With strong foundation, building fun for kids
Former Mooseheart resident and founder of KaBOOM makes his mark building playgrounds for children in poor communities

Darell Hammond, former resident of Mooseheart and founder of KaBoom, plays with kindergartners at the Mooseheart school.
(Corey R. Minkanic, for the Tribune / June 1, 2011)

By Victoria Pierce, Special to the Tribune
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Darell Hammond was 4 years old when he arrived at Mooseheart with his mother and seven siblings in 1976.

His father had walked out on the family two years earlier and his mother no longer could hold it together. That's when someone suggested Mooseheart, a residential school with a 1,200-acre campus near North Aurora for children who are orphaned or from troubled families.

Hammond spent the next 14 years at Mooseheart. Looking back, he said, the school was the foundation for his success as the founder of KaBOOM, an organization that helps build playgrounds in impoverished communities across the country.

"I do consider Mooseheart my home. … I do what I do today because of what I learned here," he told the students and staff during a recent visit.

After graduating from high school in 1989, Hammond bounced around. He attended but never finished college, one of his biggest regrets. But he didn't let those years go to waste. He worked at various jobs gaining contacts that would prove helpful later, he said.
In 1995, he read a newspaper story that described a brother and sister — 2 and 4 years old — who had been playing in an old car on a hot and humid day in Washington, D.C. The children got locked inside and suffocated.

The story went on to show that there were no playgrounds or ballfields near the poverty-stricken neighborhood, so the children used the abandoned car to play.

"I'm haunted today by that story. I'm trying to reverse that," Hammond said.

Hammond founded KaBOOM 15 years ago to help rebuild neighborhoods by bringing the community together to build playgrounds. Since its founding, KaBOOM has raised $200 million to build 2,000 playgrounds in all 50 states and a few foreign countries.

The name suggests the sudden transformation of a dilapidated play lot or ugly vacant lot into a playground with swings, slides and more — all in a single day.

Hammond said it’s crucial to have community members invested in the work so they value and care for it for years to come.

It's also critical, he said, that children have a place and opportunity to play. Many don't get a recess at school, and video games and structured activities often have replaced unstructured, creative playing, he said.

"We're seeing the cost of that in childhood obesity, a lack of problem-solving abilities and a lack of creativity," Hammond said.

He makes the case for play in his new book, "KaBOOM! How One Man Built a Moment to Save Play."

Hammond said he wrote the book in spurts while crisscrossing the country on planes and trains. The project itself was a journey that he wanted to finish to celebrate KaBOOM's 15th anniversary.

Over the years, he has met former presidents and other public officials, but the Mooseheart kids seemed more impressed, he said, that NBA stars Kobe Bryant and Dwight Howard also have helped him.

"I think that's amazing," said Mooseheart freshman Jen-ni Serrano. "When you're here you don't really think about it. He realizes how important Mooseheart was for him."

More than 140 of the KaBOOM playgrounds have been built in the Chicago area, most recently at Playhaven Park in Broadview and St. Bruno's School in the 4800 block of South Harding Avenue in Chicago.

Projects in June include a partnership with the North Berwyn Park District to build a playground at Brocato Park and another at St. Angela's School in the 1300 block of Massasoit Avenue in Chicago.

Some of Hammond's former classmates and Rosalind Pelman, Mooseheart's retired speech therapy teacher, heard Hammond's remarks at his alma mater.

None was surprised that Hammond has made a career out of helping others.

"Darell was always somebody who thought outside the box. He was drawn to help people," said Gary Urwiler, who also lived at Mooseheart as a young boy and is now the school's superintendent of education. "He's done a remarkable job."

That help has extended back home to Mooseheart.

Nearly 10 years ago, KaBOOM helped rebuild an aging playground there. Hammond visited with a group of kindergartners, enjoying the brightly colored equipment.
He even took a turn down the curvy slide.

"It's been an incredible ride," he said.

**How KaBOOM works**

KaBOOM works with community and financial partners to coordinate the building of playgrounds in low-income neighborhoods.

Volunteers or companies willing to become a financial partner can contact the organization at kaboom.org under the Build a Playground link.

Community organizations seeking a playground also may apply online.