Many kids in this country don't have easy access to a community playground. That's especially true in urban neighborhoods, where just walking outside can be dangerous. The need for playgrounds bothered one man so much that he started an organization that has now built more than 1,800 of them. Today, we begin a series of stories on this program about social entrepreneurs. NPR's Larry Abramson tells us about the man behind the group called KaBOOM!.

Mr. DARELL HAMMOND (Founder, KaBOOM!): C'mon guys, come on. Why don't you guys jump in there? Jump in there, and help them out.

ABRAMSON: Darell Hammond, founder of KaBOOM!, is in his own version of heaven. He's up to his ankles in woodchips, sweat dripping from his forehead, as he helps build this playground for the Imani Charter School. The school could never have paid for this on its own. But Hammond says the playground is not a gift.

Mr. HAMMOND: They have to bring volunteers, and they have to bring cash. We're bringing 85 percent of the cash to it. They're bringing 15 percent of it because what we've found, through our experiences, is that when they put their own capital into it, they care about it. They maintain it. They're invested in it.

ABRAMSON: Investment, capital - these are terms you hear a lot from social entrepreneurs like Darell Hammond. They're taking terms from the world of finance, and applying them to all kinds of social problems.

This chaotic scene is actually carefully choreographed. Music pumps all day long to keep the energy high. Professionals prepare the site and do any heavy equipment work before the volunteers arrive. Bags of concrete, food and water are carefully staged. Even if everyone doesn't show up, this thing needs to be finished in a day.

Key to KaBOOM!'s strategy is the idea of building partnerships. Some are big, corporate sponsors like Home Depot, which has been a major donor for many years. Others come from spontaneous friendships, like the half-dozen people wearing leather jackets announcing they belong to the Dead Broke Rydaz.

WILD CHILD (President, Dead Broke Rydaz): My name is Wild Child, and I'm president of the Dead Broke Rydaz, a social club, the overseer of the Dead Broke Rydaz bike club and car club.

ABRAMSON: Two of the Dead Broke Rydaz have kids in this school. Others are here because the group has a rule: You have to give back to the community.
Unidentified Woman: There's a shovel there.

ABRAMSON: Many of these people say they've never been part of anything like this before. They're using tools, mixing concrete for the first time, and many are just plain giddy about how quickly the whole thing is coming together.

Unidentified Man: I drew blood, first day.

ABRAMSON: By afternoon, a forest of red and green monkey bars and swings is rising from the ground. Some people say building playgrounds has changed them. Bruce Bauman got involved with KaBOOM! when he was an executive with Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. Now, he works with KaBOOM! full time.

Mr. BRUCE BOWMAN (KaBOOM!): I'd be willing to bet a year from now, somebody on this build is out doing a project somewhere on their own. It may not be building a playground, but they will sort of cop that - sort of volunteer spirit, and go out and take what they've learned through this process, and go out and do other projects.

ABRAMSON: The build moves forward relentlessly. Volunteers eat away at a 15-foot-high pile of mulch, one wheelbarrow at a time. It's turned into a soft carpet at the base of the structure. And then suddenly, it's all over.

Mr. HAMMOND: Dedicate this playground, and then we'll all file in behind and take a group photo.

ABRAMSON: At the end of the day, dozens of volunteers watch the ribbon-cutting, and share the warm glow of having worked on this project.

Mr. HAMMOND: One, two three...

Unidentified Group: KaBOOM!!

ABRAMSON: KaBOOM! is hoping other groups will mimic the system they've developed. The group shares their strategies for raising money, and for wrangling large groups of volunteers. Their chief evangelist is Darell Hammond himself, who overcame a lot when he was a kid.

Mr. HAMMOND: I'm the seventh of eight kids. My father left my mother. After trying to care for us as best that she could for two years, we became wards of the court and went to a group home, called Moose Heart, outside of Chicago, Illinois.

ABRAMSON: Hammond tells that story often - here, to a class of students at the University of the District of Columbia that is studying different models of social entrepreneurship. Hammond speaks warmly about growing up in a group home, and about the playgrounds he had there. He says other kids should at least have a playground, even if they have little else.

Mr. HAMMOND: And all the things may not be solved out of it. But we'll at least be able to look back at a moment in time about what we could and did do, when we did something together.

(Sound bite of children playing)

ABRAMSON: A few months later, the playground stands in the bright sun of a September afternoon. School has started again, and before kids hit the books, they hit the play structure. This week, KaBOOM! built playground number 1,871 in Metairie, Louisiana.

Larry Abramson, NPR News.

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