowler](#) have known each other for about 20 minutes, but the NHL player and the 8-year-old Orange County resident have already formed a bond that is as heartwarming as it is unexpected.

The [Anaheim Ducks](#) defenseman peers intently at racks of socks and shoes in a local Target.



Ducks (rear, left to right) John Gibson, Ryan Kesler, Jared Boll, Kevin Bieksa, Jakob Silfverberg, Antoine Vermette and (blocked) Rikard Rakell and Cam Fowler took kids from The Wooden Floor shopping at an Anaheim-area Target.

What size does Christian wear?

Does he like this brand? The color?

If not, they can look at another, Fowler insists as they move from aisle to aisle.

Later, while Fowler's girlfriend, Jasmine Maggard, and Christian's 17-year-old sister, Heather, are checking out gifts for Heather, a high school senior, Fowler waits patiently outside the changing room door to make sure all of the articles of clothing picked out by and for Christian fit him perfectly.

Fowler just turned 25. He does not have any kids. He has two younger sisters who are in their teens but, generally speaking, doesn't usually have much to do with youngsters.

So he was surprised to find himself so immersed in the experience of shopping with his new pals.

"I ended up having more of a relationship with them maybe than I expected," Fowler said. "They kind of opened up, and Christian was making me laugh the whole time. What was cool to me was the relationship that Heather and Christian had. He was picking out clothes for her, she was making sure he was OK, fixing his hair and stuff. That was very cool."

Maggard agreed. "It was like we had known these kids forever. But we just met them," she added.

This outing is the first time that Fowler, the 12th overall pick in the 2010 draft, has taken part in the Ducks' annual shopping excursion with The Wooden Floor, a nonprofit organization in Orange County that provides after-school programs to help low-income kids prepare for higher education through the arts.

By the end of the day, Fowler is sharing tips with Heather about how she might relieve stress before a dance performance, and Christian is holding a microphone for an interview Fowler does with the Ducks' in-house media group.

"I told her I listen to some music. I like to take deep breaths," Fowler said. "It really seemed to resonate with her."

In some ways Heather and Christian are unusual among the kids connected to The Wooden Floor. Theirs is a two-parent family, and their father works two jobs to support the family's four children. All six members of their family share a two-bedroom apartment in the Anaheim area.

Next spring, Heather -- who is in her eighth year at the program -- will graduate from Valencia High School in Placentia and, with assistance from The Wooden Floor, will attend college. She will be the first in her family to do so.

"At first it was definitely scary," she said of the prospect of

heading off to college. "But now I'm excited. I'm planning to go to a community college first and then transfer into a four-year [program]. The medical field has always been my favorite thing, so I want go into that."



Antoine Vermette helped young fan Alfonso Guerrero pick out some cool kicks.

NHL players have a long history of giving back to their respective communities, and frankly, their efforts often fly under the radar. But if you peek behind the curtain and see how these events come together and the impact they have, you'll learn quickly that oftentimes it's not the financial commitment of players -- although that certainly is important -- but the investment of time, effort and, on a day like this, emotion, that shows how meaningful these kinds of moments can be for everyone involved.

"Us doing it as a team is very cool, but I think that should be the back end of the story," Fowler said. "It should be about the kids and the experience for them. So my main focus was on them today."

In some ways, the Target store in this Irvine shopping mall had the look of a demolition derby-turned-scavenger hunt as the kids from The Wooden Floor paired up with Ducks players and their wives or girlfriends and other volunteers to fill out shopping lists that included necessities -- and, of course, a few toys.

Other shoppers craned their necks to see what was causing the commotion, as red plastic Target shopping carts brimming with goodies careened around the store, piloted by [Kevin Bieksa](#), [Ryan Kesler](#), [John Gibson](#), [Jakob Silfverberg](#) and Fowler.

The shirts, shoes, Lego Star Wars and Nerf weaponry that ended up in the various shopping carts might well be the only gifts these children get this holiday season, said The Wooden Floors CEO Dawn Reese, who also noted that the shopping spree and the program's holiday party are sometimes the only fun activity on many of the kids' holiday schedules.

More than 90 percent of the 375 kids The Wooden Floor helps annually with tutoring and college-prep assistance -- as well as crisis intervention and counseling six days a week -- come from low-income or extremely low-income families.

"They have to navigate a lot of challenges, especially toward higher-education goals that we have for them," Reese said.

And so, sure, getting some cool things is a part of the equation.

But will the kids remember the Batman caps or will they recall instead veteran [Antoine Vermette](#) regaling them with stories of having to cover his ears and eyes because former teammate [Anton Volchenkov](#) insisted on watching horror movies all night long when they were on the road?

"[The players] really uplift them and really empower them. We do that too, but this is just something special, when a stranger goes into your life and puts focus and attention on you. They're kind of like, 'Wow, what's this all about,'" Reese said. "It makes you feel very proud, so we hope that pride then follows them in all parts of their life when they leave today."

As the kids get ready to jump back on the bus that ferried them to the mall, there are hugs and pictures and autographs from the players. It's been only a couple of hours since they met, but somehow it seems like they've been friends much, much longer.
