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Wabash Inclusive Playground's Story and Funding Updates

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WABASH COUNTY, IN – The Wabash Inclusive Playground Committee is thrilled to announce that construction funds are now 78% secured from private donors, corporate sponsorships, community fundraisers, Stellar Community funds, grants, and the City of Wabash. The committee's goal is to obtain the remaining construction funds needed by the end of this year to begin building early in 2018.

This concept for inclusive play was infused in Shelly Myers' (chair of the Inclusive Playground committee) life about four years ago when she was cleaning out her email inbox and came across a lost email from her sister-in-law from months prior. Little did she know that upon clicking on that email and the link it contained that her life's course would be drastically altered.

When she opened the link included in the email it led her to a video about an inclusive playground in Portland, Oregon called Harper's Playground. This playground was created by the parents of a young girl with special needs because she was not able to play at their local playground with her sister. Myers watched this video awestruck by how common sense the inclusive approach to play was and asked, "How, as a mom of a child with special needs, have I never even heard of inclusive playgrounds? I have no doubt experienced what it is like to take a child with a walker to the playground, only to realize that it is nearly impossible for him to get through the mulch, up the steps and then back down again by way of slide, monkey bars, or any other play element. We typically avoid the playground because it is more work than it is worth. And who wants to play with the kid whose mom has to carry him around the equipment to help him do everything? But, without help, the only thing Cason can do at the playground is sit and watch everyone else play. Why are ALL playgrounds not built for ALL children? And why does Wabash not have a playground like this? Upon further research, I learned that there were only a handful of inclusive playgrounds in the state at that time, and the closest one to Wabash was over an hour away. My future was solidified from that moment forward."

This is where the Wabash Inclusive Playground story began. A story about a family who wants to create a new standard of play in their community so that

children can look past ability or disability and can focus instead on the one thing that all kids should be able to focus on; play. Luckily, as she began to share her interest in building an inclusive playground in our community, she was met with overwhelming support from family, friends, others with special needs children, the community, local organizations and city government. The idea took hold and before she knew it a committee was formed, the city had designated land for the playground (an old factory site that is being repurposed) and then the group was connected with a landscape architect who was ready to make this dream a reality. Next the group partnered with the Community Foundation whom became the fiscal sponsor, allowing the group to operate with 501(c)3 non-profit status. The committee, which includes everyone from the mayor to parents, a physical therapist, the parks superintendent, and representatives from many local businesses, would be responsible for creating the design and the fundraising efforts for the playground. Upon completion of construction, the city will take ownership of the playground and becomes responsible for regular maintenance and upkeep, using endowment funds the committee plans to raise for repairs or replacement parts as needed.

The design process for the playground was finalized in early 2016. The group worked collaboratively with parents, families with special needs children, therapists with expertise in the types of equipment beneficial to children with special needs, and designers and architects experienced in creating inclusive spaces. Additionally, the council on aging provided the group with information to make sure the space is user-friendly not just for people of different abilities but for those of different ages as well. The committee's desire is to create a space that is not only inclusive but also multi-generational. As opposed to using a main play structure in the design, the team opted to create a hillside that curves around, gradually ascending to a midpoint at about 8 feet high, and then gradually descending as one makes their way around the other side back to ground level. Essentially, it's a half bowl, with a variety of play components coming down the hillside from different heights. Inside of the surrounding hillside there are additional play elements that allow kids the opportunity to swing, spin, balance, or engage in a variety of other sensory experiences. The group has chosen to use poured in place solid safety surfacing that is conducive to feet and wheels which truly makes the space inclusive for all. The group's ultimate design goal was to not make it obvious who should go where, so the design caters to including everyone in all possible ways.

Now in July of 2017, the construction documents are ready to go out for contractor bids and a contractor should be selected within the next two months. At the end of the design phase, the estimated cost of the project was \$1.7million, meaning that was the fundraising goal. The committee has worked diligently over the past year fundraising privately with individuals and businesses, raising community awareness and funds through public events, and writing grants. The fundraising committee has successfully managed to secure \$1.33 million in funding to date. The support from the community is truly humbling and the

committee would like to extend a huge thank you to all the partners that have helped us come this far.

From the onset of this project, the group has consistently made the statement that this playground was going to be so much more than JUST a playground. As a committee, they have promoted this project as “More Than a Playground” because it is a project that will foster friendships that would otherwise not have formed, allow all kids to make playground memories, and it will change lives. When kids are raised with separation by ability as the norm, that norm will remain. If society erases that boundary and give kids a place where they are all able to play, explore, imagine and create without limitations they will start to see each other for who they really are and a new culture will form: A culture that will be continued as today’s generation of children has children and they teach their kids about inclusion. This playground is set to make Wabash more of a family destination, impacting our community economically, and that will help shift the culture, like a pebble thrown in the water that sends ripples far and wide. It truly will be more than just a playground.

The Wabash Inclusive Playground will be located on the three-acre green space west of the Wabash County YMCA and adjacent to the John Drook Memorial Skate Park at 410 South Carroll Street. If you are interested in more information about the project visit Facebook @morethanaplayground or visit the website morethanaplayground.com to watch the project video. To make a tax-deductible donation to the Wabash Inclusive Playground mail checks to the Wabash County Community Foundation at P.O. Box 7 North Manchester, Indiana 46962 with “Wabash Inclusive Playground” in the memo or go to morethanaplayground.com to donate online.

The All Inclusive Playground operates as a 501(c) 3 corporation through use of the Community Foundation . For more information about the Community Foundation, please visit cfwabash.org or call at 260.982.4824.

Grow Wabash County (legal name Wabash County Business Alliance) is a not-for-profit corporation designed to assist business development needs, promote livability, foster entrepreneurship, and many other important functions in Wabash County, and is the new collaborative organization formed with the merger of the EDG of Wabash County and Wabash County Chamber of Commerce. We partner with local, regional, state, and federal agencies to accomplish our mission. For more information about the Wabash County Business Alliance, please visit www.growwabashcounty.com or call at 260.563.5258
