

Little City Foundation gets new place to play

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It was a modern day barn-raising of sorts as nearly 200 volunteers converged on the campus of the Little City Foundation in Palatine to build a long-awaited playground.

Not just any playground, but one that meets the diverse therapeutic needs of the largest percentage of their pediatric residents: those with autism.

In a little more than six hours Friday, volunteers assembled the 2,500-square-foot playground, moved 175 cubic yards of mulch, mixed 8 tons of concrete, built six picnic tables, trellises and planter benches and planted 10 trees.

"It proves that with a collective spirit, you can accomplish anything," said Shawn Jeffers, Little City Foundation executive director.

The bulk of the volunteers came from Discover Financial Services in Riverwoods. Employees turned out from

the audit, communications, human resources and law departments.

"This is my community, my neighborhood," said Joanna Kalantzis, of Palatine, who works in Discover's corporate communications department. "I knew it was for a good cause."

The playground's main components are purple — a soothing color intended to create a calming environment — while pieces include a small rock climbing wall, rumble seat slide, swings and a "treasure tumble" filled with noisy beads.

For 50 years, Little City Foundation has cared for children with physical and intellectual disabilities, and increasingly that has meant children on the autism spectrum.

Ann Derrig's 16-year-old son, Timothy, has autism, and he has attended school and lived at Little City for eight years. The Libertyville mother had tears in her eyes as officials dedicated the playground

Friday.

"This has been a vision of ours for years, to have a place for our kids to play that's therapeutic and meets their gross and fine motor skills, while giving them a chance to be outdoors," Derrig said.

Another mother, Heather Figlioli of Park Ridge, whose 8-year-old son Vincent lives on the campus, described how parents had worked for years to obtain funding.

"Here we have this beautiful campus," Figlioli said, "But we never could get the funds for a playground. We needed hundreds of thousands of dollars."

It took a grant from Discover and Ka-boom!, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to creating safe play spaces, to help bring the project to life.

They arrived on campus earlier this summer for a design meeting, with parents, Little City staff members and therapists, as well as the children themselves, who drew on paper some of their favorite

components.

Dr. Frederika Theus, clinical services director for Little City, said it was challenging to design a community playground that would meet the individual needs of all the children on the autism spectrum. However, some common elements emerged.

"We wanted to make sure there were lots of motion pieces, as well as opportunities to touch and have sensation," Theus said. "We also wanted some pieces to make sounds, but not all of them. Too much sound can be disturbing to some children."

Jason Swangren, a Little City staff member, served as project manager. He has worked on the campus long enough to remember the individual swing sets behind each of the residences that eventually wore out.

"We knew we wanted to replace them, but we wanted a playground that's as much therapeutic as it is recreational," he said.