



A place to play for all

By Angela Daughtry, News-Leader

If the Freedom Playground Foundation has its way, local children will have a new playground within the city of Fernandina Beach. But it won't be just any park. Rather, the First Coast Freedom Playground will be the area's first "universally accessible" playground, which means that children of all types of physical abilities will be able to use it.

Local resident Aaron Morgan first got the idea for an all-inclusive playground when he saw a show on television about a unique park in Ohio that was meant for all children regardless of their abilities.

"I was in Central Park with my little girl," he says, "and I thought, what if she was in a wheelchair?" Morgan says he lives within walking distance of five parks, but not one of them is accessible by wheelchair. He began doing research and found there was a park in Tampa called Freedom Playground, built by the Freedom Playground Foundation, a 501(c)3 organization.

Stefani Busansky, a Tampa resident who has a daughter with cerebral palsy, started the foundation around 2001. It was through her efforts that the first Tampa park was opened in February 2008 and the second in October.

The nearly \$1 million Busansky raised for the first Tampa park started with a \$5 donation from a woman who was a caregiver at her daughter's rehab center.

"She said she was tired of hearing me talk about it, so she gave me five dollars," says Busansky, a stay-at-home mother. After that, Busansky was inspired to start having fundraisers and writing grants. One of the largest grants was \$150,000 for each park from CVS pharmacy. The city also agreed to donate the land. Once the park was built, it was gifted back to the city, says Busansky.

She says she also "lucked out" by finding a great landscape architect, Ted Kempton. Now, she says, raising funds and awareness for Freedom Playgrounds is like another full-time job.

Busansky emphasizes that the parks are for all children, not just the handicapped. "It's about good park design that happens to be universally acceptable," she says, rather than parks made primarily for the handicapped.

"I think (the attitude) is slowly changing because when people go in (Freedom Playground), they say, 'Wow, this is a great park.'" The playground has even become popular with senior citizens, says Busansky, which was an unexpected benefit.

"I have two kids, with no hidden agenda or ego involved," says Busansky. "This is pretty much what I do. Now I'm writing grants for the Fernandina project, and I already raised funds for the design."

Morgan says the First Coast Freedom Playground likely won't be built for another two years. In the meantime, plans are being developed and grants are being sought to bring the concept to life. First Coast Freedom Playground has also become part of the Freedom Playground Foundation.

City commissioners have already approved the playground concept and a space behind the Atlantic Avenue Recreation Center has been identified as an ideal spot. The location was chosen because it offers proximity to other recreational activities such as the beach, pool and skate park.

Kempton, the architect from Tampa, has developed plans for the First Coast park. His design incorporates the entrance to Egans Creek Greenway as well as shade, accessible surfacing and a looped circulation system.

Morgan says he hopes to incorporate elements such as local history, art and nature into the playground, along with handicap-accessible areas. One element Morgan hopes to have is a model shrimp boat that kids can play on. It would have a wheelhouse and elements kids could touch and move. The park would also have a raised ramp walkway leading into the woods, with a "bird's nest" large enough for kids to sit inside. There may also be a musical area with chimes and drum-type instruments.

Another idea is for a sand pit in the middle of the park so kids can look for buried treasure, and a raised area where the entire park can be seen.

"We learned what works and doesn't work from the Tampa parks," said Morgan.

Accessibility by "Boundless Playground" standards means at least 70 percent of play activities can be enjoyed by children with physical challenges without having to leave their support behind, plus 25 percent of raised equipment must also be accessible. These are higher than ADA standards, which require only 30 percent of activities to be accessible. At Freedom Playground in Tampa, at least 70 percent of the activities are accessible to children with physical challenges, and 75 percent of raised equipment is also accessible.

"The purpose is for inclusion," said Morgan. "I want my children to not see differences."

Morgan says the foundation has already received a \$100,000 grant from a local charity, but expects the park to cost between \$700,000 and \$750,000. He says the bulk of the money will come from state and federal grants and donations rather than loans. The original cost was up to \$1 million, but was lowered by taking out some play equipment, which is the most expensive aspect of playgrounds.

Busansky says education on what the parks are about is a big part of what she does. "There's a lot to be done," she says. "It's not like I'm a groundbreaking pioneer."

Some organizations, Morgan says, have already helped out, such as a sign maker who will create park signage at minimal cost. Many others have approached him saying they would love to help out, and he is looking for more volunteers and organizations to partner with. The city's Parks & Recreation Department has also been extremely helpful, he says.

City Parks & Recreation Director Nan Voit said the group has been easy to work with and "very smart by following the proper channels. ... It's nice to see citizens working on something valuable to the community," she said. "They're keeping us in the loop. When they do meet with the architect, we're invited to go to the meetings."

"I just have one request," said Voit. "I just want to make sure there's a built-in game table," so adults can play chess or checkers while their children are playing. "We don't have anything like that," she added.

Park fundraiser

A fundraiser for the Fernandina's first Freedom Playground park is coming in September. For more information or to make a donation, call chair Aaron Morgan at (904) 335-7253 or e-mail aaron@freedomplayground.org, or write to First Coast Freedom Playground, P.O. Box 15158, Fernandina Beach, FL 32035.

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