Springdale celebrates Playful City USA status

Nonprofit KaBOOM! is offering $2.1 million in play-related grants to communities like Springdale that are making a commitment to the well-being of children.

By Ben Duda

When Dr. Rick McWhorter talks about the civic pride and quality of life in Springdale, he knows his city has an ace up its sleeve.

As the director of Springdale Parks and Recreation, McWhorter finds himself frequently explaining an often-overlooked aspect in measuring “quality of life” in a city: play.

“If you show an interest in your children and the value of play, you will show people who are looking to move into the area that your city would be a better place to live,” McWhorter said.

Under McWhorter’s guidance, Springdale has done just that. In each of the last three years, Springdale has served as the only city in Arkansas recognized by nonprofit organization KaBOOM! as a Playful City USA community.

Playful City USA is a free national recognition program honoring cities and towns of all sizes that make play a priority and use innovative new programs to increase play opportunities for children. Beginning in 2011, a total of 103 grants worth $2.1 million are available to Playful City USA cities and towns through 2013. Grants of $30,000, $20,000 and $15,000 and will be awarded to existing Playful City USA communities as well as communities receiving Playful City USA recognition for the first time.

KaBOOM! first recognized Springdale as a Playful City USA community in 2008 with the city again earning the honor in 2009 and 2010 for its continuing efforts to promote the importance of play and provide great places for children and families to play.

“The city has taken great pride in being the first and only city in Arkansas to receive this designation,” McWhorter said.

Benefits of receiving Playful City USA recognition include access to KaBOOM! play and playground related grants, highway street signs identifying a community’s commitment to children, public relations and media support and recognition at national municipal leadership and recreation conferences.

Springdale certainly reaped those benefits and more. One component to becoming a Playful City USA community is that a city holds an annual “Play Day.” McWhorter said Springdale used the Play Day to bring together business, civic and citizen interests in a singular event that benefits children with more than 1,500 children participating in the activities associated with the city’s 2009 Play Day.

“We used corporate sponsors to assist with funding parts of the Play Day and we also got civic groups, school athletic teams, city leaders and city staff involved,” McWhorter said. “We had a blast and it was exciting watching children interact with our
school athletes and seeing smiles on their faces as well as their parents.”

The city used the Play Day as a springboard to emphasize the importance of play in the wake of continuing research suggesting that children need at least 60 minutes of unstructured play every day. Springdale then set a goal to have public play spaces within walking distance of all citizens. A critical first step was to realize the city already possessed an untapped resource of terrific play spaces: playgrounds adjacent to elementary schools.

“We partnered with our public school system to keep their playgrounds open to the public after school hours,” McWhorter said. “Combined with our public parks, this created a significant coverage area for our children to have a public play area within walking distance. Now, the city is in the process of developing trails to connect all public facilities, schools and parks.”

Collectively, McWhorter and the city’s efforts have started to make municipal and civic leaders understand the importance and value of play. That realization, in turn, directly led to citywide improvements in play opportunities for children, which increased the quality of life for all city residents.

“Play is just one of the segments contributing to quality of life and the Playful City USA designation enforces that emphasis,” McWhorter said. “Word is getting out about the importance of play in the development of our children. We are beginning to see more people using the play structures and park land with their families and we hope this trend will continue because the value of family togetherness through play is extremely important.”

More information about the Playful City USA program and an application can be found at www.kaboom.org/playfulcityusa. Applications for 2011 Playful City USA status and available grants are due June 1.

Ben Duda is the Senior Manager for the KaBOOM! National Campaign for Play, which includes the Playful City USA program.

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