

Shoes and Smiles for Kids

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REDLANDS - More than 100 children met professional volleyball players and received new pairs of shoes Thursday.

The event was the first of 15 held across the country in conjunction with the Association of Volleyball Professionals beach volleyball tournament. Crocs, Inc., and SolesUnited teamed with the AVP and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to provide shoes and raise awareness for SolesUnited.

SolesUnited collects worn-out Crocs and makes new shoes for people around the world who do not have their own.

Thursday's event was slightly different, with the children receiving brand new Crocs.

"Predominantly, we serve low-income kids, so we are a natural pairing with SolesUnited," said P.T. McEwen, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands.

Kids from the Brockton and Dennis Hansberger clubhouses and about 15 kids from the Redlands Community Center attended the event. Most of the event was held in the gym of the Community Center.

The event began with a question-and-answer session with AVP beach volleyball players Ryan Mariano and Jenny Johnson Jordan, who are competing at the AVP tournament this weekend in Riverside. The players described what it takes to be a professional athlete and stressed the importance of doing well in school.

"I think it's important to expose kids to a variety of things like volleyball," Jordan said. "We really wanted to stress the importance of education and going to college."

"The kids were really excited," Mariano said. "Boys & Girls Clubs betters the lives of others, as does SolesUnited, so this was the perfect combo."



AVP Player Ryan Mariano, just finished signing a Croc for Boys & Girls Clubs Members

After the talk, each child was fitted with their own pair of Crocs.

"I love them!" Jonathan Burdick, 10, said after receiving his "beige-brown" Crocs. "They're comfortable and more relaxing. I just love them a lot."

"They feel good," said Madia Wright, 7. "I just wish I could wear them to sleep every night."

For most children, the best part about the shoes was how they felt.

"I like them a lot because they are airy and comfortable," said Leora Wright, 10.

Some kids were nearly speechless about their new shoes.

"They're awesome." said Analyse Manzinas, 9. "That's all I can say."

After putting on their new shoes, the children spoke with the athletes individually and got their shoes and T-shirts autographed. Jordan and Mariano also offered volleyball pointers and showed kids how to hit and serve the ball.

"I thought it was great - on par for what we expected," Mariano said. "I think we accomplished what we set out to achieve."

Crocs is donating 30 tickets to children from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands for the finals of the AVP Tournament on Sunday. They will present the AVP Cares Athlete of the Week award.

"It's about raising awareness for the 300 million people without shoes," said SolesUnited representative Tim Gray, who attended the event in Redlands. "Since 2007, we've give away 2 million shoes."

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