PLAY’S THE THING

Darell Hammond

It’s a tough time to be an advocate for play. Reduced recess time at schools, more TV and computer usage, and parents’ fears about letting children outside alone means that “our children are playing less than any previous generation,” says Darell Hammond, 40, the founder and chief executive officer of KaBOOM!, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., devoted to saving play for children.

“This lack of play is causing kids profound physical, intellectual, social, and emotional harm,” he says. “Without ample play, we will continue to see a decrease in creativity and imagination as well as vital skills including curiosity, social skills, resiliency, and the ability to assess risk.”

Hammond himself grew up in a group home outside Chicago, one blessed with 1,200 acres and “hundreds of trees to climb on.” So in 1995, when he read about two children who had died while playing in an abandoned car, he established KaBOOM! and set a goal of providing a play space within walking distance of every child in the country.

To date, KaBOOM! has helped 1 million volunteers in 700 communities across North America build 2,000 playgrounds for some 5.5 million kids. The organization has also created an online “Map of Play” that helps parents find local playgrounds and community leaders identify where more playgrounds need to be built. “It’s a joyous geography, showing where kids can climb and run, laugh and shout, learn and grow,” Hammond says.

Photograph by James Kegley