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Neighborhood, nonprofits team up to make new playground happen

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Clara Reynolds has waited for this playground for more than four decades. She sat Wednesday in a lawn chair outside her housing complex in Southeast D.C., legs tucked beneath a fleece blanket for warmth, watching the bustling sea of blue-shirted volunteers in front of her.

A hundred feet away, more than 250 people were assembling the red, blue and yellow framework of a state-of-the-art playground.

Reynolds, 70, has lived at the People's Co-Op for 42 years. She raised three kids in these brick apartment buildings, and still helps to raise her seven grandchildren. And for all of those years, she has wished that the complex had a playground. On Wednesday, in a single day, she got her wish.

After months of planning and a final and frenzied six hours of hard labor, the People's Co-Op had a new place for children to play.

The project was created by the apartment complex and the nonprofit Summitt Health Institute Research and Education Inc. (SHIRE), and organized through a partnership with KaBOOM!, a D.C.-based nonprofit that builds playgrounds for communities nationwide. Kraft Foods donated \$70,000 of the playground's total cost.

"The goal is to build a playground within walking distance of every kid in America," said Evan Mynatt, KaBOOM!'s on-site associate project manager, giving kids a safe and healthy place to play.

Before Wednesday, the playground at the People's Co-Op consisted of a broken-down elephant seat and a rusted tunnel. That wasn't good enough in a part of the city where childhood obesity is a serious problem, said Ruth Perot, SHIRE's executive director.

"If you don't have a place to shop where you can buy healthy foods and if you don't have a safe place to play, then you're not fixing the problem," Perot said. "You have to give people the tools to succeed."

There was no lack of tools on Wednesday.

Hammers pounded, drills buzzed, and laughter rang as volunteers from Kraft, Georgetown University, the Navy Seabees, the D.C. National Guard, D.C. firefighters and other groups worked on various projects.

Each project was headed by a individual team leader, volunteers who were easily identified by their unusual hats.

A woman with Mickey Mouse ears laid out two-by-fours for others to nail down to make the seat of a bench.

A man in a Viking hat poured concrete mix into wheelbarrows for volunteers in his group to stir.



A woman in a glittering rainbow-striped top hat helped a group of kids pick colors for painting welcome signs and checkers boards on sections of plywood.

Many of the leaders, including Shemeika Becton, who wore a pair of lion ears, were members of the co-op. She said she was happy to volunteer her time because this is her neighborhood and she has two children. Many of the other volunteers from the neighborhood shared the same sense of ownership.

It didn't go unnoticed.

"The Southeast has a bad rap," said Mynatt as he watched a planter being put together, "but when they have over 200 volunteers show up, I mean, this place is rocking. They know how to rally around a cause."

One of KaBOOM!'s goals is to make the neighborhood and the community feel invested in their park. So the co-op was required to raise \$7,500 toward the cost of the playground.

Residents started on the fundraising last November. "Ms. Reynolds cooked every day," said Andrea Giles, the property manager at People's Co-Op. With the help of other residents, Reynolds would go to local barbershops and other businesses to sell dinners of fish, grilled chicken, barbecued pork chops and "her famous iced tea," Giles said.

Reynolds worked so hard and donated so much time because she was tired of seeing kids play in the parking lot, she said.

She said she remembered piling "as many kids as you could fit" in her Oldsmobile and driving them to Anacostia Park because it was the closest place for them to safely play. Now when her grandchildren come to play, they'll have an alternative. So will the 60 children who live in the co-op.

There's Becton's youngest son, 7-year-old Charles, who said that he's most excited about the new playground's slides.

There's Darrin Bailey, also 7, who spent most of the day carting wheelbarrows full of wood chips from a heap at one end of the parking lot to the playground.

Volunteers had set up a children's station, a place for the kids to write thank-you letters for sponsors and to stay out of the way.

"They want to help as bad as anyone else," said Deirdra Girardeau, an organizer for SHIRE.

But most of the kids, like Bailey, could be found helping out instead.

Bailey said he couldn't wait, and that he was most excited about "the sliding board, the monkey bars, and the tick-tack-toe board." He also said he designed a welcome sign for the playground, but he didn't have time to show anyone. He had to get back to work.

