

# inspiration playground



A NEIGHBORHOOD PUB  
FIT FOR THE FAMILY,  
A SPECIAL OCCASION OR JUST  
A MEAL AWAY FROM HOME



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If there is a project launched to benefit our city's children, chances are you will find Brownie McGraw close by.

A former educator and administrator who now works part-time in the juvenile division at the Larimer County District Attorney's office, Brownie has a special place in her heart for the youth of Fort Collins. She currently serves on 10 boards, including the Poudre School District Foundation Advisory Board, the After School Program Task Force and she was instrumental in getting the new gym for the Youth Activity Center.

So it's no surprise that three years ago, when a resident approached former Mayor Ray Martinez with an idea for a special playground for children with disabilities, he called Brownie.

"So I went over (to his office) and watched this video about this couple in California who lost their child after about two weeks," she said. "The child had severe disabilities. They wanted to start an 'inspiration playground' in California in his memory – Shane's Playground – so that kids who had disabilities could play and other kids could play with them, too."

It touched her deeply, so she told Ray she was hooked and she'd be happy to help.

Brownie became the president of the all-volunteer committee All Children Together, formed to pursue the playground's construction. Through the process, the group learned that play is an integral part of growing up, but many families of children with disabilities avoid playgrounds because their children are unable to participate. Realizing the positive impact the project would have, Brownie and the other committee members got right to work on Colorado's first and only Inspiration Playground.

Bob Powell, vice president of All Children Together, is passionate about this project.

"This is the first project in the state to address this need," he said. "We are setting a new standard for playgrounds in the future."

The City of Fort Collins strongly supports Inspiration Playground and got on board by offering funds already earmarked for a new playground. That \$475,000 was a



great start, but it was going to take \$1.35 million to complete the project.

All Children Together persevered and received a grant of \$200,000 from the Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Grant Program (Colorado Lottery money). The Colorado Eagles Hockey Team joined in the effort and agreed to match all gifts from the community dollar-for-dollar up to \$250,000. The Fort Collins community has also stepped up, leaving only \$125,000 more to be raised to fully fund the project.

Early in the campaign, one young teen came forward in support of the program and became the first youth to make a donation. Thirteen-year-old Joseph Akmakjian donated \$1,000 of his own money that he had earned working at a restaurant on Saturdays.

Brownie explained that Joseph, who is confined to a wheelchair, has become a very public booster for the project, speaking to different groups in its support. She laughed as she remembered his appearance before the Loveland Rotary Club, where the audience was largely elderly.

"Joseph said when he was little, his mom could hold him and swing (at the playground) and could lift him up into the things and all and he could do it," she said. "But as he got older and bigger, she couldn't do that. So he said, 'Then I had to sit and watch my friends and then it got so I couldn't do that and I had to sit in the back with the old folks and all they talked about was aches and pains and politics.'"

Brownie said the group laughed hard because of Joseph's genuineness, but was also impressed by a boy who just wanted to be able to play with his friends.

Inspiration Playground will be located at Spring Canyon Community Park on Horsetooth Road, close to the foothills. In order to best meet the needs of the community, All Children Together sought input from local children with disabilities, adults, families, therapists and community members. They also hired Shane's Inspiration, the California nonprofit organization that now has extensive experience with building universally-accessible playgrounds.

ARTICLE BY KERRIE FLANAGAN ❖ JOURNEY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Brownie photograph by Alexis Hendrix • Swings photograph by Melissa Mullins



If you are inspired to help financially support Inspiration Playground, you can call 224-3462 or send a donation to: Inspiration Playground, c/o Realities for Children 1610 S. College Ave., Fort Collins, CO 80525 (Please make check to Community Foundation of Northern Colorado and note Inspiration Playground) Remember, the Colorado Eagles Foundation will match your gift dollar for dollar.

The equipment that will be found at Inspiration Playground will include:

## the giant

A stone creature that will guard the playground and offer great places to hide, climb and explore;

## tomahawk hillside slide

Designed after the weapon Native American legend says was used to slay the giant, this slide will be accessible to children of all abilities;

## eagle swings

Specially designed with high backs and safety straps for children who need the support. These swings will be next to traditional swings, so everyone can swing together.

## spring animals

A horse, wolf and buffalo mounted on springs will allow children to pretend they are riding through the old West;

## play panels

Children will bring the Native American legend to life as they navigate mazes to avoid the giant and find a way over the mountain;

## coldweather talking bob

A "talk tube" that mimics words, sounds and vocal patterns, and

## spring creek

Children will be able to dig at wheelchair-height sand tables and a spray park will give all a chance to get wet.



The playground design will be unique in that it will relate to Fort Collins history and culture. The Native American myth surrounding Horsetooth Rock was the inspiration for the equipment at the playground.

Having a playground where children with and without disabilities can play together is the first goal of Inspiration Playground. It would have been the perfect place for Joseph, now 15, to play with his friends and not feel left out.

In October 2007, the hard work by Brownie and the rest of the All Children Together team will become a reality and then all children – tall, short, wheelchair-bound, blind or deaf – will have a place where they can all play together. ❖



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