

# Daily News of Los Angeles

## UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE PLAYGROUNDS

### PROGRAM GIVES DISABLED KIDS A PLACE TO PLAY

April 19, 2008

Section: News

Edition: Valley

VAN NUYS - The mission a decade ago was simple: Build "one beautiful playground" for kids with disabilities so they too could soar on swings, frolic in sandboxes and traverse bridges.

For the folks at **Shane's Inspiration** -- a nonprofit started in 1997 to honor Shane Alexander, who only lived two weeks after being born paralyzed -- that mission seemed strong enough to get the roughly 180,000 kids with disabilities in Southern California to come out and play. But the children didn't come.

"There were a lot of haunting questions over the last 10 years," said Tiffany Harris, program co-founder, along with Shane's parents, Catherine Curry-Williams and Scott Williams. "Where are the children? Why aren't they coming? And how do we remove the bias? We didn't want this to be a hollow mission."

Today, the program has turned a corner with 16 universally accessible playgrounds in Southern California and more on the way, supported in part by the state's Proposition 40.

There also is an educational program in 40 schools aimed at combating bias against children with disabilities, and monthly play dates have brought out thousands of kids.

And now, waiting around the bend, are 80 playgrounds planned throughout the country and as far away as India.

The group's first big break came when then-Councilman Mike Feuer helped secure 2 acres at Griffith Park for **Shane's Inspiration**, which was completed in September 2000.

And the City Council passed an initiative guaranteeing that similar playgrounds would be built across Los Angeles.

Cardenas supported bill Funds for the project came in 2002, when current City Councilman Tony Cardenas, then-chairman of the budget committee for the state Assembly, backed a bill earmarking \$9.5 million of voter-approved Proposition 40 bond money for universally accessible playgrounds in Los Angeles.

“I started to realize that, fundamentally, we needed to do more, so I went ahead and championed it,” Cardenas said of Assembly Bill 716, which ensured that at least one universal playground would be built in each of the city's 15 council districts.

Within the next two weeks, more children will have the opportunity to play as more universally accessible parks open in South Los Angeles and the Fairfax District.

In the San Fernando Valley, one is slated for the county's El Cariso Community Regional Park in Sylmar later this year.

“I think you're seeing a spark from Los Angeles that's going to ignite the nation and the world,” said Jon Kirk Mukri, general

manager of the city Recreation and Parks Department, which has partnered with such organizations as **Shane's Inspiration** to build more playgrounds for disabled kids.

“It's a lab, a learning lab -- a real learning lab where kids can get together and see, except for wheelchairs and leg braces, there's not much difference between kids' laughter,” he said.

And the playgrounds also allow disabled adults the opportunity to play with their children and grandchildren.

“We want to have a fully accessible playground for all the families,” Mukri said. “Can you imagine the men and women coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with disabilities?”

Gale Williams remembers sitting on the sidelines while his kids jumped around on playground equipment.

The retired computer systems designer and father of four broke his neck in a car crash when he was 18, suffering full paralysis in his legs and partial paralysis in his arms.

“As a father, I didn't have any accessible playgrounds,” he said. “I might go someplace with them and watch them play.”

‘Expands their imagination’

A longtime advocate on behalf of those with disabilities, the 69-year-old Williams said being able to participate in something as seemingly small as a playground can have a profound effect on children with disabilities.

“What it does is it expands their imagination, where they know they can do something,” Williams said. “Play for a child with a disability helps them get into the mode of ‘Maybe I can do more. Maybe I can't be a concert pianist, but I can do other things.’”

The latest Americans with Disabilities Act playground standard states that if a playground has elevated ramps or platforms, 50 percent of the activities on those ramps and platforms have to be reachable by children with disabilities, said Virginia Hatley, director of design for **Shane's Inspiration**.

The ADA accepts the use of "transfer stations," or rises, in which children in wheelchairs have to pull themselves out of their chair in order to access ramps and platforms.

"They consider them a legitimate form of accessibility," Hatley said. "We don't consider that accessible; we consider that humiliating."

While **Shane's Inspiration** credits the ADA for paving the road for organizations such as theirs, the ADA's compliance board standards for playgrounds are limited because they must consider factors including costs.

Hatley said the price of universally accessible playgrounds generally runs about 20 percent higher than a standard playground -- anywhere from \$65,000 to \$1 million.

But despite the added cost, **Shane's Inspiration**, the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds and other groups are aiming for 100 percent fully accessible playgrounds for all kids.

"A child shouldn't have to drive from Chula Vista to Los Angeles to play," Harris said.

Safety committee `junior chair'

Cole Massie of Atwater Village only has to travel a few blocks to enjoy the **Shane's Inspiration** playground at Griffith Park.

An engaging 10-year-old boy with boundless energy, Cole said he's **Shane's Inspiration's** "junior chair" of the safety committee - a job he takes very seriously, as he pushes and pulls on playground bars and jungle gym steering wheels.

"My job as the chair of the junior safety committee is to make sure all the kids are safe," he said while lying on his stomach on the low deck of a playground apparatus, tapping a pole to check its sturdiness.

Born with cerebral palsy, Cole said the playground has allowed him to play on equal footing with other kids, which is great news to his mother, Michelle Massie.

Still, as Cole played on a recent weekday -- struggling to pull his body up and down steps and dragging himself across bridges -- his mother said she usually doesn't bring him to the playground unless it's for one of the monthly get-togethers organized by **Shane's Inspiration**.

"Unfortunately, when you go on weekends, it's very crowded and there are no special-needs kids," Massie said. "Generally speaking, it's just crazy."

Harris said the monthly "play dates" -- with able-bodied and disabled children -- were added as the group's mission has changed from building playgrounds to using them as an educational tool to end bias against children with disabilities.

An education program, "Together We Are Able," also includes tutorials with able-bodied elementary school students encouraged to give their honest -- and often negative -- opinions about kids with disabilities.

The children are then taken on a field trip where they're paired up to play with special-needs kids, which is followed by another classroom session.

“We don't make it easy,” Harris said. “There's this great trepidation as these two buses pull up. ... Two and half hours later, they've eaten lunch together and they've played and they don't want to leave.”

At Griffith Park, one boy asked Cole why he couldn't walk. Cole politely answered: “I was born this way.”

Question answered. Back to his safety committee duties.

Cole gave his reasons why he loves coming to **Shane's Inspiration**.

“It's like really fun for the kids,” he said. “Because here, it's alllllll about the kids.”