

Perks and Recreation

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA, KIWANIS FIGHT NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER WITH A NEW PUBLIC PLAYGROUND.

One summer day, a group of children eagerly gathered at a new play area in Greensboro, North Carolina. As they scanned the surroundings, half of the young people were puzzled by one of the play structures: a long, smooth log centered on a support, fitted with handles on each end.

The mystery object? A seesaw made by staff at Greensboro Parks and Recreation.

“We had to explain to them how to make the other person go up and down,” says Vonda Martin, the City of Greensboro’s park planner. “It’s very telling when you design something that you think is very simplistic, but other kids never had the opportunity to play like that.”

Introducing today’s technology-loving children to the simple fun of outdoor play is behind a rapidly growing movement based on connecting young people to nature. And thanks to a US\$30,000 donation from the Kiwanis Club of Greensboro, the Kiwanis Nature Play Yard — which debuted in October 2016 — does just that.



Words **JULIE SAETRE** • Pictures **THE CITY OF GREENSBORO**







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ROBIN MOORE, PROFESSOR AT THE NATURAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

Each year, the club supports one major project in addition to its regular commitments. When club Secretary Liz Reinecke reached out to the Parks and Rec Department for ideas, the staff thought of a piece of land that had been donated to the city. The original owners had asked that it be used for nature-inspired play, not a traditional playground.

“In today’s environment, we always see kids with video games and phones, and they spend so much time indoors,” says Preston Allen, the club’s immediate past president. “They don’t spend much time out in nature. So the idea was to put together a park that was not the typical playground equipment, but things that kids would climb on and jump from one thing to another and be exposed to different kinds of plants — all those kinds of things.”

After a series of meetings with the community, the Greensboro club and city staff shared their vision for the play area with Robin Moore, director of the Natural Learning Initiative of the North Carolina State College of Design. Moore, an architect and urban planner, is internationally known for his designs of play and learning environments for children and has authored several books on the subject.

When designing a nature play area, he says, it’s not only the children he needs to consider. Many of today’s parents must be persuaded to take a chance on what once was a common outing. Not only do the

adults have misgivings about an all-natural play space — no foam floors, no padded surfaces — but the very idea of letting kids venture into a non-controlled environment gives them pause, reinforced by highly publicized cases of missing children.

“There’s a lot of anxiety among parents about letting their kids outdoors,” Moore explains. “The mass media plays these incidents time and time again to the point where people think a stranger is waiting to kidnap your kid around every corner. And the statistics don’t support that at all.”

Parents also worry about everyday risks, Martin says.

“(We) have to design ‘safe nature,’ so the kids feel safe and their parents feel safe allowing them to play and be creative and smell the flowers and watch the insects and not be afraid of a bee.”

Journalist Richard Louv brought these issues into the limelight with his 2005 book “Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder.” The book links deprivation of the natural world with childhood obesity, depression and attention disorders.

The not-for-profit organization that Louv co-founded, the Children & Nature Network, maintains a research library on the nature/child connection. Recent studies reveal a multitude of benefits for youth who spend time in nature: increased physical activity, decreased risk of obesity, improved relationship



skills, better academic performance and reduced stress and aggression.

Such play also connects children to the importance of being kind to Mother Earth, Moore says.

“Hopefully, that leads to an understanding of human dependence on the natural world ... linking that to the big picture in terms of global climate change and taking more care of the planet.”

For the play yard, Moore and his team concentrated on the site’s configuration, including grading, accessibility issues and placement of play elements, as well as on a detailed landscaping plan. From there, the Parks and Recreation staff took over, crafting a climbing fort from a stockpile of fallen pine trees, an all-natural child-size table and chairs, rope- and log-based climbing apparatus and more. A digging area lets children search for buried treasure hidden in the soil by staff.

The city’s botanical garden pros brought Moore’s landscape plan to life with plantings that encourage young explorers to wander off the beaten path.

“In the public gardens, the kid factor is ‘pretty’ and ‘respect’ and ‘don’t pick the flowers’ — all

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VONDA MARTIN, CITY OF GREENSBORO PARK PLANNER

the things that you can’t do,” Martin says. “You can do that in the Play Yard. You don’t have to be prim and proper. You can get your hands dirty and you can run around and you can fall down and you can skin your knee on the tree.”

Adds club Past President Allen, “You learn that when you fall down, you get up and you wipe it off and you keep on playing.”

And how will those protective parents react to a skinned knee?

“The parents that are into this are kind of scattered,” Moore says. “But if you put something compelling on the ground, they will appear. ... We know from our research that this kind of activity is very empowering and gives children a sense of control over their lives — the feeling that you can do anything.” ☐

