



Play For All!

By **Margie Wilhelmi**, *Director of Marketing, Wheaton Park District*
Sandy Gbur, *Executive Director of Western DuPage Special Recreation Association*

Mrs. Legner was returning home after leaving her oldest son, Michael, to watch his younger brother, Sean, for the very first time. Michael was a great big brother who understood that Sean was “different.” When Sean was eight, he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. One day while Mrs. Legner was away, Michael and Sean decided to play in the backyard on their swing set where they had played many times before. Mrs. Legner was just a few blocks from home when she heard fire trucks and immediately had a sinking feeling. When she turned the corner her fears were realized: the trucks were parked in front of her house, with a ladder extended to the highest limb of one of the backyard trees. A fireman was climbing the ladder in an effort to carry Sean down from the tree because he had climbed too high and Michael had to call 911 for help.



1 in 88 kids and 1 in 54 boys are diagnosed with autism.

Life can be full of challenges for families who have children on the autism spectrum. Sean did not comprehend the danger of his climb—he was just having fun! For the Legner family and others with special needs, a trip to the local playground can be just what the doctor ordered. Playgrounds can be safe places for kids to climb high, release their extra energy and simply feel free.

Stories similar to the Legner's are heard all too often at Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA). In DuPage County alone, more than 5,400 families have identified a child under the age of 14 years with autism or sensory integration disorder. For this reason, WDSRA decided to be one of many partners to bring a Sensory Garden Playground to DuPage County. This playground will be unique because it is being built for children who are on the autism spectrum or who have sensory processing disorders, physical disabilities and other special needs.

WDSRA, a cooperative extension of nine park districts within DuPage County, is working alongside other partners to build this playground: the Wheaton Park District, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, Shane's Inspiration and the Kiwanis Club of Wheaton. Each organization brings a uniqueness and passion to the project. "Kiwanis brought this concept to the Wheaton Park District and they ran with it," said Kiwanis member Cindy Keck. Kiwanis is a global organization of volunteers dedicated to changing the world one child and one community at a time. Keck continued, "As we began to discuss the importance of this project, all of our other partners quickly joined in."

Shane's Inspiration, which specializes in inclusive play parks, awarded a \$150,000 grant to the Sensory Garden Playground for playground design and equipment from Landscape Structures. Shane's vision for fostering a bias-free world for children with disabilities and a mission to create inclusive playgrounds and programs that unite children of all abilities is evident in the design plan for the Sensory Playground. This grant quickly got the project off the ground.

The Forest Preserve District joined in and gave approval to include the playground in a master plan for a Wheaton Park District development of the property. This land lease spans 40 acres of open space at Naperville and Warrenville Roads where the playground will be located. This area is well-known by the community as Danada Farms South Park, named after Dan and Ada Rice, thoroughbred racehorse owners and breeders who purchased a 152-acre farm in 1929, which became known as Danada Farm. The couple loved thoroughbred horse racing and one of their prized horses won the 91st Kentucky Derby. Because of its rich history, this area is the ideal location for this playground, which incorporates an equestrian theme. Providing a secluded and calm setting, nestled among large trees, the playground is located near the I-88 corridor, making it an easy destination for families traveling within and beyond DuPage County. Currently there are one million people living within a 15-minute driving radius from this location.

Although the playground will be located between Wheaton and the neighboring town of Lisle, the Wheaton Park District saw this playground as a necessity in addressing the needs of the changing communities. Wheaton is respected as a leader in the community, providing recreational programming for hundreds of thousands of people on an annual basis, so it was appropriate for them to lead and manage the design and installation of the playground and be responsible for long-term maintenance.

This playground will have many innovative features that will make it unique: a cozy dome or a log tunnel for children looking for a quiet space to decompress, a fragrance garden to appeal to the senses, and so much more. As families park their cars, they'll follow a sign inviting them to walk over a small bridge. Then they will arrive at a space nestled in the forest preserve away from traffic and noise. Nearly everything in the playground is intentional. The partners have spent the past few years researching, holding focus groups, and collaborating with many outside agencies to identify the various features and components that will provide play for all.

“We worked intentionally in choosing equipment, surfacing, and plantings that will appeal to all kids including those with sensory disorders and autism.”

“Everything planned for this playground has a purpose and a child in mind,” said Rob Sperl, Director of Planning for the Wheaton Park District. “We worked intentionally in choosing equipment, surfacing, and plantings that will appeal to all kids including those with sensory disorders and autism.”

While they have made great strides in identifying what the playground needs, a project of this magnitude can be quite expensive. The total price tag for the complete project is currently \$2,200,000. The project partners have been working diligently for the past several years on pursuing funding sources. To date, more than \$400,000 has been raised through grants, corporate sponsorships, and private donations. These funds are being applied to the development of Phase one this fall 2013.

Phase one includes the Pony Stables Playground planned for 2-5 year olds. It features slides, climbers, and activity panels all with a pony stables theme. Toddler swings with high backs and a cozy dome will be included as well. An additional part of phase one is “Art Along the Way,” a series of walking paths with interactive art components that lead to the Garden Area. Plants will be selected to improve natural habitat conditions and capture the interest of children who may see birds, butterflies, and other species. Plants will be chosen based on sound, textures, fragrance, and visual appearance to provide sensory stimulation. Raised flower beds will make it possible for all visitors to garden and will provide wonderful scents and textures for people with visual impairments to experience nature.

Lastly, Phase one will include a central gathering space, which will offer a comfortable, shaded gathering area for adults to sit and observe their children, while a climbing structure with a mare and foal will highlight the equestrian theme. The universal design of the play space will make it possible for all to join in the fun.

Phase two will be The Race Horse Farm Playground for 5-12 year olds. This playground will allow access to the highest level from either a ramp or other climbing apparatus and will include a rubberized surfacing with a race horse farm motif to cushion falls.

Phase three—“Adventure Scape”—will combine the realism of rock climbing with the exciting challenges that climbing cables provide. The purpose is to build upper-body strength and core strength as kids climb over and over.

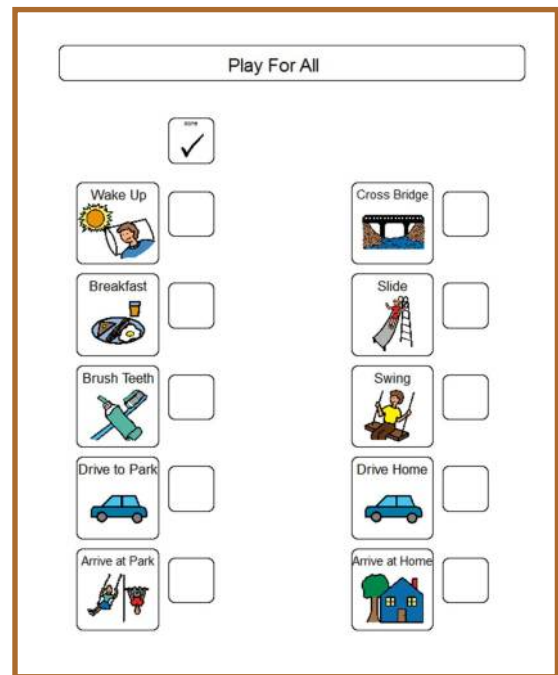
Phase four will feature a water playground where children can manipulate the environment by holding back water and digging in the sand. This area will be filled with the soothing sounds of water trickling and splashing over rocks. Among the plans for Phase four is an Accessible Tree House Area that will allow for anyone to safely reach the top of trees and get a bird's eye view of the surrounding natural areas. The last element of Phase four is a multi-sports field which will be designed after a “think tank” meeting with disability and playground experts.

Other supporters for the project include: Rotary Clubs of Central DuPage, Lisle, Wheaton, West Chicago and Carol Stream, FORWARD

DuPage, BMO Harris, DuPage Community Foundation, Lisle Partners for the Park, Ball Horticultural Company with endorsements by many others, such as Easter Seals, Turning Pointe Autism Foundation, and Handicap This.

Once the Sensory Garden Playground is completed WDSRA will add a trip to the park as part of their Ability Awareness Program that they currently conduct with 3rd through 5th graders to teach them about what it's like to have autism, a visual or hearing impairment, or a physical or learning disability. WDSRA's goal is to take the mystery out of “disability” and to foster a bias-free world where *all* kids can play and develop. Play dates will be created so children with and without disabilities can come together at the Sensory Garden Playground to enjoy the one thing they all have in common: their love of play.

Children with autism often feel anxiety when there are changes in their routine, sometimes resulting in tantrums and emotional meltdowns. WDSRA will assist parents by creating a downloadable picture schedule of the play spaces that parents can access to create their own visual picture chart or social story prior to visiting the playground



The Legner family anxiously awaits the opportunity to play at Sensory Garden Playground where they know their children will have fun, meet others, and be safe.

SEE CHART ON NEXT PAGE

Sensory Garden Playground, Play For All

Features planned for the playground have a purpose and promote inclusion.

FEATURE	PURPOSE
Art Along the Way	Features interactive art that is unique to this space. Welcomes kids as they cross the bridge and invites them to play.
2-5 year old play area	Area for younger children to play safely away from older kids.
Cozy dome	Provides a space away to decompress if overwhelmed.
Rocking horse	Allows children to get rid of excess energy.
Activity panels	Challenge kids to count, read letters and pair up pictures with language.
Climbers	Kids with sensory issues don't always know where their body is in space, so climbing at an early age can assist them to be more in tune with their bodies.
Sound Garden	Ability to make soothing and pure music is not only fun but can help kids relax and learn about cause and effect.
Raised Gardens	Allows easy access for elderly and mobility impaired; promotes cross-generational play.
Fragrance Garden	Various scents will appeal to all, especially those with visual impairments who can enjoy the garden. Includes plants with different textures to feel, see and hear. Swirling paths of different textures will appeal to many people as they walk along the path and feel different sensations.
Central Gathering Area	Provides adults a shaded place to enjoy their children as they play. Kids with sensory issues may not be willing to wear sun protection because of how it feels, so shade is important. Rubberized surface for safety and benches with arms for stability.
5-12 year old play area	Area for older children to play together
Oodle swing	Allows for easy access from a wheelchair or walker, provides trunk support for kids with low muscle tone, and allows four-six kids to swing and socialize together.
Omni spinner	Spinning is a repetitive motor behavior that can be soothing.
Roller slide	Children with autism need intense activity to satisfy their vestibular system such as the slide which provides deep pressure.
See saw	Can hold four kids at one time with high backs for support.
Adventure Scope Area	Rock climbing provides healthy challenges for all children. Kids on the autism spectrum often like to climb but don't understand danger. A climbing area with a unitary play surface will provide safety.
Cable traverse	Teaches how to hold balance and builds upper body and core strength.
Shelter/restrooms	Fully accessible restrooms will be provided for families so no one needs to leave the fun early.
Benches	Comfortable seating with arm rests to assist with transferring.
Accessible drinking fountain	Essential for hydration and allows families to stay longer at the park.
Fence	Provides a stopping point for children who like to run.
Accessible Sport Field	Designing a multi-use field that encourages participation by all.
Accessible Tree House	Provides opportunity for individuals with mobility impairments to get to the highest point along with their able bodied friends.
Water Play Area	Provides opportunities for manipulating shallow water. Digging in the sand will allow kids with sensory deficits to feel the weight of moving earth. Running water provides soothing sound and cooling sensation.



WebXtra

Accepting Change

by Sue Rini, Director of Finance & Administration, Carol Stream Park District

Like it or not, change is part of today's business culture, even in the world of parks and recreation. Employees who can accept or initiate change will thrive; those who complain and fear change may be left behind. Employers seek employees who enthusiastically support change for themselves and their organizations as a whole. Employees who continue to take care of business in the midst of change and are able to look for the positive opportunities it brings, reinforce their path to success.

It's not uncommon to fear change; some employees have even been conditioned to fear change. However, change is normal and most of us will experience an unpredictable change (either personal or professional) in our lives. Changes can come from advances in technology, innovation or economic conditions. These changes can directly affect our professional lives as well as our personal lives. They may lead to feelings of frustration, uncertainty or a detour in your plans. "How" you make this normal life experience a positive and beneficial opportunity is what makes the difference.

Read the Full Story Online

Go to ILparks.org and select Publications/IP&R Magazine/ WebXtras from the left column.