Ken Langone Tribute: Retiring founder leaves legacy with Ken’s Kids

Founder Ken Langone has been a driving force behind The Home Depot from the time he helped us get our start in 1978. Anyone who has experienced a store walk with Ken knows he’s as orange-blooded as it gets.

Our lead director also has taken the lead in living our values, helping make them part of our Company DNA.

When it comes to giving back and taking care of our people, Ken has a big heart, and perhaps nowhere is that compassion more evident than in Ken’s Kids, a program that helps mentally challenged young adults find meaningful work at Home Depot stores.

Ken helped start the program 10 years ago after learning about the hardships of people who are mildly disabled. Although many of these young adults are willing and able to work, most end up unemployed, isolated and cut off from society because companies aren’t set up to properly train and help them over a long-term basis.

Ken’s Kids, a nonprofit formed solely for Home Depot associates, provides all the vocational training and support that these young adults need to become productive and independent. The program currently employs more than 100 associates in 52 stores but has plans to expand, thanks to a three-year, $1 million grant from The Home Depot Foundation plus a generous matching gift of the same amount from Ken. In addition, Ken announced he’ll give $250,000 through his upcoming retiring director charitable donation package.

The program provides full-time coaches and ongoing support for qualifying associates who get jobs stocking shelves, cleaning displays, mixing paint and helping customers find products.

“Home Depot has been invaluable in the lives of these young adults in bringing them a sense of purpose, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of well-being and a sense of independence, which is important,” said Barbara Wray, program director, Ken’s Kids.

The associates in the program have been a blessing to their stores as well, bringing a strong work ethic and a positive attitude to the sales floor.

“It’s a perfect example of giving back, taking care of our associates, taking care of our customers and just building great relationships,” said Erich Schulz, store manager of Store 4101 in South Philadelphia, which participates in Ken’s Kids.

Those relationships are a special part of the experience for Caitlyn O’Brien, a Ken’s Kids associate at Store 2012 in Indianapolis.
“When I first met the associates, they were very nice,” Caitlyn said. “And then after working there for a year, they were like a second family. I’m that close to them.”

Ken, who is retiring from the board in May after 30 years of service, reminded associates at the recent Store Managers Meeting in Atlanta that The Home Depot always found success through doing good and doing the right thing.

“All of us come from the same place. We’re the lucky ones. We can do all the things we want to do in life. We owe these kids [in the program] the same opportunity,” Ken said. “You have no idea the good and the power you have in you to change lives.”