



Boundless Opportunities



Teen takes the reins to deliver playground



Born with spina bifida, 15-year-old Ali Karpenko sought help from the community to build a playground for children of all abilities.

The folks in Grand Forks, N.D., have discovered dreams really do come true when production is driven by a persistent teen and a committed community.

Ali Karpenko was determined to make her dream come true—to build a Boundless Playground for kids with disabilities and their families. In March 2007, she attempted to win a \$300,000 playground through a Playskool essay contest. Her essay made it into the top 20 out of 900 applicants, but did not receive the grand prize. Even so, Ali—who was born with spina bifida—was determined to make it happen.

“I am very blessed, as I have a very mild case of it. Many of the problems I face are hidden to most, as I am very physically able. I did not begin the

playground project for myself. I’m doing it for the kids like me who have a disability, but aren’t as lucky as I am,” she says.

Through conversations with Rex Allen, president of Premier Recreation Products, Ali—now 15 years old—secured a reduced cost for the playground equipment. The news prompted supporters to raise the money to purchase the equipment.

The fund drive was led by local partners, including The Arc, Upper Valley, Sertoma Club of Greater Grand Forks, and the park district. The project also was supported by the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds.

An extensive fundraising campaign garnered \$200,000 within a year.



ABOVE COMMITTEE PHOTO BY DIANNE SHEPPARD
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A Sensible Site

The site for the playground is Sertoma Park, a 22-acre neighborhood area bordered by a coulee on the east and south sides and public streets on the north and west sides. There was already one playground on the property before the Boundless Playground was added. Other amenities included lighted walkways and picnic facilities. The site also contained the Japanese gardens, which were established as a cultural exchange

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—Ali Karpenko

project between the city and the city of Owano, Japan.

Sertoma Park is within close proximity to key points of the city, including a medical complex containing clinics, a hospital and a rehabilitation and long-term care facility. Conveniently placed within a growing residential area, there is also an elementary school a couple blocks away.

The Community Build

The process to develop a community playground extends beyond a fundraising effort. The planning and design phase is a critical step in the process. In order to raise the funds, the size and scope of the project need to be determined. With the help of Premier Recreation Products and GameTime, conceptual drawings started to take shape. Ali and the grassroots volunteer committee spent hours determining the final design and cost of the playground. Once the design was completed, the team set out to raise the funds to support the plan. Through many private donations and successful grant writing, the funds were raised, and planning for the first community build began.

Phase one took place in September 2008. The park district prepped the land before the equipment arrived. A significant task was the coordination of the community build, which entailed rounding up community volunteers, confirming sponsors for food and beverages, and delegating site work. The volunteers helped with shoveling concrete and installing the main playground structure.

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For more information, visit www.boundlessplaygrounds.org.

The process, which would typically take seven days, only took three days to complete. The tireless volunteers were excited to see the playground take shape. Once phase one was completed, the group was on hold over the winter months.

The second phase of construction was organized and again, volunteers from across the Greater Grand Forks area came out to support the project. Installation, which included a section for toddlers, was completed in May 2009. Concrete work, installation of poured-in-place surfacing and landscaping progressed following the final equipment installation, and was completed mid-August, 2009.

Celebration And Dedication

A community celebration and dedication for Ali's Boundless Playground were held at the park in August 2009. Live music, food, face-painting and sprint cars (another passion of Ali's) filled the park, while community members, volunteers, partners and sponsors enjoyed the evening celebration.

"I think every kid should be able to have fun and feel like he or she belongs," says Ali. "It is nice to have a place where kids with disabilities and their siblings can have fun together." **PRB**

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