Darell Hammond wants to ignite a KaBOOM! in building public playgrounds

Darell Hammond, founder of KaBOOM!, talks about why kids need unstructured playtime and efforts to map 'play deserts' where playgrounds need to be built or renovated. The key to it all: self-organizing local citizen groups.

By Gregory M. Lamb, Staff Writer / April 25, 2011

KaBOOM! is a nonprofit group in Washington D.C. dedicated to helping provide American kids with a safe place to play within walking distance of their homes. Founder and CEO Darell Hammond grew up in a group home outside Chicago and as a young adult was moved to action when he read about two children who died while playing in an abandoned car because there was no playground nearby. Now, after 15 years, KaBOOM! is about to build its 2,000th playground in low-income areas around the US. Hammond's new book, "KaBOOM!: How One Man Built a Movement to Save Play," is being published tomorrow.

"We're not trying to do all the work ourselves," Mr. Hammond says in a recent phone interview with me. "We're trying to frame the issue" and "build tools" that local groups can use.

We also talked about America's "state of play," the nation's "play deficit," efforts to map "play deserts" (where playgrounds need to be built or renovated), and how the work of self-organized local citizens underlies the KaBOOM! philosophy.

(The interview below has been edited and condensed.)

Just how bad is our "play deficit" in America?

Darell Hammond: We built more than 200 playgrounds last year but we got more than 14,000 requests. [The problem] is bigger than the resources KaBOOM! has to solve it. And that's why we're trying to crowd-source the solution to get it to be higher on parents', teachers', and administrators' agendas, but also recognizing that if we sense an urgency there's also a solution that comes behind it.

You're nearing 2,000 playgrounds that you've built?

Our big milestones this year are our 15th birthday and that we'll build our 2,000th playground. We have raised $200 million, leveraged over 1 million volunteers, and impacted 5.5 million kids. So we're pretty proud of that.

What do you hope your book will accomplish?

This is KaBOOM!'s 15th birthday and as we looked back at the impact we've been able to have and looked forward to what's needed and necessary one of the things that we recognized is that as a society we treat play too much as a luxury. We need to think about how do we get people to better understand that it's through play that kids build the social skills, the muscular development, and actually the creativity that's going to be needed and necessary for a thriving childhood but also to adapt to the world they are going to inherit, sooner rather than later.
KaBOOM helps local organizations come together to build playgrounds for children?

We're solving the "play deficit" through empowering communities to map where the play opportunities are, to map "play deserts." After they've identified "play deserts" [they] actually tap into tools and resources to build and improve the [playgrounds] that exist or need to exist and become advocates at the city level for times and places for play, such as reinstating recess, or [developing] a master plan around what would make the whole city more playful.

So building a new playground is only one solution, one part of what you're advocating?

We're asking people to map their current "state of play." If they figure out that there's a play deficit in either access or quality [they can] improve it by building or managing a current [playground] better and then go on to look at the whole city and ultimately the whole country.

How have the economic problems of the last few years impacted your efforts?

Unfortunately, what we've seen is that parks and playgrounds are among the first to be cut in terms of capital expenditures. And they're the last to be returned to budgets when good times come back.

You offer an online do-it-yourself kit for local groups to use?

We offer a self-organized community and tool kit online of a step-by-step way that people have successfully managed projects. And then [we] have coaches who can mentor them along the way.

Do you have activities outside the United States?

We directly build in North America and then indirectly through online community playground projects that have happened in every single continent.

We've had groups self-organize in India, in Russia, in Poland, and we've had US charitable groups [help], like a Boy Scout adopting the orphanage he grew up in in Russia. He raised money here and then went over and built a playground in Russia.

What's one example of an outstanding playground project?

I think about our work on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, where right after the hurricane people questioned our intentions about rebuilding playgrounds when there were so many other needs down there. [We've found that a playground] sometimes becomes the first visible transformational piece of hope coming back to the city.

What benefit do these projects have for the adults who work on them?

You can think of us ironically as a dual-mission playground builder and a community builder. Certainly you can hire a contractor to build a playground. But engaging the community creates an opportunity to gain new skills and new relationships by doing that. After building a playground [the volunteers] may go on to get a streetlight fixed down the street or mentor another community going through the process. Or they may decide to focus on their whole city's [playground needs].

We see people having a new sense of confidence and courage. We don't direct what they do next; it's self-directed, but we have lots of evidence that the leaders of the projects go on to do other initiatives and projects.

What do people need to learn to work together?

For someone who's never organized a project like this before ... there's some research that's involved. There really is this tremendous opportunity in a joyful way to gain new skills [in organizing, public speaking, planning etc.] and to put the skills you already have into practice.

How are the children themselves involved in the planning process?
We like to say the kids are the playground experts. We get them involved by having them sit down in planning and design sessions to talk about where they currently play, what their favorite colors and sounds may be, if they had a dream playground what it might look like.

On the day [of building the playground] they may be involved helping to plant an eco-garden or a butterfly garden. Or they may be doing beautification projects.

**Once the planning is done the actual building of the playground happens all in just one day?**

Exactly. It's done in Amish barn-raising style where lots of prep work takes place and in a single day the playground, the park, the shade structures, the picnic areas, the edible gardens [go in]. It's a multi-generational space. People of all ages will hang out there. There's a vacant lot in the morning, and it's transformed eight or nine hours later at the end of the day.

**How do you plan for upkeep and maintenance?**

We have a "friends of" group that starts almost immediately as the project is planned. Maintenance and programming is a consideration right from the beginning. The best playgrounds don't just get built by community volunteers. They engage with them over a long period of time.

**How do you cope with liability issues, with possible lawsuits over playground injuries and so on?**

Different communities have different sets of rules and levels of tolerance. [We need to] educate and inform decisionmakers that by not allowing swings [for example] or not allowing kids to take risks of the consequences that's going to have to [kids'] future development.

**What's so important about "unstructured play" if children are already getting exercise in organized activities like baseball and soccer leagues or dance classes?**

The best type of play for kids is all types of play. But what's happening right now is that free, unstructured play isn't getting the same level of significance and importance.

Kids are now getting in excess of seven and one-half hours of screen time – TV, video games, computers – a day. I think it's incumbent upon parents and teachers and caretakers to get out and actually play with their kids in an unstructured way.

That's not to say that organized sports is a bad thing, but it shouldn't be the only type of thing that we put our kids into. Kids need a balanced kind of activity, and certainly free and unstructured play needs to be a larger part of what we're providing, particularly to younger kids.

**What is an "imagination playground"?**

It's an oversized building set that doesn't snap together in any specific way so it allows kids to bring out creativity. Kids are only limited by their own creativity. It gets complemented with what we call "found parts" – fabrics, balls, etc.

**Do they buy this from you?**

You can buy them from us online for $10,000 or $5,000 for a half unit.

**They're used outdoors?**

Outdoors or indoors. It's in a mobile cart so you can roll it into an outdoor recess or it could also be used in a gymnasium.

**You were raised in a group home setting?**

Partly I do what I do because of my own personal experience that I bring to this. And although you can think of it as a tragic situation, my father leaving my mother and my mother having a nervous breakdown and all of us [kids] being sent to this group home thousands of miles from where we were born in Idaho to outside Chicago, it was actually a pretty good upbringing.... I was there from age 4 to 18, for 14 years. It was like a Boys Town.... we had our own school.
You read a Washington Post story about two kids who died playing in an abandoned car?

A two- and four-year-old brother and sister had gone into a Pontiac Trans Am car and suffocated and died. There was no place to play within three miles of where these kids grew up. It brought new significance to my work of building playgrounds. It gave me deep passion for the work that we’re doing.

How did you come up with the name KaBOOM!?

(Laughs.) I wanted to call it the Institute for Community Building. A kid went to a microphone at one of our early projects – a planning meeting – and said, "You mean this is like ... KaBOOM!" and the name just kind of stuck. It's kind of like the disbelief disappearing and the impossible becoming possible.