

volunteer spirit



This family organized an area that welcomes children with disabilities.



A Special Playground

Will and Sam asked one question when their parents told them their sister would never walk, run, skip, or hop. “How,” the brothers asked, “will Lily play tag with us?”

“We were thinking about all of these heavy things,” says Lynne Shaw about that period just after she and husband John learned Lily had spinal muscular atrophy. It’s a motor neuron disease where the spinal cord doesn’t carry movement messages to muscles, causing the muscles to atrophy.

The boys’ innocent query brought immediacy to the situation. “I thought, ‘That’s a good question,’” Lynne recalls. “She really can’t play.” The stay-at-home Nashville mother decided, that with enough help from others, she could level the playing field by creating a playground that would welcome all children, including those with physical, cognitive, or sensory disabilities.



Creating Lily’s Garden

As a first step, Lynne contacted Boundless Playgrounds, a national nonprofit organization that helps communities build play areas for kids at all developmental levels. Then she began laying the groundwork locally.

Her own neighborhood, Hillsboro

Lily’s Garden in Fannie Mae Dee’s Park (commonly referred to as “Dragon Park”) attracts many visitors, even people from out of state. The facility exceeds required safety standards.

West End, provided the perfect location. Fannie Mae Dee’s Park, just a few blocks from the Shaws’ home, features a kid-pleasing fountain shaped like a gigantic sea serpent (though most people refer to the beloved statue as a dragon).

The location seemed tailor-made for Lynne’s idea. “Harris-Hillman Special Education School is literally at the back door,” Lynne explains. “Public school Eakin Elementary is on one side of the park, and on the other side is the Ronald McDonald House. Across the street is Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital.”

Lynne pitched the project, a playground for all children, to the Metro

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Described as "spunky" by her mother, Lily now drives her wheelchair with confidence around Lily's Garden as she plays with other children.

Board of Parks and Recreation, suggesting that she form a non-profit 501(C)(3) to raise the necessary funds. "I expected it would be one of those situations where they would say, 'Oh, the liability is too great; we can't do that,'" says Lynne. Instead, metro parks enthusiastically agreed. Not only would the park system contribute the land and some funding, it would also provide labor and maintain the playground once completed.

Many Helping Hands

During the two-year grassroots fund-raising and design effort, each member of the Shaw family played a role and carried business cards with their titles. "I was the executive director," Lynne says. "Lily was the official tester. My youngest son, Sam, was the motion manager because he loves wheels. Will, my oldest son, was the junior project supervisor." And John, her husband? "I worked for two years for free," Lynne says dryly. "He basically underwrote the project."

Everyone she contacted eagerly supported the effort. "Orion Building Corp., the general contractor, wrote off its fee," she says. "People who owned concrete companies would pull up

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Planning The Design

Lynne worked with local landscape architect Kim Hawkins, as well as Boundless Playgrounds and Nashville's ADA Compliance Division. "We tried to reach broadly in order to cover a variety of disabilities," Lynne explains. The design includes ramps, wheelchair swings, rubber surfacing, raised sandboxes, and a water feature. Tables mix wheelchair openings with regular seating to promote mingling among all the children. Exits and entrances to equipment were cleverly designed as well.

The park is located at 2400 Blakemore Avenue in Nashville. For more information visit www.nashville.gov/parks/.

The design of the playground accommodates all children, regardless of their abilities, and addresses a variety of special needs.

The Star of the Project

When Lily's Garden opened in December 2001 as the first "boundless playground" in Tennessee, folks from all over began visiting. As for Lily, now 7, the hoopla at first left her a bit bewildered. "I'm not sure she realized it was going to be a playground for everybody in Nashville. She was like, 'Who are these people, and why are they on my playground?'"

They're at your playground, Lily, because your brothers wanted to play with their baby sister.

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and ask, "Do you need concrete?" Little kids brought pennies to school." In addition to metro parks, Vanderbilt University; the Junior League of Nashville; and Permovil, the Tennessee-based company that made Lily's wheelchair, contributed heavily to the project.

When installation work began, volunteers came forward. Others brought food and drinks to refresh the workforce. A nursery from Lynne's hometown of McMinnville donated 2,900 plants, with metro parks providing much of the landscaping labor.