Mobilizing the Playground Movement

By DAVID BORNSTEIN
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On Wednesday more than 500 volunteers will gather at the Imagine Southeast Public Charter School, in Congress Heights, one of Washington’s poorest neighborhoods, to help construct the 2,000th playground led by KaBOOM!, an organization that has turned community playground building into the modern-day equivalent of barn raising. Among those assembling slides and swing sets alongside residents and Americorps volunteers will be Michelle Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan who will be highlighting the importance of play and the administration’s Let’s Move initiative, which aims to attack the problem of childhood obesity.

Helping communities transform their public spaces, and activate their citizens.

For 15 years, KaBOOM! has been leading playground construction around the country, mostly in neighborhoods where at least 70 percent of children qualify for the federal government’s free and reduced-cost lunch program. Earlier this month, it completed its 150th playground on the Gulf Coast — in New Orleans’ Palmer Park.

In Fixes, we often focus on basic problems that are overlooked. Despite overwhelming evidence that play is vital for children’s physical, emotional and cognitive development, in recent decades, due to many factors, children’s outdoor play opportunities have declined markedly. As I reported in a past column, many schools have scaled back recess because of disciplinary problems and pressures to improve students’ academic performance.

KaBOOM! is attacking another dimension of this problem: the shortage of safe, developmentally appropriate and attractive play spaces available to many American children. KaBOOM! has assumed a leading role defining, highlighting and, now, mapping, the country’s “play deserts” — communities lacking such spaces. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, half the children in the country live in a neighborhood without a park or community center.

What makes KaBOOM!’s model unique is the way it sparks leadership and unleashes energy within communities to improve the play environment. KaBOOM! raises most of its funds from businesses and foundations and it could hire contractors to build playgrounds directly — something that would be faster and easier. Instead, it has spent years refining a process that teaches people around the country how to organize themselves to turn around their own public spaces. Along the way, it has created a blueprint for activating citizens — something of particular value in a country that has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the industrialized world.

KaBOOM! was launched in 1996 after its co-founder and chief executive, Darell Hammond (not to be confused with the comedian Darrell Hammond), read a Washington Post story about two small children — a four-year-old girl and her two-year-old brother — who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car. “They couldn’t find anywhere else to play,” Hammond recalled. Reporters noted an absence of swings, slides and playgrounds at the Stoddert Terrace housing complex, where the children had lived.
Hammond couldn’t get the image out of his mind. When he was four years old, he had been placed along with his siblings in a group home because his father had abandoned the family and his mother was unable to care for them. But the home turned out to be a beautiful thousand-acre facility called the Mooseheart Child City & School in northern Illinois.

Throughout his adult life, Hammond has felt a deep sense of gratitude — and obligation — to repay society for his good fortune. He discovered that he loved building playgrounds for disadvantaged children and that he had a gift for inspiring others around this vision. By 1999, KaBOOM! had 50 corporate partners and was building 50 playgrounds a year. Today, a KaBOOM!-assisted playground goes up, on average, every other day somewhere in the country — always led by locals who have spent months mobilizing their neighbors, reaching out to local businesses, and managing countless details. (Hammond has recently published a book — “KaBOOM!: How One Man Built a Movement to Save Play” — which is full of practical guidance for anyone interested in building an organization to address a social problem.)

KaBOOM!’s approach is captured by its name. Its signature events are one-day building projects — typically held on Saturdays — when local residents and other volunteers, through a burst of coordinated energy over six to eight hours, transform an empty patch of land into a colorful playground. “When people arrive in the morning, they say, ‘How are we ever going to do this?’” explains Hammond. “But by 10 or 11 o’clock, as it starts to take shape and they start to get excited, they say things like, ‘Is this the fastest one you’ve ever built?’”

The idea of the “benevolent community” — neighbors pitching in for the common good — has been described by Robert Reich as one the defining narratives of American history. The Great Seal of the United States contains the dictum E Pluribus Unum — “Out of many, one.” However, it can be difficult to actualize this ideal in a country where living patterns favor sprucing up the back yard over the neighborhood park. Poverty adds another layer of difficulty. Long-term unemployment, crime, stress — and a feeling of being left out of the American dream — can make it difficult for citizens in a disadvantaged community to rouse one another to take up collective challenges.

KaBOOM! seems to have found a way to jumpstart this process. It offers a tangible goal that almost everyone can agree upon — a place for kids to play. More important, it breaks down community building into doable steps. “To get things going, you need a definable project on a definable timeline,” explains Hammond. “It’s about common cause, common experience, achievable wins, and cascading steps of courage.”

An average playground costs about $75,000. The deal that KaBOOM! strikes with local groups is this: KaBOOM! will provide a road map and pay 90 percent of the costs, but the community must handle the organization work and come up with the remaining 10 percent. KaBOOM! provides advice for soliciting donations, shows locals how to organize a design day to generate excitement — enlisting children to draw their own “dream playgrounds” — and brings in a project manager to oversee the build day.

Community members divide themselves into subgroups, assign co-chairs, and coordinate everything that will be needed for the build day — that means agreeing on a design, selecting playground equipment, preparing the site, digging holes, mobilizing volunteers, finding tools, getting government permits, ensuring first-aid coverage, arranging for breakfast and lunch for hundreds, pulling in donations of everything from T-shirts to water bottles to heavy equipment and portable latrines and, finally, getting a DJ for the end-of-day party. At the outset, organizers are often daunted by the scope of the undertaking. Many say: “How are we going to find all this?”

“This a path that we’ve seen thousands of communities go through,” explains Hammond. KaBOOM! shares success stories from similar communities. But it also helps community members recognize their own strengths. In fact, one of the most useful experiences for residents is when they go through an “asset mapping” process — something that Hammond learned about while working at an organization called the Asset-Based Community Development Institute.

A KaBOOM! facilitator begins by asking locals to consider the resources they have available. Does anyone have a brother, uncle, friend or co-worker who works at a grocery store, a hospital, a university, a construction company, a realtor, a rotary club? The list goes on and on. “In a room of 10 people, you discover that you can find connections to everyone in the community,” explains Nate Rosenthal, KaBOOM!’s community manager. “People, especially in a low-income community, don’t normally realize all the assets they have.”

Once all the contacts are assembled on a chart, people are surprised to see what they have to work with. Jobs get assigned. People start reaching out. The co-chairs report back weekly. One by one, checklist items get ticked off. “We stress that it’s really hard to do this on your own,” adds Rosenthal. “But if you get between 10 and 15 people involved in the planning committee you’re going to be successful.” When problems arise, he adds, it’s usually because a strong-headed person is insisting on doing things his or her way.
The process is just as important as the final product, says Hammond. Details make all the difference. Planning is essential, of course. When you’re pouring concrete — the average playground uses 280 80-pound bags — you need to know where to place tarps and wheelbarrow paths, and how to do it safely. KaBOOM! helps out. But people management is equally crucial. For example, builds run more efficiently — and volunteers have a better experience — when they are grouped at random, rather than when they self-select into teams. Leaders step in to ensure that teams have a mixture of people with different skill levels as well as some with fun personalities. It’s helpful for teams to have easy-to-remember names. And it’s a good idea to have rolling lunch breaks to keep the momentum.

“The process is really about moms and dads and neighbors coming together to do something significant for kids,” says Hammond. “And the kids, who are watching this take place, understand — maybe they don’t understand it immediately, but they understand it down the road, like I did — that people did something incredible for them. And they’ll remember that.”

KaBOOM! has many stories of playground organizers who have gone on to do other things: build community gardens, refurbish community centers, lobby to have street lights repaired, and run for elected office. A 2008 study found that 90 percent of participants (pdf) said the experience improved relationships between residents, gave locals an enhanced sense of their collective capacity, and made them feel less skeptical about possibilities for further change.

“Community building can take a long time,” explains Deborah Puntenney, an assistant professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, who conducted the study. “Dropping in a playground acts as catalyst. It’s almost a prescription for how to activate a community.”

Over the years, KaBOOM!’s biggest challenge has been keeping up with demand. A few years ago, to increase impact, the organization began putting its planning tools online for anyone to use. On Friday, I’ll report on this effort and respond to comments. And if any readers have participated in building a playground, let us know about your experience.