



# A's, Oakland Zoo team up for annual holiday party

Cook, Doolittle meet young fans, participate in local canned food drive



OAKLAND -- Forgive Stephen Cilono if he's having a hard time hiding his smile.

To his left, the principal of Achieve Academy, a school for underserved children in Oakland, is watching a group of his students tell Santa what they want for Christmas. To the right, they're having their faces painted, their eyes already fixed on the arts and crafts table across the way.

And straight ahead? That would be A's relievers Ryan Cook and Sean Doolittle, signing autographs and taking pictures with over 200 fourth- and fifth-grade students as part of the annual A's Community Fund holiday party at the Oakland Zoo.

"For me, I'm incredibly grateful," Cilono said. "Really, this is the first time some of these students have been to the zoo. ... This is an opportunity many of these kids never would have had. Then, to top it off, they get to meet two of the A's star pitchers? What more can you ask for?"

They didn't have to ask, but they did get more. Each child received a wrapped gift, courtesy of the Good Tidings Foundation.

In addition, students were treated to an animal presentation in the Wildlife Theater. Lunch was provided by Round Table Pizza and Pepsi.

"We're in a position where we can help," Doolittle said. "To be able to give back, it's very rewarding. It's a big part of what comes along with being a Major League Baseball player."



For Doolittle, the ability to give back hit particularly close to home.

With his family residing in New Jersey, Doolittle made a trip east from his Arizona home a couple of weeks after Hurricane Sandy struck. Fortunately, his family lives far enough inland that they weren't too affected by the storm. That said, after seeing firsthand what the storm left behind, the chance to make an impact in the community -- whether on the Jersey Shore or back in Oakland -- is one that Doolittle is grateful for.

"Whether it's a natural disaster, or just encouraging kids to get good grades in school, feed the needy during the holidays," Doolittle said, "it really is an honor to come out and represent the team in the community."

Cook, too, was appreciative of the chance to give back. He also looked at the holiday party as a chance to reflect on just how much has happened in the past year, for both himself and Doolittle, as well as the team as a whole.

Cook, acquired by the A's from Arizona in the Trevor Cahill trade last December, was just trying to make the team out of Spring Training. Doolittle, meanwhile, was a converted first baseman, hoping to get to the Majors any way he could.

Both became impact relievers for the A's, helping the team to an American League West title and the team's first playoff appearance since 2006.

"What I was doing 12 months ago," Cook said, "never in a million years would I have dreamt that I did what I did and that we did what we did as a team. To see it come full circle now and be the kind of figure to give these kids that extra incentive to do well, that's pretty cool."

On Thursday, Doolittle and Cook made an appearance at the Bank of America Walnut Creek banking center to sign autographs for fans making canned food donations. The donations benefited the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, as part of a hunger relief effort with Feeding America.

The impact the two have made the past couple of days isn't going unnoticed by the community.

"I've worked at [Achieve Academy] for 15 years," Cilono said, "I've really gotten to know the kids, their families, and one day, their kids' kids. I really love this community. It makes it this much more special.

"To see them smiling and happy, it reminds me why I'm doing this. ... I'm just so grateful for how the A's are giving back."

*Adam Loberstein is a contributor to MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*