

99 Mooseheart Students Experience 'The Goulden Touch' In Holiday Shopping Spree At St. Charles Target

MOOSEHEART, Dec. 14 - There wasn't any mad dashing through the aisles of St. Charles' SuperTarget store as 99 Mooseheart children embarked on a Christmas shopping spree. (That could be explained, in part, from some firm instructions from the adults in their lives, to not go madly dashing through the store.)

But looking into the elementary and middle school students' eyes gave away the inner thrill of holiday shopping as they began a two-hour spree made possible by Chicago Bears placekicker Robbie Gould and his "The Goulden Touch" foundation.

"I'm excited to get the opportunity to work with Mooseheart," Gould said. "It's awesome to have the kids come and have a lot of fun today. It's fun to put a smile on a kid's face, but it brings a lot of cheer to myself and everyone involved with The Goulden Touch."

The amount involved was pretty staggering. A total of \$13,200 was available, thanks to contributions by The Goulden Touch, the Chicago Bears' "Bears Care" charitable organization, Target and a personal donation made by Gould himself. This meant each of Mooseheart's elementary and middle school students was allowed to spend a bit over \$120.

"I was thinking (it would be) along the lines of \$20 or \$25 per student," Mooseheart Executive Director Scott Hart said. "(Gould), through his generosity and fund-raising, has ballooned that up to around \$120 per child. It's a great Christmas gift to Mooseheart in general."

Each group of student shoppers was helped by school and campus staff while Gould continuously moved through the store from child to child, making some recommendations and chatting with the students. He graciously agreed to every autograph request, signing everything from napkins and pieces of paper to footballs, shirts and jerseys.

"Every kid has been so polite and every kid has been so excited to go and shop and it's awesome to see them shop for every family member and to shop for themselves," Gould said. "It's really a unique opportunity. You think you are touching their lives. But they are all thinking about their families and everyone around them. You're touching more than just 99 kids' lives who came here today."

Some of the older Mooseheart shoppers, middle-schoolers mostly, knew who Gould was, and were aware of the team-record 57-yard field goal he had kicked in an overtime losing effort against the Denver Broncos on Sunday, and they wanted to meet and talk to a professional football player. Some of the younger children were just happy to be around the person who was allowing them to do some shopping. At least one of Mooseheart's youngest children just wanted Gould to twirl around, because she was in the mood for some in-store twirling.

"It makes losing a lot easier," said Gould, who'll turn 30 later this month. said. "If you put it in perspective -- you're pretty bummed after losing 13-10 after having a 10-point lead with five minutes to go. But at the end of the game, I knew I had this opportunity ahead of me. It's just a game, at the end of the day. We love to win - but you can't win them all. And there's so many other opportunities where everyone gets to win and have a lot of fun."

Hart said that the holidays can be a tough time for some of the children who live at Mooseheart, whether they are preparing to return to their guardians when the semester break begins on Friday or whether they will be staying on campus through the holidays.

"Christmas can be a difficult time for our children," Hart said. "Some of them have lost family members and are trying to overcome some serious life challenges at a young age. This really lifts the spirits and lightens the mood and gives the children something else to focus on instead of loss . This is a day of huge gain for our kids."

The shopping spree put smiles on a number of faces at the SuperTarget too. Store manager Kristen Barbaro had her staff ready to assist and opened a pair of dedicated checkout lines so the children could make their purchases.

"My entire team has talked about how this really brings the spirit of Christmas alive," Barbaro said. "We're really excited to be a part of such a great event for kids who are in need. It's great to have Robbie Gould here and we're happy to be able to give back to the community in this way."

The nature of the shopping and the questions the children were asking touched the Target staff. Boys spent time shopping for nail polish while girls were seen looking for cologne while everyone went to the jewelry counter, at least to look.

"One thing that's really special is that these kids have been shopping for their family and other people that they know," Barbaro said. "I saw very little of shopping for the kids shopping for themselves. That kind of touches your heart, when you think about the spirit of Christmas and the idea that these kids don't have a lot and yet, rather than buying for themselves, they are buying for others."

Gould said there is a fair amount of charitable work done by his teammates. The Goulden Touch has been in existence for 10 months.

"We really don't do it for the PR," Gould said. "A lot of the guys in the locker room do it because, somewhere along the way, someone's helped them get to where they are today. It's always great to give back to the community that's so embraced all of us, not only in our professional careers but our families as well."

The shopping spree was the first time Gould had met children from Mooseheart, but it may not be the last. He said he wants to visit the Mooseheart campus and meet with the students, possibly talking the football team. There's also a chance Monday's shopping spree could become more than a one-off event.

"I have a passion for helping youth -- not only in this area, but back home," said Gould, who is a native of Jersey Shore, PA. This is the future of our country. It's important that they understand to make the right decisions and to work away from the wrong decisions, to take advantage of opportunities that you have and work hard."

Hart said furthering the relationship between Gould and Mooseheart would be wonderful, from a Mooseheart perspective. Certainly, 99 children were having a great time with their shopping spree.

"This would be something special, if we could make this an annual event for our children," Hart said. "I know Robbie's having a great time and I know our kids are having a blast being here."

Since its founding, Mooseheart has operated a complete, accredited kindergarten-through-high-school academic program, plus art, music, vocational training and interscholastic sports. It is an extremely nurturing and student-tailored program, with an average student-teacher ratio of 12-1.

Mooseheart students who complete their studies with a 3.0 GPA or better (4.0=A) are eligible for up to five years of annually renewable scholarship funding, covering tuition, room and board in an amount comparable to that required for an in-state student at an Illinois public university.

Mooseheart is currently home to roughly 230 students, ranging in age from preschoolers to high school seniors. Applications for admission to Mooseheart are considered from any family whose children are, for whatever reason, lacking a stable home environment. Mooseheart boasts its own U.S. Post Office and a fully functioning branch of Fifth Third Bank.

In addition to Mooseheart, Moose International also supports Moosehaven, a 70-acre retirement community near Jacksonville, FL founded in 1922; and conducts more than \$70 million worth of community service programs annually.