



## Children of All Abilities Play on Accessible Playground

Like any seven-year-old, Harper Morris wants to play with her friends. But because the second-grader has a congenital condition in which the muscles of her arms and legs are contracted and shortened, she can't run or climb stairs and is often left out on her Urbana, Illinois school's playground.

### Challenge:

- Create Inclusive Playground
- Replace Broken Equipment

"Recess has been a challenge for us," says her mother Shea. "She can't run, so that's hard on a playground when kids run around and play. She might have one or two friends who want to look at bugs or flowers with her in the garden, but most of the kids are on the playground."

### Solution:

- Raised \$600,000 for new Playground
- Developed new park for all ages and abilities
- Positive psychological impact

It's painful for parents to watch their child excluded from the games that other children play. "It just breaks my heart," says Harper's mother. Peg Chaidez felt much the same way when she discovered her son Owen crying on the first day of school at Hillcrest Elementary School in Downers Grove, Illinois. Owen, who has the same condition as Harper, uses a wheelchair. When he'd joined his classmates during recess, his wheelchair got stuck in the woodchips covering the elementary school's playground.

Owen's mother vowed to him that she would do something about it.

### Overcoming Obstacles To Completion

But it wasn't easy. Chaidez faced significant obstacles. When she approached Hillcrest Elementary about making the playground fully accessible, the school told Chaidez that the district didn't have funds for a new playground. She'd have to find the money herself. And she did just that. To raise the \$600,000 the new playground would cost, Chaidez first needed a 501c3 to hold the funds and allow donors tax deductions. She approached organization after organization and was turned down, she says, "more times than I can count." Finally, Sharon Duncan, the founder of Abide in Me, a nonprofit supporting people with disabilities, agreed to partner with Chaidez's Dream Build Play Experience.

After a promising start, fundraising stalled. Chaidez's breakthrough came when donor Barbara Gulick introduced her to Ron McDaniel of the Ronald L. McDaniel Foundation. Most successful projects rely on a few key donors, and fulfilling Chaidez's dream wouldn't have been possible without the McDaniel Foundation and Barbara Gulick.

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- Michelle Rzepka, Principal of Hillcrest Elementary School



Fundraising was only part of Chaidez’s challenge. The playground also needed the right design. Chaidez sought input from parents and teachers, and consulted focus groups of both differently- and typically-abled students to find out what they wanted in a playground. Landscape architect Mike Maloney, who donated his services, revised the design six times before they settled on the final design.

### Something for Everyone

But Chaidez’s determination and perseverance paid off. On August 17, 2016, “Owen’s Playground, a Playground for Children of All Abilities,” opened with a huge celebration. Parents and kids drove to Hillcrest Elementary School from all over Illinois and surrounding states to join in the festivities. Hillcrest’s new playground offers something for all kids, no matter their interests or abilities. With a rubber surface instead of woodchips, double-wide ramps, and adaptive swings, it’s fully wheelchair accessible, and complete with merry-go-round, rocking bus, and climbing walls. A relaxation station allows quiet time for children who are over-stimulated to soothe themselves. Play panels, including a marble maze, provide hands-on activities for kids who want sensory play or independent games. Owen loves to talk about “his” playground. He particularly likes the rocking bus and the adaptive swings. “Swinging makes me feel happy,” he beams. But even more important, he gets to join in with his friends. “It makes me happy because I can go play with my friends on the playground,” he says. It makes Harper Morris happy, too. After reading about Owen’s Playground on Facebook, Shea Morris drove two and a half hours to take Harper to the grand opening. “The playground is amazing,” she says. “On a playground where there’s a ramp ... Harper can play along with her friends whatever the game.”



### Positive Psychological Impact

Perhaps the most important aspect of the inclusive playground is its psychological impact. Peg Chaidez sees the change in Owen: “Where I see the difference for Owen that an inclusive park brings is his confidence level. In the past he had to sit on the blacktop during recess. ... It really isolated him from his peers. And now I see that confidence ... that he can do everything that his friends are doing.” Shea Morris believes that the playground has had a positive psychological impact on Harper. It “increases her self-esteem to be able to play with her friends instead of sitting on the sidelines where she’s made to feel different.”



Children with limited abilities are not the only ones who benefit from the fully accessible playground. Keith Wallace, Executive Director of Lincolnway Special Recreation Association, believes that an inclusive playground helps everyone because it breaks down barriers and builds community. “When we bring up the opportunity to talk about peoples’ differences, that’s when learning happens,” he says. “An inclusive playground brings that environment ... [and] fosters understanding and teachable moments. ... Typical kids learn that [differently-abled kids] can do things just like they can. They just have to do things a little differently ... So anytime we put two different worlds together, we break down walls.” Amy Balicki, mother of four typically-abled kids, agrees. She says, “The new playground has broken down barriers that I never noticed existed. Before, kids in wheelchairs were forced to stay on the blacktop while many typically-abled kids would make a beeline for the playground. Now there are plenty of opportunities for everyone to play together. That inclusiveness is a good thing for everyone. It helps build community.”



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## HILLCREST ELEMENTARY – DOWNERS GROVE, IL

Number	Product ID	Description	Ages	Play Events	Capacity	ASTM Use Zone
	NUIN-2565	Entire Play Space**	5-12	111	616 Kids	126' x 239' (38.4m x 72.9m)
1	580-0172	Traditional Series 6' Bench	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	560-0583	RopeVenture® Vertex	5-12	1	25 Kids	28' x 28' (8.5m x 8.5m)
3	550-0186	Volito™ Multi-User Swing	2-12	1	4 Kids	30' x 27' (9.2m x 8.3m)
4	550-0187	Volito Add-On	2-12	1	4 Kids	N/A
5	NUIN-2566	Ramped Structure	5-12	57	457 Kids	91' x 117' (27.8 x 35.7m)
6	BB-2568	RockIt™ Climber	5-12	9	28 Kids	18' x 34' (5.5m x 10.4m)
7	BB-2321	Sound Garden	2-12	3	12 Kids	N/A
8	560-2571	Comet II	5-12	1	6 Kids	16' (4.9m) diameter
9	560-2570	Comet I	5-12	1	6 Kids	16' (4.9m) diameter
10	560-0576	REV8 Rotating Climber	5-12	8	25 Kids	25' (7.7m) diameter
11	590-0062	Funnel Ball®	2-12	1	6 Kids	N/A
12	see page 178	Arch Swings	2-12			
13	see page 146	Custom Signs				



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