

Wishes funded, kids have fun at EA video game tournament

NHL '07 Challenge raises money for Make-A-Wish Foundation

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BURNABY - As Sarita Ponce skates her virtual Canucks to a video game victory, you'd never guess she spent four years battling an aggressive brain tumour that left her blind in her left eye.

"Yes!" says Ponce, fist in the air as the puck lands between the digital goal posts.

The win was part of Electronic Arts' NHL '07 Challenge on Sunday afternoon in partnership with the Make-A-Wish Foundation of B.C. and Yukon.

Ponce was among seven Wish recipients -- children who faced life-threatening illnesses and had their wishes granted -- who spent the afternoon at EA's Burnaby campus playing in a video game tournament, eating doughnuts and having a good time.

They competed against video game producers and animators, and celebrities like Vancouver Canucks general manager Dave Nonis, **Olympic snowboarder Ross Rebagliati** and Bobby Singh of the B.C. Lions.

"It's a fun-raising event," said Ross Hetherington, the foundation's executive director for B.C. and the Yukon.

All around him people -- big and small -- sit in front of flat monitors facing off on-screen and moving controllers.

In addition to the tournament, EA set up monitors for family members and other Wish recipients to play other video games on-site. It was a party atmosphere and almost everyone's thumbs were moving.

Video games give children who might not be well enough to run and play a chance to participate in sports like hockey or football, said Hetherington.

"There are three or four kids in wheelchairs and gaming is their life," he said. "It's fun to see them up against Markus Naslund [in the game] and win."

Giving young people and their families a good time is important since illness can be emotionally tough, Hetherington said.

"For children facing a life-threatening illness -- through all the treatments, the missing school, the not being able to participate in sports, the anticipatory grief -- to offer them a ray of hope gives them strength to carry on," he said.

Wishes are funded by donations and typically cost around \$6,000, Hetherington said.

Last year, Ponce wished for a week-long trip to Disney World, an experience she describes as "really fun."

The trip helped the whole family, said her mother, Amar Ponce, 28.

"It was nice to reconnect after going in and out of the hospital for about four years," she said. "It's emotional. You feel like it's the end but you learn how to find strength."

Across the room, James Donohue, 12, competed against EA game animator Stefan Van Niekerk.

"It's a lot of fun to play with some great kids," said Van Niekerk. "I'm down two points. He's a little too good!"

One year ago, Donohue, a Grade 7 student from Abbotsford, was fighting Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system. He wished for a trip to Italy to see the Lamborghini and Ferrari car plants. The trip meant a lot during a "really scary" time, said his dad, Pat Donohue.

"You have terrible, terrible thoughts when you hear that word 'cancer' - especially involving children," he said. "It was nice for us to just get away from everything."

When James's game ended, he celebrated his second triumph of the tournament with high fives from onlookers, including his dad.

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