

Group builds nationwide playground network to serve disabled

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(In this photo provided by the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds, Matthew Cavedon is shown at a Boundless Playground in Berlin, Conn., in 2002. Cavedon, who uses a wheelchair, is one of the nonprofit group's most effective representatives. (AP Photo/National Center for Boundless Playgrounds)

SCIO TOWNSHIP -- Shallon Kovac loves her school's new playground, which is designed so that children with disabilities and those without can play together.

"Awesome," the 15-year-old with Down syndrome said repeatedly last week while leading visitors on a tour of the playground, rushing from sandbox to climbing wall to slide to rocking boat.

Shallon, who was attending day camp at Honey Creek Community School and enters Ann Arbor's Huron High School in the fall, quickly scampered up one side and down the other of the climbing wall.

The playground opened June 23 at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District's campus west of Ann Arbor. It was the 75th playground to open under the sponsorship of the Connecticut-based National Center for Boundless Playgrounds. The 80th is scheduled to open Wednesday in Battle Creek, 65 miles west of here.

Boundless Playgrounds can be found in 21 states and Ontario. By year's end, 11 more are scheduled to open in Michigan, along with others in Shreveport, La., Kingsport, Tenn., and Hartford and West Hartford, Conn. Dozens more are in development.

Among the nonprofit group's most effective representatives is Matthew Cavedon, a 16-year-old from Berlin, Conn., who uses a wheelchair.

Cavedon says he didn't know what he was missing until 10 years ago, when he was asked to help design a playground accessible to children with and without disabilities.

"Once I experienced it, I was hooked," says Cavedon, who was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that prevents him from fully extending his joints.

Playing, he says, is "an important, essential part of life."

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are about 5.6 million people ages 6 to 18 with disabilities nationwide.

Those who work with children with disabilities stress the importance of play in their development.

"Unstructured play is as integral to a child's development as shelter, love and food," says Mara Kaplan, chief executive of the Pittsburgh-based Center for Creative Play, which promotes "universal access" play facilities.

On July 13, the ceremonial ribbon had barely hit the ground at Summerville Community School in Flint, a fading industrial city 70 miles north of Detroit, before neighborhood children swarmed over the brightly colored playscape of Boundless Playground No. 79.

Group executive Debbie Midford pointed out features designed to help those with visual, motor and attention disabilities.

A quiet area underneath a play unit for the youngest children aims to give those with autism a retreat from the bustle overhead. Hexagonal stools of various heights give those with Down syndrome a chance to strengthen their balancing skills. And rubber mats let caregivers, as well as children who use wheelchairs and walkers, get right up to the equipment.

"The philosophy is everybody wants to play together," Midford said. "The bottom line is everybody can play together. ... On a Boundless Playground, not everyone can do everything, but everyone can do something."

Principal Phyllis McCree barely contained her excitement at the completion of the \$366,000 project, which tantalized her pupils as it rose behind a fence all last school year.

"I can't wait to see 200 kids, 300 kids, on every inch of this," McCree said. "This is a principal's dream come true. ... It's so kid friendly."

The Boundless Playgrounds group was born a decade ago in a couple's sorrow at the death of their 9-month-old son from spinal muscular atrophy.

Amy and Peter Barzach recruited 1,200 volunteers to help create Jonathan's Dream, a 25,000-square-foot playground "where children of all abilities could play together." It opened in 1996 in their hometown of West Hartford, Conn.

The couple asked members of a club for children with disabilities to think up play equipment for Jonathan's Dream. Cavedon, then 6, was among the designers.

His idea was for a swing that he and other wheelchair users could operate.

The Barzachs liked the idea, as did the design engineers, and they made it the playground's focus.

Publicity surrounding Jonathan's Dream spurred Amy Barzach and Jean Schappet, a founder of a play equipment company, to start the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds in 1997.

Toy-maker Hasbro Inc. in Pawtucket, R.I., kicked in with a \$521,000, three-year grant. Last year, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation pledged \$7.5 million for 19 Boundless Playgrounds in Kellogg's home state of Michigan. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush says he wants 50 in his state.

Today, there are 23 Boundless Playgrounds in Connecticut and five in Michigan, with others in Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia, as well as Orangeville, Ontario.

Amy Barzach is happy at how Boundless Playgrounds have spread but says she would be even happier to see her group go out of business -- for lack of need.

"We have this vision that in 15 to 20 years, people wouldn't think about building playgrounds that exclude children with disabilities," she says.

Highlights of Boundless Playgrounds projects

Highlights of the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds' initiative to create play spaces that meet the needs of children with disabilities:

-Founded in 1997, the group is based in Bloomfield, Conn. It got its start with a \$521,000, three-year grant from toy maker Hasbro Inc.'s Hasbro Children's Foundation and has received \$7.5 million from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, \$500,000 from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, \$400,000 from NFL Charities and \$100,000 from the Picower Foundation.

-Boundless Playgrounds says its facilities reflect an "understanding (of) the diverse needs of children with different kinds of abilities and disabilities."

-The group has opened 79 playgrounds - 23 in Connecticut and 56 others in Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia, as well as Orangeville, Ontario.

-Michigan communities getting playgrounds in 2005 under W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant include Albion, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Blissfield, Bloomfield Hills, Detroit (two), Flint, Hillman, Holland (two), Kalamazoo, Kochville Township in Saginaw County, L'Anse, Lansing, Sandusky, Southfield, Watersmeet and Wyoming.

Source: National Center for Boundless Playgrounds, W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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