

"Group Tries to Make Playgrounds Accessible for the Disabled"

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Stefani Busansky wants her two little girls to play together.

But the wheelchair her 7-year-old, Sarah, needs to move around makes it nearly impossible for her to use most playgrounds. Busansky first noticed the problem several years ago near their Tampa home.

"(Sarah) wanted to go on the playground, but it was surrounded by sand," Busansky said. "We couldn't push her chair through the sand. I just started thinking, wouldn't it be great if we could get all over this playground."

Then she read about a Boundless Playground in St. Petersburg, one of nine such playgrounds in Florida. Eight more are planned. The playgrounds are accessible to children in wheelchairs but are still fun for the able-bodied and are designed so they can play together.

"The whole concept of universal design is that it's good for everybody," said Amy Jaffe Barzach, co-founder and executive director of the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds. "What you see is a really fun place, and every child, regardless of disability, can get to the highest level. It's done through ramps and bridges, but it's not like a ramp at the bank. It's built into the play, so you don't even really realize it's special."

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act addresses playgrounds, Barzach said ADA guidelines generally focus on wheelchair accessibility. The Boundless Playgrounds address not only barriers for children with physical disabilities, but also developmental, cognitive and sensory disabilities.

Like Busansky, Barzach also was inspired by her child when she began the Boundless Playground movement. After her 9-month-old son, Jonathan, died of spinal muscular atrophy in 1995, Barzach remembered a little girl in a wheelchair months earlier who was unable to join the other children on a playground.

As a tribute to her son, Barzach, with the help of about 1,200 other volunteers from her community in Connecticut, spent the next 18 months designing, planning and building the first universally accessible playground in the country.

"It was a good healing project for the rest of us," Barzach said. "I know how to do projects. I don't know how to lose a child."

Jonathan's Dream, the inspiration for what would become Boundless Playgrounds, opened in West Hartford, Conn., in October 1996. Barzach and Jean Stapes, a certified playground safety inspector, co-founded the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds in 1997. The nonprofit organization has been involved with the creation of more than 100 playgrounds in 21 states and Canada with dozens more in development.

The organization has also worked with major playground equipment companies to provide Boundless-certified designs for costumers.

Allen Cooke, with American Park & Play, said the Boundless Playgrounds his company builds use the same components as that the company's other playgrounds. The difference is the ramps.

The children must "have the ability to roll a wheelchair from deck to deck to deck. They also have to have larger decks to turn around in."

Cooke said he'd love to see the Boundless Playground design applied to all playgrounds, but the costs can be prohibitive. He said the structures themselves require more parts, and replacing the sand that surrounds most playgrounds with a safe, wheelchair-accessible surface drives up the cost.

Many communities are working with nonprofit groups and private businesses to help with funding.

Gov. Jeb Bush, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz and representatives from CVS/pharmacy held a groundbreaking last month at for a Boundless Playground at Riverside Park in Miami. The other parks will be in Broward, Hillsborough and Miami-Dade counties.

The CVS/pharmacy Charitable Trust has earmarked \$950,000 to help with the construction of the eight playgrounds. The money will serve as a challenge grant to attract other donors.

Bush said the passion and commitment Barzach showed when she came to visit him three years ago convinced him that Boundless Playgrounds were right for Florida. He has since set a goal of 50 playgrounds for the state.

"We are making a difference, and soon we will have those 50 Boundless Playgrounds in the state," Bush said. "And hopefully we'll have more. Hopefully that will be how we design our parks and how we design our school playgrounds and how we organize ourselves from the very beginning."

The ultimate goal of the people behind the Boundless Playground movement is to put themselves out of a job.

"My long-term vision is that we would live in a world where people don't even think about designing playgrounds for disabled children," Barzach said. "Of course you would want to build something that could be used by everybody. People wouldn't even think about building playgrounds that leaves kids with disabilities out."