Helping Out: His life is a playground (or 2,000 of them)

Monday, August 30, 2010

Founder and chief executive of KaBoom, a nonprofit that builds playgrounds in communities.

Charitable giving highlights: The nonprofit has built nearly 2,000 playgrounds, raised $200 million and galvanized 100,000 volunteers throughout the country and internationally.

Personal: Lives in the District with his wife.

I was raised in a group home for 14 years, so I was a beneficiary of philanthropy. I didn't have a family. The nameless, faceless strangers were my family. They gave me an education, put food on the table and clothes on my back. I am who I am because of that formative experience. Now I am paying it forward.

In college, I volunteered on a community service playground building project. I realized that the same process in lower, underserved communities could really build social capital.

I immediately started KaBoom. I never set out with a business plan or a grand vision. We built one playground after another and just tried to do better each time.

We find a deserving community that is ready for a playground. We sign up a corporation to provide the finances and bring out volunteers. This is different from other good, well-intended charities that take either volunteers or money -- not necessarily both.

In the selected community, we hold a day of designing. The kids, the playground experts, tell us their favorite sounds, colors and things to do at a park. We also ask the adults what encourages them to attend the playground.

Through corporate sponsorship, we fund 80 percent of the playground and get the community to raise the other 20 percent of it so that they have stake in it.

In 1995 when two kids suffocated in an abandoned car because they didn't have anywhere to play, everyone just pointed fingers, but no one did anything to rectify the situation. We decided to build a playground in that community.

That story made me mad, but just driving around different neighborhoods across the country made me madder. I would go through a neighborhood and find a basketball court that doesn't have a backboard or rims, or a park that is 40 years old, or one that has been vandalized.

A packed playground that has a range of kids laughing and giggling where parents, grandparents and older siblings are there has truly become a civic hub of activity for the community. That's what we're trying to accomplish.

Play is the best natural resource in a creative economy. Kids need more of it. It is the work of childhood. We hope to intrinsically change the opinion that play is not just a luxury but an absolute necessity for kids' lives.

-- Interview with Vanessa Mizell