

Making Friends with Panthers

In addition to winning more on the ice, the Florida Panthers are working hard to create winning partnerships around South Florida. *by DORI ZINN*

SOME OF Randy Moller's earliest memories are of skating on frozen Canadian lakes at 5 years old. He started playing on a hockey team at an outdoor rink in his home province of Alberta when he was 6. He didn't realize hockey was played indoors until he was 10.

"In the '60s, we didn't have 400 channels on the TV, and in small towns, we would rush home from school, get out our sticks and walk down the street to the outdoor rink to play," says Moller, whose 15-year NHL career ended in 1995 with the Florida Panthers and who today holds television analyst and front-office positions with the team. "We would take a break if it snowed again. We brought shovels with us to shovel the snow ourselves. We played until it was dark."

Moller has his dad – and the fact that in western Canada, there isn't a whole lot to do but skate and play hockey – to thank for his introduction to the sport. But of course, those aren't quite the same childhood experiences kids have in



South Florida. That's why the Florida Panthers started the Learn to Play program three years ago that helps kids 4 to 8 years old learn to play hockey. For \$100, parents can get their kids a helmet, sticks, skates, jerseys, pads and gloves – normally valued at \$500. Kids are even allowed to keep the gear after the six-week program ends.

Learn to Play is one of a handful of community programs the team has introduced in recent years. While some are aimed at kids, others seek to honor military veterans or raise money for local charities. All the work has been a priority under owner Vincent Viola, who bought the team in 2013.

John Colombo, the Panthers' director of community relations, says Learn to Play is designed to introduce kids to the game of hockey without breaking the bank. "For parents to get six weeks on the ice, plus equipment, cancels out the scary part of hockey," Colombo says. "This is a cost-effective option for kids to learn hockey in a fun and constructive way."





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Every Sunday from now through Easter, the Learn to Play program will have on-ice training from Panthers alumni and certified coaches from USA Hockey.

Learn to Play isn't the only community hockey program the Panthers offer. The Summer Hockey League, which started this year, partners with Boys and Girls Clubs across South Florida. The eight-week sessions for 5-12 year-olds provide the clubs with equipment for no charge. At the end of the summer, there was a tournament at the BB&T Center, with the winner crowned the South Florida champion. The visiting clubs also get a tour of the press box, locker rooms, and meet the Zamboni driver. While young boys are still the majority, Colombo says more girls are participating in the programs year after year.

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“These families are sacrificing a ton, so what can we do for them? Our job is to make it as enjoyable for them as possible.”

Veteran and Panthers season ticket holder Mike Fleener being honored on November 1, 2016.



“When we first started clinics, we had maybe 5 percent who were girls, now it's upwards of 30 percent,” he says. “They are some of our best players. We're looking into having a girls-only on-ice clinic.”

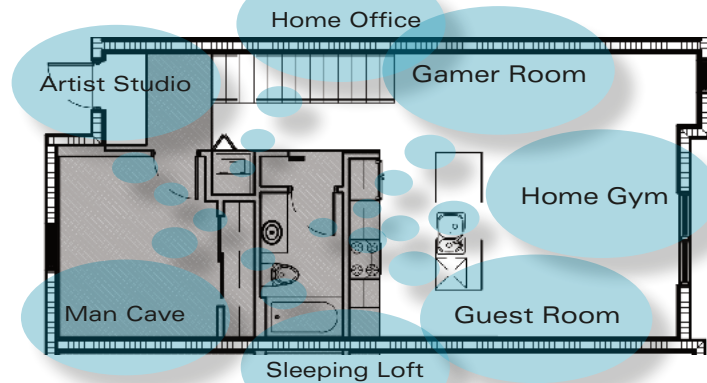
The young outreach isn't the only community program that the Panthers have. While the majority of outreach is geared toward children, there are a few that focus on adults. The Heroes Among Us initiative hon-

ors a military hero for each of the Panthers' 41 home games. “Our owner is a graduate of West Point,” Colombo says of Panthers owner Vincent Viola, who attended the United States Military Academy. “We have a strong military presence here, and this initiative is funneled down from ownership as a commitment to the people of South Florida.”

Each home game, a military hero is honored with a recorded video about their ser-

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vice that plays during the second period. They get four tickets to a game, a jersey, and right before the National Anthem, they go out on the ice to get recognized. Colombo says at the start of the season, they were already booked up for every home game two months in advance.

“These families are sacrificing a ton, so what can we do for them?” Colombo asks. “Our job is to make it as enjoyable for them as possible.”

Most submissions come from online entries but every so often, employees may see a media story about a local hero or get a face-to-face request to have someone honored. The program was among the first Viola instituted after buying the team; this is the fourth year the Panthers have been honoring military heroes at every home game.



This year, the team started a community champion program, which was also an idea from ownership. Lauren Simone, the executive director of the Florida Panthers Foundation, says that before she arrived a year ago, there wasn't any staff specifically for foundation needs. Now there's a donation system coming straight from the team.

“When I got here, [the team] wanted a process in place to give out community dollars where it was most in need,” Simone says.

Now, she says, there are four major pillars of priority when it comes to giving money to the community: veterans'

issues; building youth hockey; children's health, wellness, and education; and helping to support the endangered Florida panther. In October, the team announced the new grant program, which promises to donate \$5 million to the South Florida community over the next five years.

At each home game this year, a local non-profit or government agency will be awarded up to \$25,000.

“We use our games as a platform for the partners,” Simone says. “We want to create a long-lasting relationship.”

And Randy Moller sees that lasting relationship among the Florida Panthers and the South Florida community.

“The success rate we're having is off the charts and we're very proud of that,” he says, seeing how kids are getting hooked on hockey. “There's nothing like the game of hockey.”

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