

Matteo's Dream – A Playground for Children of ALL Abilities

Concord resident Liz Lamach and her son, Matteo, had a dream. They dreamed of a playground where children who cannot walk, see or hear can play safely alongside children who can. Matteo uses a wheelchair and is blind, making it difficult for him to enjoy traditional playgrounds. Through a highly collaborate effort involving many departments in the City of Concord and multiple business and community based organizations, people came together to make Matteo's dream of an accessible playground a reality. *Matteo's Dream, A Playground for Children of ALL Abilities*, opened in May 2007 at Hillcrest Park.

The City provided the site and supplied \$232,000 in parkland funds. Lions Club members raised an additional \$500,000 and solicited in-kind donations and volunteers. Over a two-week period, the playground was built by over 1,500 volunteers. The playground features castles, slides, rock walls, a tree house, a swaying boat with extra wide walkways, and rubberized flooring to accommodate wheelchairs.

Planning Process

In 2001 supporters and advocates of disabled children met with Parks & Recreation Department staff and members of the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Commission (PROSC) regarding the development of a playground for children of all abilities. The supporters and advocates of this playground include parents of disabled children and members of the Lions and Lioness of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. The Lions Club's interest stems from the organization's commitment to serving disabled citizens. The District 4-C Chapter of the Lions Club contracted with a consultant to further study and define the playground concept. The Lions Club has previously worked on national, regional, and local levels with the consultant, Leathers and Associates, to develop community-sponsored playgrounds with the modifications and structures that will serve children of all abilities. In situations where funding for the project is an issue, the Lions Club has conducted community campaigns to generate the funds required to purchase the equipment. Leathers and Associates supported the project by designing a plan, providing the equipment and supervising its

installation by community volunteers. According to information provided to staff from the Lions Club and Leathers and Associates, the company has facilitated the successful completion of over 1,600 playgrounds over the last 30 years built through community contributions and volunteer labor.

Hillcrest Park was selected as the site for the new playground because the play area was large enough to accommodate the concept. In addition, Hillcrest Park is conveniently located near the George Miller Center, a facility that serves disabled citizens.

For two years, Ms. Lamach and the committee wrote grant proposals, gave presentations, and solicited donors and sponsors. Their hard work has resulted in combined contributions to this project of \$500,000. Major contributors include: The Lions Clubs of Alameda and Contra Costa County, Lions Club International Foundation, Dean and Margaret Lesher Foundation, Community Development Block Grants allocated by the City and Contra Costa County, Criterion Catalysts and Technologies, and First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission. The City also provided \$232,000 in Parkland Funds that were programmed for the replacement of the existing playground equipment at Hillcrest Park in the long range Capital Improvement Plan to complete the approximate \$750,000 budget.

Bringing children together in play fosters an experience that creates a broader atmosphere of tolerance while building a stronger foundation for our community. This playground allows children of all abilities to communicate, build friendships and garner an understanding of all cultures and abilities through the universal language of play.

Kids are not the only benefactors of this accessible playground design. Parents who have disabilities need to be able to move around the playground in order to support and interact with their children as they play. Accessible routes in and around the play area also help parents without disabilities particularly those who are pushing younger siblings in strollers. Accessible routes even make it easier for grandparents to get around the playground to support and play with their grandchildren. Adults and children with and without disabilities have also found the playground to be an excellent source for their own physical therapy and healing process.

This 16,000 square foot playground built using recycled structural materials is unique, probably in the world, for features and specialized construction allowing children with disabilities to play alongside able-bodied children. As they play together, it provides wonderful opportunities for children to be aware of diversities and become more appreciative of the differences between them. Removal of barriers and the opportunity for achievement make this project distinctive from a community use perspective.

Design Effectiveness

In June 2004 a Design Day was conducted to solicit input from children of all abilities, their families and caregivers. Everyone was asked to dream big about what they would like in the ideal playground. Ideas were put to paper and an initial playground design developed. Primary design elements were derived from a collaboration of non-profit agencies and community members with the expert assistance of Leathers and Associates designers. Interviews were also conducted with various doctors and advocates for the disabled to find out what they would like to see at the playground. The finished product includes a variety of effective playground elements designed to meet the needs of today's users and considers opportunities for complimentary future enhancements.

Features include:

- A variety of accessible elements like special ramps allowing children in wheelchairs or walkers to be positioned on upper levels of the structure where they can "play" on the colossal Rocking Boat and platform tree houses.
- Visually impaired children will have access to a sensory garden within the structure and a tactile slide (Alpine Thunder slide) with three types of surfaces the children will feel.
- Low and high overhead ladders and sets of rings will allow wheelchair access as well as access by able-bodied children.
- Favorite aspects of the playground for all users are large scale xylophone style instruments which allow even the most inexperienced musicians to make music that sounds good.

- Cool-down areas that are shaded and have “mistifiers,” as children with disabilities tend to overheat.
- For deaf children, there will be stainless steel reflective surfaces for them to see 360 degrees and know when someone is behind them.
- An aluminum slide will be installed for children with cochlear implants (static from plastic surfaces “fries” the surgically-implanted device). Slide surfaces have been designed to stay cool even when temperatures exceed 90 degrees.
- There’s a “clear” see-through tunnel for autistic children who have difficulty transitioning from light to dark places.
- A separated section (Tot Lot) includes equipment suitable for the youngest children.
- Seats on some of the swings are appropriate for children unable to swing alone (high backs, seat belts).
- The entire surface of the playground is covered by a rubberized “shock absorbing” product, which is required for safety. The surface is wheelchair friendly, providing a smooth surface that’s easy to navigate for everyone.

Operation & Maintenance

The City of Concord is responsible for the overall maintenance and safety of the playground as required by state regulations. Sustainability of the entire playground was an important criteria during planning and has been addressed in a collaborative manner with a newly formed chapter of the local Lions Club. The unique individual play elements and construction materials are more expensive than most of the other more traditional playground equipment used in Concord. The Lions Club has agreed to continue fundraising and providing volunteer support to maintain and enhance the Matteo’s Dream playground and others in the Concord community in perpetuity. The collaborative partnership will result in the ability to continue replacing and enhancing playground elements, keeping the entire facility fresh and interesting for future users and assisting the City in controlling maintenance

expenditures. The Concord Lions Club has also formed a committee to assist in evaluating the playground's condition and is committed to providing skilled volunteers for on-going maintenance.

The primary load bearing materials used to construct the platforms, towers, and swing sets is extraordinary. FiberForce is reinforced, recycled plastic lumber made of high density plastic combined with fiberglass. The material looks and acts like high quality wood lumber but requires zero maintenance. Painting or preserving is not required to prevent rot; the material has a very high structural integrity and is covered with a 50 year limited warranty. The bottom line is a playground that will be around for years to come at a reasonable expense.

Summary

CPRS -- California Park and Recreation Society Mission Statement:

This successful program embodies several elements of the CPRS' Mission Statement:

- Matteo's Dream clearly provides an unparalleled opportunity for accessibility and cultural unity with unique features allowing children and adults to play together in a safe environment on well maintained equipment designed specifically for that purpose.
- Service to Community was epitomized by over 1,500 volunteers from throughout the Concord community and beyond coming together as playground builders over the course of two weeks. Although faced with many challenges, volunteers turned out in force with gratitude for the opportunity to contribute. This was one of the finest examples of community teamwork in the history of Concord.
- Fostering Human Development through interactive play with special equipment like musical instruments and elevated bridges wide enough for multiple wheelchairs encourages participants to take healthy risks together. Overcoming challenges and experiencing "safe" adventures in an accepting atmosphere is attracting Matteo's Dream Playground visitors from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.