by Marnie Norris

IF YOU ASK ANYONE in the Village of South Elgin, about an hour northwest of Chicago, they will tell you the same fact: this is no ordinary community. South Elgin is a community that cares deeply.

Karen and Joe Cluchey, South Elgin natives, along with many others, are a living example of that. They decided to make a difference for children and adults with disabilities that will leave a legacy of true inclusion in this community for the next generation.

During the 2009 recession, when new park and playground projects were least likely to happen, they rose up to the task of building a state-of-the-art, fully-inclusive playground. And that effort really did take a village.

The First Spark

The inclusive playground in S.E.B.A. Park was initiated when the Village of South Elgin entered a national inclusive playground contest hosted by Shane’s Inspiration, an international non-profit leader that partners with communities to design, develop, and program inclusive playgrounds, and Landscape Structures, an international leader in inclusive playground equipment.

“It was originally started when our Director at the time received an email about the contest,” shared Kim Wascher, now South Elgin’s Parks and Recreation Director. “We put it out to our foundation, and asked if someone wanted to run with this.”

Karen received the phone call. Realizing the work this would entail, she had to decide if she could take this project on. That’s when she remembered one little boy who never got to play.

“You know, years ago, I was working as a special education assistant in the classroom with my little friend Zach, who was a kindergartner at the time using crutches and braces, “ Karen recalls. “He wanted to do everything by himself. But as soon as he got to the playground, there was no way for him to interact with his classmates,” she said. “He would take off as quickly as he could to be with his friends and more often than not he would be falling and tripping. He didn’t have a playground where he could be included.”

The personal experience of people with disabilities inspired the entire team.

“As staff, leading by example is key,” stated Shane Hamilton, Parks and Recreation Supervisor. “We have staff here who also have family members with disabilities. We get it. Everyone at the time just got it.”

And they took that personal passion and began reaching out into the community.

“I spoke with teachers, middle school principals, business leaders with the Village, and explained to them what this was and asked them if they could write a letter of recommendation, which all of them said yes definitely. Without even asking, they all said what can I do, how can I help? I want to be a part of this,” remembered Karen.

South Elgin was one of the contest winners, which established a partnership with Shane’s Inspiration, whose design and development team guided the process. Their first piece of guidance: build your base.

Growing the Village

The staff at parks and recreation, Karen, and her husband Joe knew this would require a large group of stakeholders to realize the vision.

“The Village supported the concept but at the time didn’t have the
funds to commit to the project. We are a small agency and don’t have staff to write all the grants. So we approached the FUNdation (a local philanthropic organization of which Karen is a member) to start a committee,” Shane shared.

The committee grew. They enrolled special educators, a former principal, business leaders, and many others. This diverse group offered access to diverse, potential funding sources. “We were going to different groups and asking for their help. And we would find people who were so excited about it, because everyone has their story of inclusion needs,” said Joe, a former Fire Chief for South Elgin.

And that outreach included those who would directly benefit from a fully-accessible, welcoming play space. “There are individuals in this community with disabilities. And when we started talking about it, they started sending emails to our village website. They started showing up at recreation board meetings and saying, thank you,” Shane recalled. “As a recreation organization and volunteer committee, we are really plugged into the special needs community.”

This critical outreach engaged people with disabilities with the process. Utilizing Shane’s Inspiration’s community design model, it also allowed this important group of stakeholders to give input into the design itself, making sure the S.E.B.A. playground didn’t miss an inclusion beat. “Every aspect of the design process we couldn’t have done without the support of Shane’s Inspiration, because we were new to designing an inclusive playground,” shared Karen. “We started with their community design workshop to tap into our community and see what they were looking for in an inclusive playground. From there, we gave our design needs to Shane’s Inspiration’s design team, who did a marvelous job of designing a playground that fit the needs of our area.”

Design in hand, they were ready to fundraise in a struggling economy, which presents many needs and few resources. Given this, how do you sell an inclusive playground as a critical community need when most have little idea of what it is?

Sharing the Vision, Raising the Money

Unless you’ve seen a child with a disability able to swing for the first time in his life, it can be hard to describe the power of an inclusive playground. And communicating your vision clearly is key when raising those dollars. “People don’t necessarily understand inclusive playgrounds,” stated Karen, who speaks from a good deal of experience now. “But once you make that presentation, they get it. You can see the lights go on.”

The playground committee started with their marketing content by partnering with Shane’s Inspiration to develop a sponsorship package. “We all sat down and put together a presentation that was consistent to everywhere we went. So we all went to various groups, but we all used that same presentation. And it touched the heart strings,” Shane said.

Once the material was ready, they spread the word to strategic potential partners and the community at large, combining grassroots support with higher-level corporate and foundation sponsorship. “We had to be creative and look in many places for support. We made people understand that this is a destination facility. This is not just for South Elgin. This is for the entire community and beyond. That definitely helped with the fundraising,” Karen stated.

Even school children were inspired to create change. “It inspired awareness. We had school kids saying, ‘We want to raise money for this playground.’ And they did. They started ‘Change for Change’ by collecting coins.” Joe remembers.

And the donations kept coming in through cash and physical support. The playground committee turned over every stone. Kim Wascher shared, “All of the earth work for the project was an in-kind donation. We received all the engineering that way and completed the sensory garden through an in-kind donation with a landscape company and an Eagle Scout. That would have been so expensive.”

The committee’s consistent vision, focus, and word of mouth paid off. The Hoffer Foundation, the philanthropic foundation of the Hoffer Plastics Corporation, a South Elgin partner of 63 years, became one of the early angel investors through a matching grant. “Our whole passion has been taking all the blessings we’ve been able to accumulate and be a part of the community and improve the opportunity for people to enjoy themselves,” shared Bill Hoffer, President and CEO.

Bill’s first contact was Karen. “She came up and met with all of us and really outlined her dream of this park and playground along the river. It really struck a chord. It was almost serendipitous, everything coming together. I think Karen deserves a tremendous amount of credit for her passion...
and her leadership in making this happen.”

However, he and his daughters were inspired to give for another, more personal reason.

“We have a young man with autism who works here. We’ve learned a lot about his passions,” shared Bill. “We’ve gotten a real opportunity to see inclusion firsthand. We’re touched by this idea of creating S.E.B.A. Park and having it all inclusive, where families with a child with a disability could go down there and the whole family could participate together. It really struck a chord with us.”

The Hoffer Foundation’s matching grant spurred more investment. However, fundraising presented continuous challenges. Sources would come forward, then fall away. And, anyone who has been a part of a long-term passion project knows it can be hard to sustain the inspiration.

What kept them going?

According to Sue Welu, former principal, special education teacher, and committee member, “It was the group. We could laugh through times that were difficult, and there was always someone to continue us in the right direction. And everybody played a role in that, so it wasn’t just one person.”

For everyone, the community and the commitment to inclusion kept them spreading the message during the hardest fundraising periods. “You just have to be resolute in your commitment,” said Joe. “Think of the impact it will have. We are in the position where we see the people it will benefit. So by putting yourself there, how do you quit?”

They didn’t.

“No one person said we should stop this. It wasn’t even in the conversation,” confirmed Shane.

Passion + Planning + Communication + Community = Success.

The S.E.B.A. Park inclusive playground opened on a warm sunny day on August 8th.

The day before, the playground committee members and recreation staff were still pushing themselves to learn more about inclusion. They participated in Shane’s Inspiration’s training on fostering social inclusion through My PlayClub®, their family program, and Together, We Are Able®, their powerful social inclusion education program that promotes compassion in schools.

Then it was time to hit the playground! “The day before we opened up the park, the committee got to go down and see it,” shared Sue. “We had the young adults with disabilities from Fox Valley Special Recreation there, and the squealing that was going on as they were experiencing this for the first time just brought tears to your eyes.”

Playing It Forward: The Long-Term Legacy of S.E.B.A. Park’s Inclusive Playground

Today, the inclusive playground in South Elgin is a busy place. In the summer, the playground averaged two buses per day. One school for children on the autism spectrum drove an hour from Chicago just to play there.

Based on attendance alone, this powerful community appears to have been successful, because it is providing a resource where none existed for families living with significant disabilities.

“Now, every ramp, every platform leads to something to do. At eye-level, there are things for a child in a wheelchair to do. And that doesn’t mean that the typical child can’t come here to play. They love it. These kids get out of their cars and say, ‘It looks like Disneyworld!’” exclaims Shane.

The physical barriers have definitely been removed. But measuring long-term success, in terms of a change in acceptance and awareness of people with disabilities, can be more difficult. How do you measure the impact of inclusion when the barriers to it are invisible?

“Sometimes the relative impact is hard to judge because of what you’re trying to do here. When these families’ kids go to one of the regular parks, they get to sit over there on the side while the other kids get to run and play and jump. In their world, this can become their park. Hopefully, it will provide a real memory to them as an individual and for their family,” reflected Bill.

From what the committee members have observed, the families are deeply impacted.

Joe remembered one father, who was pushing his daughter with severe physical and mental disabilities in the Sway Fun, a rocking boat.

“He was sitting right across from her, and we were just kind of pushing it back and forth, and she was just smiling and laughing. The guy came off in tears, and he said ‘You know what? When you have a child that’s profoundly disabled, you don’t always get many good days. This was one of the best ones.’”

Other snapshots of success arise from the social environment that the playground is creating. For Shane, that has a personal impact.

“When we get our little guy who has autism down there, we don’t have to worry about pointing or laughing. Inside the walls of this
Inclusion truly has rooted at S.E.B.A. Park. People from all over see it growing on the playground. The best testament to this community's success is that it's spreading. Joe shared a memory of when a neighboring community first listened to their inclusive playground presentation. “A guy told us, ‘Why would I donate to your project when we don’t have anything in our community?’ Guess what they are working on now? They are building their own.”

If You Build It

The inclusive playground at S.E.B.A. Park took a few years to realize. The first play space and sensory garden are complete. An additional early-childhood phase is in the works, for which the committee is enthusiastically fund-raising $335,000. With so much experience behind them, they have some sound advice to share for communities looking to build their own inclusive playgrounds.

Be Informed: “Understand what you are getting into. There are costs that you might not think about. For example, because of the location being in a flood plain, there was a lot of earth work and water storage that came into play. And also make sure that all the roads and pathways are accessible. Make sure all that is done before you open,” shared Kim.

Identify Your Champions: “Who are going to be your champions? Find the right people. Without Shane’s Inspiration, we would not have had our focus. We would not have had the right direction. We would have failed. It’s the little things, like Shane’s Inspiration’s team saying to Karen ‘Don’t give up.’ It’s those few words. Partner with people who know what they are doing, people who are experienced in this.”

See What’s Out There: Joe added, “The best way to do it: go see someone else’s. We went out to Shane’s Inspiration’s inclusive play-grounds in Southern California. Open up your minds, open up your heart. Go watch an inclusive play date.”

Don’t Take It Personally: For Shane, it took a thicker skin. “I can’t tell you the amount of times we were told ‘no’ before getting the million dollars we raised. You’re going to be told ‘no.’ Don’t take it personally. Let it go in one ear, right out the other, and start talking to the next donor.”

Be Creative and Communicate: Karen looked everywhere for fundraising inspiration. “Think out of the box. Talk to different people. Get ideas from everyone. The more people involved, the easier it is to divide up the work. There are angels out there to invest. You can find them and make them understand the needs.”

Have Faith In Your Impact: “Don’t give up. It can happen. Have faith that you are making a difference. After seeing the difference it’s made in our community, it is worth every single challenge,” said Karen.

Her husband Joe couldn’t agree more. “When you see the difference it makes, how do you not fight for it to be successful? Go watch the impact this will have on people. This learning environment that you are creating is life changing.”

This Village truly is a community that cares about changing lives for all its community members, for the better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marnie Norris is Director of Programs for Shane’s Inspiration and has worked with them since 2002. Shane’s Inspiration is a national organization whose vision is to foster a bias-free world for children with disabilities. Their mission is to create inclusive playgrounds and programs that unite children of all abilities.