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Nonprofit creates a boom in playgrounds

National group works with local volunteers, building 194 places to play in Illinois

By Amanda Marrazzo, Chicago Tribune
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Because one man believed that all children have the right to a safe place to play, thousands of playgrounds have been built in communities across the country in areas that might otherwise go without them.

Darell Hammond founded KaBOOM in 1996, and since then the Washington-based nonprofit has partnered with hundreds of corporate sponsors, raised more than \$200 million and rounded up millions of volunteers to build more than 2,200 playgrounds across North America. That includes 194 in Illinois, 106 of which are in Chicago, said Mike Vietti, communications manager for KaBOOM.

Hammond and his seven brothers and sisters were raised at the Mooseheart Child City & School, a group home near Batavia. Early on, he learned the good that a charitable foundation can provide.

As an adult he was moved to build playgrounds for children in low-income neighborhoods after reading a story of two children who suffocated to death while playing in an abandoned car. They died because they didn't have anywhere else to play.

"We are dedicated to saving play," Vietti said. "We believe in the community-build model, involving local residents in not only the construction but in the planning for the playground. It creates community."

The organization is called KaBOOM to reflect "that explosion of energy and excitement stemming from communities bonding together for a common cause," Vietti said.

In Chicagoland this year, KaBOOM built 11 playgrounds. Vietti said one playground is on the calendar to be built in March at St. Sabina Catholic Church in Chicago, and he expects many more will be scheduled.

KaBOOM, in a partnership with Discover Financial Services, brought together more than 500 volunteers in September and completed a playground at Wright Park in Elgin.

Located in a modest, working-class neighborhood on the east side of Elgin, the park's former play structure, built in the 1930s, was old and rotted, and it didn't meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, city officials said.

It was one of the last outdated parks in need of replacement in Elgin. The cost to construct a new playground on the eight-acre lot would have been more than \$80,000, a tough expense to justify for a playground in today's economy, said Cherie Murphy, Elgin's assistant to the city manager for community engagement.

But through KaBOOM's efforts and Discover paying for most of the project, along with \$7,500 raised through the United Way of Elgin and another \$7,500 from the city, a shiny, colorful and safe playground was built. The playground features a "bus" and other climbing structures, a tick-tack-toe game and a stage.



Murphy said the project went "phenomenally" well, bringing out the best in everyone who volunteered while inspiring neighbors and re-energizing the community.

"The whole neighborhood got involved. We had some great stories," she said. "Neighbors connected with neighbors.

"It shows the residents they have the power to make this community what they want it to be. It empowers people to know they can change things they may not like about their community. ... It's really inspiring, it's that pioneer spirit."

Andy Garand, who lives across the street from Wright Park, volunteered to help build the playground. He said his four sons thought that was "awesome."

"I love it," Garand said on the day of the build. "I thought it would be cool to build my kids a park."

In October, KaBOOM partnered with McDonald's charitable organization and built a playground at the Irving Park YMCA in Chicago. Neighborhood children drew the designs, more than 200 volunteers arrived at the site, and in less than eight hours a 2,400-square-foot playground was built. It's the second of 12 playgrounds scheduled to be built by mid-2013 in a partnership between McDonald's and KaBOOM, Vietti said. Other KaBOOM playgrounds are in Palatine and Round Lake.

The Palatine playground was built in 2010 at the 56-acre therapeutic campus of Little City. The organization, which serves people ages 6 to 22 with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities, paid nothing for the playground, said Sally Blake, communications associate. The playground was designed based on input from a select group of children and their parents and guardians. Together, they decided on colors, types of equipment and size, Blake said.

The children's therapeutic team also was part of the design process, indicating the children's sensory needs.

"The playground provides sensory stimulation to children with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities," Blake said. "It also allows for social interactions, both independent and group playtime and a place where families can go while visiting their loved ones."

Before it was built by some 200 volunteers, there was no playground for these children.

The playground is important to these residents because "it promotes healthy sensory stimulation so they are able to kind of go outside and go blow off steam when they need to," Blake said.

Round Lake has two KaBOOM playgrounds, one built in 2008 next to the Robert W. Rolek Community Center and another built in 2011 near the Round Lake Area Sports Center, said Marlon Rodas, marketing manager for Round Lake Area Park District.

Each project involved at least 400 volunteers.

The playground built in 2008 replaced an older structure and today serves many children, including those with special needs who attend the child development center at the community center. It also offers a skate park.

The one built in 2011 provides recreation for children in a neighborhood that had no playground.

"It's been a blessing. ... It was a need," Rodas said. "This is definitely something people didn't have very nearby."

KaBOOM is always looking for partners and locations to build playgrounds. When a funding opportunity arises in a particular city or area, applications on file are reviewed to determine if the area has a high need for a playground and if the local community will support the project. For more information, visit kaboom.org.