Ducks Take Students on Holiday Shopping Spree

Players shopped with 16 students from Santa Ana-based nonprofit The Wooden Floor at Target

by Jenelyn Russo / Special to AnaheimDucks.com

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Holiday cheer from the Ducks continued this week as the club treated 16 students from Santa Ana-based nonprofit The Wooden Floor to a shopping spree at Target in the Irvine Spectrum.

Hosting the low-income youth for the ninth consecutive year, eight Ducks players and their wives or significant others spent the afternoon with the kids as they selected Christmas gifts for themselves and their family members.

“It’s pretty special,” said Ducks defenseman Cam Fowler. “To get the opportunity to be able to do this and help people who really need it is special for me. Just walking around with them, you can see the joy on their faces. They might not have this opportunity otherwise, so I’m very thankful we get the chance to do this.”

Founded in 1983, The Wooden Floor serves low-income communities in Orange County with their afterschool programs that transform the lives of students and their families through the art of dance.

Ducks players Kevin Bieksa, Jared Boll, John Gibson, Ryan Kesler, Rickard Rakell, Jakob Silfverberg and Antoine Vermette joined Fowler as they helped the students choose items from throughout the store in time to celebrate the holidays. Leaning toward necessities, the kids were more likely to pick out clothing and shoes, but the players made sure to get some games and toys in the carts as well, offering input and fashion advice along the way.
Vermette was paired with 11-year old Alfonso, a fifth grader at Lowell Elementary in Santa Ana who is in his second year at The Wooden Floor. Along with helping Alfonso find jeans and shirts for school, the Ducks center talked hockey with his new buddy, sharing how he got his start in the sport and why he loves to play.

“It’s great and really puts things into perspective,” Vermette said. “It’s nice to have a personal connection with these kids and see how big of a help it is for them. I’m glad we had a lot of guys coming out and doing this.”

Alfonso was appreciative of the experience with Vermette as well. “I am very grateful for this opportunity that they’ve given me,” Alfonso said. “It was very nerve-wracking that I actually got to meet a real hockey player. But I had a lot of fun today.”

By providing dance education, along with academic and family service programs, The Wooden Floor annually reaches 375 underserved youth, giving them the hope and opportunity they need to reach their academic goals and break the cycle of poverty. As a result, 100 percent of graduates of The Wooden Floor since 2005 have immediately gone on to enroll in higher education, compared to about 45 percent of their socioeconomic peers.

“Today’s holiday shopping spree with the Anaheim Ducks really provides a couple of opportunities for our students,” said Executive Director and CEO of The Wooden Floor, Dawn S. Reese. “One, they get to be with the Anaheim Ducks players, which is amazing in itself. And two, the players really serve as role models amongst the students, and they get to see that others give back to them.”

Seventeen-year old Heather, a senior at Valencia High School in Placentia, spent the afternoon shopping with Fowler and acknowledged what a memorable experience this event was for her and her family.

“It’s just an amazing thing,” she said. “They came here to spend time with us and shop. I’m grateful that they do this. What the Ducks do for the community is really incredible.”
After graduation next spring, Heather plans to enroll at Fullerton College and later transfer to a university to pursue a career as a plastic surgeon, a vision that would not be a reality without the assistance of The Wooden Floor.

“It’s the most amazing thing I’ve been in,” said Heather, who is in her eighth year at the program. “It’s like my second home. They’ve helped me so much with my high school years. I’m just so glad to be a part of The Wooden Floor.”

Both students recognize how their lives have been changed by the opportunity to dance.

“I’ve danced since I was young, and expressing myself is really fun,” Heather said. “It clears my mind and makes me happy. I love dancing.”

Added Alfonso, “I enjoy the movements and how it keeps you healthy. It helps you find out the full potential you have. I feel more like myself when I’m dancing.”

With the knowledge of the daily challenges these students face, Vermette had difficulty finding the words to explain how grateful he and his teammates were to be a part of such a life-changing experience for the kids during this season of giving.

“It’s tough to describe,” Vermette said. “It’s really rewarding to see the appreciation of others that are in need. As an organization, it’s part of our responsibility to give back to the community and to serve people who don’t have it as easy, to make a difference.”

As the players and students wrapped up the afternoon and took their shopping carts filled to the brim to the check-out lines, it was evident there were plenty of smiles and changed lives, on both sides.

“When they come from difficult circumstances, like a lot of these children do, and they see another group of people put their hand out to them and offer them this terrific opportunity and hang out with them for the day, it really changes the way they think about themselves,” Reese said.

“We often hear from kids after they attend this event that they can’t believe the players would take time out of their busy day to spend time with them. They come out of this feeling joyful and optimistic in whatever they do.”