



Stemilt and Hansen Fruit are Wrapping “Snow” Much Love into Gifts for Foster Children

WENATCHEE, Wash – Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way, oh what fun it is to ride on the Stemilt and Hansen Fruit sleigh! It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas as Stemilt and Hansen Fruit employees come together for a ninth year to participate in the gift donation for foster children. The two companies collected presents for a total of 146 foster kids this year in the Wenatchee and Yakima communities who are under the care of Washington State’s Department of Youth and Family Services, Fostering Solutions, K Connections, and Foster First.

While this is the ninth year of the donation for Stemilt, it will be the fourth year that Hansen Fruit has joined in to help make Christmas morning a memorable experience for children and their foster families. This year, Stemilt donated gifts to a total of 113 children. Operations manager at Hansen Fruit in Yakima, Kyler Hansen, said they supported 33 kids this year at the Foster First agency in Yakima.

“It will be five years in May that Stemilt and Hansen Fruit have been partners,” explained Hansen. “The compassion that Stemilt has shown their community has rubbed off on us and our goal is to put a smile on every kid’s face on Christmas morning. It’s great to be able to help these kids who have struggled in their upbringing. We started receiving letters last year from foster children expressing their gratitude and it was really special to hear how much it means to them.”

Kathryn Bolyard, organizer of the donation at Stemilt, took charge of the program in 2014. Prior to partnering with Hansen Fruit, Stemilt supported the highest number of foster children in 2017 with 188 kids. In 2018, Bolyard reached out to Kyler Hansen at Hansen Fruit who gladly accepted the partnership in the donation tradition. Stemilt currently provides gifts for foster children in Chelan and Douglas counties in Wenatchee.

“Our Stemilters strive to alleviate the expenses of Christmas by gifting anything from bicycles to barbie dolls,” said Bolyard. “The holidays are an expensive time for everyone, and many of these foster homes have multiple children. I’m overwhelmed by the astounding generosity I see every year from my fellow co-workers. Our staff looks forward to donating each year and I usually have several eager individuals come to me for the list of foster children before I even receive it.”

The holidays can have a big effect on foster kids since not every child has a positive connection with Christmas. Introducing traditions, such as this gift drive, will hopefully allow them to build a healthier relationship with Christmas time and will impact generations to come. Venus Lomeli, director of community engagement at Foster First, and her coworker, Leah Hilaire, shared their experiences as they picked up the gifts provided by Hansen Fruit on December 16.

“I wanted to cry when I saw all the gifts because it struck a childhood memory of mine,” explained Venus. “There was a year when we fell on tough times and an agency brought us gifts. It’s one of my most vivid childhood memories. It’s not the items that I remember, but the feeling of joy. I kept thinking about how we will be bringing positive emotions to our kiddos. They are going to have moments like this to look back on, and knowing we made an impact like this is simply beautiful. I can’t wait to hand the gifts to them!”

Foster First is a non-profit Child Placing Agency that provides rehabilitations services to children ages 0-17 with offices in Wenatchee and Yakima. Lomeli explained how the agency can't afford to purchase Christmas gifts for every child, and Stemilt and Hansen Fruit's gift donations helps facilitate positive memories. Receiving gifts makes the children feel a sense of worthiness and value that lets them know they are loved and cared for.

"From the moment we walked through the doors, we felt the care of Stemilt and Hansen Fruit," shared Hilaire. "The staff was so excited to show us all the love and care that went into each beautifully wrapped present. I was overwhelmed with tears of joy. Knowing the positive impact each gift would bring to our kiddos makes us feel beyond blessed by these two companies for their incredible love and giving hearts toward our youth. Thank you, Hansen Fruit and Stemilt, we are so grateful for you!"

Through shared values and a mutual passion for giving back to the community, the staff at Stemilt and Hansen Fruit strive to put a smile on as many faces as possible this Christmas. As the two companies approach the 10-year anniversary of this gift donation, there is excitement to continue the tradition for many years to come.

"We are very grateful for the team members at Stemilt and Hansen Fruit to provide gifts to the area's foster children," said Stemilt President, West Mathison. "The gift drive has become a beloved Christmas tradition between our two companies, and demonstrates our aligned values around supporting our communities. The stories we hear from social workers are incredibly heartwarming and inspiring."