The Rewards of Renewal

By DAVID BORNSTEIN
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In “Self-Renewal,” a landmark book on how societies innovate, John W. Gardner wrote that the task for every new generation was not to “stand a dreary watch over the ancient values” but to face the “bracing truth that it is their task to re-create those values continuously in their own behavior, facing the dilemmas and catastrophes of their own time.” Society, he added, was not “like a machine that is created at some point in time and then maintained with a minimum of effort; a society is being continuously re-created, for good or ill, by its members. This will strike some as a burdensome responsibility, but it will summon others to greatness.”

Michelle Obama, working with KaBOOM! Senior Project Manager Kathryn Lusk, added a photo of the 2000th KaBOOM! playground to the group’s mobile app.

On Tuesday, I reported on an organization called KaBOOM!, which helps residents in low-income communities across the United States build playgrounds, and in so doing, helps them take steps toward re-creating their communities. In the poorest areas of the country, there is a severe shortage of quality play spaces for children; some areas have been described as “play deserts.” This problem has drawn the attention of child advocates and some (but not enough) policy makers. Park and recreation budgets are often the first to be slashed when budgets are tightened. In recent years, groups like KaBOOM! have helped to fill the gap by raising private funds to finance playgrounds. But KaBOOM! goes a step further: it shows locals how to organize and build playgrounds themselves, a process that is often a stepping stone to other changes.

Readers found this approach appealing because it addresses a felt need and acts as a catalyst for citizen participation. “In Los Angeles elementary schools, play equipment is out,” wrote Judithcheerful from Los Angeles. “No climbing bars, swings or slides — pulled out for even the little ones. Where did play equipment go, and when?” And Anjali from California commented: “I like the way the program puts the responsibility on the people. It gives them the opportunity to change something in their community. It empowers them.”

If each generation of citizens has to rediscover its capacity for societal renewal, the past can certainly serve as a guide. “As I read about the development of school gardens and community playgrounds in underprivileged communities,” commented Kim from Arkansas. “I can’t help but remember that a little over a 100 years ago, women in St. Louis and other cities were doing the same thing. Why did community playgrounds and children’s vegetable gardens end? Is this
21st-century movement foreshadowing a new Progressive Era, or is it a sign that we’ve failed to sustain real reform and must re-learn?”

It’s a profound question. How do people learn to be effective citizens in a democracy? Is it enough to take a few high school civics classes, pay your taxes, obey the law, support yourself or family, and be cordial to your neighbors — or is it incumbent on citizens to do some form of public service: to take a proactive role in fixing your community?

KaBOOM! has found that, across the country, many citizens are yearning to be more active, and to reshape their communities in positive ways, but they often need help getting started. The skills of citizenship are like any other skills; they are not innate. They have to be learned and practiced. And building a playground seems to be a good way to develop the muscles.

Sometimes people understand this intuitively. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, KaBOOM! was approached by a resident of Bay St. Louis, Miss., a city that had been devastated by the storm. At first, KaBOOM!’s founder, Darell Hammond, was reluctant to go forward. When he approached funders to gauge their interest in the idea, he was told that locals needed food, clothing and shelter; a playground would be a distraction. But local residents were adamant: the kids had gone through so much trauma. They desperately needed a nice place to play. It wasn’t a luxury; it was a basic need.

The playground was completed in December 2005 and Hammond learned that some of the volunteers had driven eight hours to participate in the project. The playground quickly became a gathering point. “People would do their birthday parties there and many people celebrated Christmas there,” recalled Hammond. “It was the only thing that had been completely redone.” Amidst the frustration of the government’s emergency response, here was something that had been handled quickly and efficiently — and by the residents themselves. KaBOOM! has helped 150 communities build playgrounds in areas affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

As I mentioned, KaBOOM!’s biggest challenge has been coping with demand. In the past few years, the organization has put its project planning tools online for anyone to use. It has also created a dedicated Do-It-Yourself (D.I.Y.) playground building team that assists groups around the country. At present, about 6,000 projects have been registered on the “Build a Playground” section of its Web site — of which about 1,500 are actively moving forward. Most are in middle-income communities, where local residents and businesses can afford to self-finance community projects that cost upwards of $50,000.

Building a playground isn’t easy. From conception to completion, the process can take 18 months. One of the community organizers who used KaBOOM!’s tools, and consulted with its D.I.Y. team, is Madra Belmont, a mother of two young children and member of the P.T.A. of the Marguerite J. Lundy Elementary School, in El Paso, Texas. “We’ve never built a playground before,” she recalled. “We had no idea where to start.” KaBOOM! helped Belmont and her colleagues select equipment, come up with fundraising ideas and effective solicitation letters, and figure out how to coordinate 150 volunteers. They also helped avert problems — like making sure they had enough cement to fill all the post holes (which would be larger than expected because of El Paso’s rocky soil).

“I knew that the project would be rewarding but I didn’t realize just how much,” Belmont said. “I was amazed at the outpouring of support from the parents.” Weeks after the playground was completed, fathers were still approaching her to ask if anything more needed to be done. If a screw had to be tightened or filed down, she recalled, they would rush home to get their tools and fix it right away. But the most satisfying part was seeing that the children were genuinely appreciative, she added: “They’ve been taking care of it, picking up their trash. There were even a number of kids who I didn’t previously know from the school who ran up to me and gave me hugs. I thought that was pretty cool.”
Belmont added: “I think the resources we got — especially on grant writing and organizing and coordinating a large group — will carry over to any project we tackle in the future.”

One of KaBOOM!’s ongoing projects is to use crowd-sourcing to assemble an online map of play — it currently has 82,000 entries — which the organization would eventually like to overlay with information about race, health, crime, obesity and the population of children. “Part of the problem is that we don’t know where the play deficit is,” says Hammond.

The organization has also created a designation called Playful City USA, which recognizes cities that do things like create a play task force, conduct a play space audit, disclose their spending on play and hold an annual “play day” to generate public awareness. In 2010, KaBOOM! awarded the designation to 118 cities. It’s also working with municipalities to help them identify and open up underutilized play spaces, such as school playgrounds that are closed on weekends.

As KaBOOM! expands its focus to helping communities self-organize and advising governments, it has become harder to keep track of its influence. Staff members say they regularly attend play conferences where they hear about playgrounds that were inspired by KaBOOM! Now, the organization is developing a “badging” system to recognize community leaders like Madra Belmont who have successfully built playgrounds. Using online tools, citizen experts “friend” people in other cities, and offer support, without KaBOOM!’s involvement. “When you’re directly building stuff it’s easy to see the influence you have,” said Hammond. “We realized that to make the biggest difference we have had to give up on taking credit.”

But there will always be stories. At a recent conference, Hammond was approached by a man from New Orleans who had worked on a KaBOOM! playground. Hammond had never met him. “He wanted to tell me that through the project, he met all his neighbors, his property values went up, his rental property is now rented by someone who volunteered on the build, and the city has come in and repaired the lights,” Hammond said. “It all started with a playground. Who would have thought?”