

## Operation Playground

Neighbors work together for the cause of play



Volunteers celebrate after building a KaBOOM! playground in a single day on the campus of Thomasville Heights Elementary School in Atlanta, Ga.

- Dan Henry

by Renee Elder August 14, 2011

Using his index finger, 10-year-old Jermon Palmer slowly traces a path across his pencil-and-crayon design of a “perfect” playground—starting with a green light at the gate telling children it’s OK to enter and play.

“Then comes the monkey bars and a tunnel,” says Jermon, a fourth-grader at Thomasville Heights Elementary School in Atlanta. “You climb up the stairs and go down the slide, then follow the red and yellow brick road to the swings!”

Jermon was among a dozen children in the Thomasville Heights neighborhood to contribute ideas for a playground built last September on his school’s campus. His mother, Keisha Robinson, joined nearly 300 volunteers in work clothes and gloves one Saturday to turn the youngsters’ visions into reality.

“The kids really needed somewhere to play,” says Robinson, 37, who grew up in Thomasville Heights, where she is raising five sons.

Historically, parents such as Robinson discouraged their children from playing outside in their neighborhood, which is located between a landfill and a prison. “There’s been a lot of shooting, lots of violence and gangs,” explains Quanda Gary, 37, the school’s physical education and wellness coordinator.

The school campus is the exception, shining as a beacon of hope for residents and providing a safety zone for children. Those factors helped convince KaBOOM!, a pioneer in community-built playgrounds, to support the school’s campaign for a much-needed outdoor play area.

“We had a piece of an old climbing structure, and that’s what the kids had to play on during recess,” Gary says about the rusting monkey bars and crumbling concrete slab that served as the school’s playground for more than a dozen years.

### Play matters

Neglected playgrounds are unacceptable to Darell Hammond, 40, founder of KaBOOM!, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to creating fun, safe play spaces within walking distance of every child in America.

“Play is not a luxury; it’s an absolute necessity,” Hammond says. “For the youngest kids, play is an opportunity to experience joy, suspense and all things creative. It’s what helps us become well-rounded as adults.”

Hammond founded KaBOOM! at age 25, after reading a *Washington Post* article in 1995 about two children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car in their low-income, inner-city neighborhood that lacked a playground.

Adamant that every child deserves a safe place to play, Hammond took the community-organizing skills he learned while working in Chicago and went door-to-door in the Wheeler Trace neighborhood, rallying support for a playground. Wheeler Trace neighbors united to raise money and volunteers—a process that became the prototype for KaBOOM! playgrounds.

“At several points it looked like the whole thing would be stalled,” Hammond says of the inaugural project, “but in the end it was an amazing accomplishment, especially the part where these residents could look back and say: ‘We did that!’”

### **Grassroots support**

Sixteen years later, community involvement remains at the heart of each KaBOOM! project—with kids contributing design ideas, local governments and schools providing land, and area residents volunteering their time.

“We’re not going to build a play-ground for them. All these projects are being done from the inside out,” says Hammond, whose playgrounds leave neighborhoods better organized to address other community needs.

Since 1995, KaBOOM! has helped residents build playgrounds in 1,900 low-income neighborhoods in 50 states, Canada, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Among them is the community around Seattle’s Van Asselt Elementary School, where a fading blacktop square with several basketball goals was the only play area before KaBOOM! got involved in 2009. “It really wasn’t much of a playground,” says Gretchen DeDecker, 57, program coordinator for Self-Help, a division of Seattle Public Schools.

The playground campaign energized the entire community. “It was so exciting,” DeDecker recalls. “The project built up staff morale and even led to the re-forming of the PTA at the school.”

A similar transformation took place in 2009 in Philadelphia, Pa.’s Walnut Hill neighborhood, where fed-up and motivated neighbors approached KaBOOM! after a young girl broke an arm and leg by tripping on a piece of broken cement at their aging playground. On a single day that August, 374 neighbors and volunteers invested muscle and sweat to build a new playground. Now the place is a joyful community hub.

“It’s where kids have birthday parties and families come together for cookouts,” says Imanni Wilkes Burg, managing director for the city’s Enterprise Center Community Development Corp.

The playground equipment also helps youngsters build strong muscles and bones.

“Kids by and large do not walk or bike to school anymore, and the amount of recess time has been reduced drastically, so they’re not getting regular exercise,” Wilkes says. “But at the new playground, they are able to run around, get some of that energy out, and channel it into positive things.”

Her testimonial pleases Hammond, who bemoans national statistics that only 20 percent of today’s children are active daily in sports, compared with 80 percent in 1968. “The happiest child is the dirtiest, muddiest, sweatiest child,” he says.

### **Ready, set, play!**

At Thomasville Heights, the playground initiative started with a school faculty meeting. “We were talking about the disparities between our neighborhood and some of the other neighborhoods in Atlanta,” says principal Charles Penn, 37. “A couple of teachers spoke up and said, ‘We don’t even have a playground.’”

With KaBOOM!’s help, local residents pledged \$7,500 to match a \$75,000 gift from Foresters, a Toronto-based insurance company with 25,000 independent agents across North America. Many Foresters employees traveled to Atlanta to help during the 10-hour workday last fall.

“It’s just a great feeling to see a playground go up in a day,” says Bruce Burak, 45, a Foresters agent from Houston, Texas, shoveling mulch as a boombox blared upbeat music.

Other volunteers assembled swing sets, hoisted monkey bar beams, built picnic tables, erected slides, and mixed cement to anchor the play equipment in the ground. “It’s amazing what can happen when people come together on behalf of students,” says Penn, wiping sweat from his brow in the late-afternoon sun.

With the monumental task complete, neighborhood children gathered around the colorful new playground, admiring the curvy slides, rock-climbing wall and a giant tic-tac-toe board while the concrete set.

During the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the end of the day, several children used scissors to sever a 40-foot, multicolored paper chain wrapped around a portion of the playground. Cheers erupted, and young Jermon was excited to see some of his ideas incorporated into the final design.

“They put in the swings, the slide and the monkey bars,” he says proudly. “I didn’t get the red and yellow brick path, but that’s OK. I think it’s still the best thing to happen for all us kids.”