

“A Playground for Everyone:” How Children, Facebook, Baseball, and a Blind Raccoon Brought “Silver Summit” to Life

By Jenny Montgomery

In October 2014, about fifty children and hundreds of other residents gathered behind a ribbon stretched across the entrance to Montana’s first large-scale, accessible playground. Ten-year old wheelchair user Melina Peck held the scissors as the others watched during a reverent pause. With one snip, the ribbon fell away and kids streamed into the play space on foot and on wheels, followed by the new playground’s fuzzy mascot, “Silver,” a six-foot raccoon with a white cane, who accepted hugs and high fives from those who came to celebrate.

The culmination of a three-year process of planning and fundraising, the grand opening of “Silver Summit: A Playground for Everyone” included the key players that helped bring the playground to life: children led the way, followed by their parents and public officials like Mayor John Engen and Parks Department Director Donna Gaukler. Well-known disability advocates turned out to join the fun, many wheeling with ease across the playground’s rubberized surface. Generous donors and citizen’s groups like Kiwanis, Rotary, Girl Scouts, and

A playground for everyone
SILVER SUMMIT



Rural Institute

Promoting Inclusive Communities
The University of Montana Rural Institute for
Inclusive Communities

52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056
(888) 268-2743 or (406) 246-5467
(460) 243-4200 (TTY), (406) 243-2349 (Fax)
ruralinstitute.umt.edu



Photo courtesy of the Silver Summit: A Playground for Everyone Facebook page.

Friends of Missoula Parks were on hand to admire the colorful adaptive equipment their contributions had made possible.

For communities studying the need for an accessible playground, Silver Summit offers a case study in perseverance and successful public-private partnership. The following principles helped a ragtag group of multitasking moms and their kids with disabilities join with city officials and community groups to create a top-notch accessible playground in a rural, low-to-middle-income state.

The eight “Ls,” which reflect the lessons we learned, can help other communities achieve their dream of inclusive play:

- Love your Parks department
- Let kids lead the way:
- Find local leaders who get it
- Level the playing field
- “Likes” pave the way: social media and messaging
- Look to the long-term
- Legislators can help
- Legacies inform the future

Love your Parks department

When I moved to Missoula from Seattle, which had an accessible swing in nearly every public park, I found my new community didn’t have a single swing that would work for my son with cerebral palsy. I didn’t write an angry letter to the editor and I didn’t threaten to sue Parks & Recreation. I scheduled an appointment with the director and thought in advance about what I could do to help.

It turned out that she was well aware of the need for an accessible playground and her vision was more ambitious than my own! She had been searching for a parent group with which to partner on fundraising and design and asked me to create one. Her budget was limited yet her goodwill and determination were powerful. We became unstoppable allies.

In other cities, Parks departments have sometimes reacted defensively to the “accusation” that their playgrounds are not accessible. They remind citizens that all certified playgrounds technically meet ADA standards. True, but ask a child using a manual wheelchair whether wood chips are an obstacle to play. The fact is, if we required all playgrounds to be truly accessible, they would be so expensive we would have very few. The high cost of wheelchair accessible surfacing accounts for this in large part and currently requires that we do some private fundraising.

Envision your goal and present yourself to your Parks Director as a person willing to help

solve a pressing problem and put a feather in the department’s cap. If you encounter a deer-in-the-headlights look, accentuate the positive. You understand the Parks budget is a fraction of what they need just to maintain existing facilities, much less add new ones. You realize that costs for accessible playgrounds that meet the need for uncrowded space, smooth surfacing, secure fencing, and adaptive equipment frequently exceed half a million dollars. Point out that accessible swings are cheap and can serve nearly anyone. Listen to their thoughts, affirm their underlying desire to meet the recreation needs of every child, and cheerfully remind them of the developmental benefits of play: physical, social, emotional and cognitive. Let them know that community fundraising efforts for accessible playgrounds are almost always successful because no one wants to see children left out. Stoke their enthusiasm and begin to hatch a plan—a plan to be developed with real decision-making roles for end users, the children.

Let kids lead the way

Accessible playgrounds are truly in their infancy. From the wooden ramp-and-platform



Photo courtesy of the Silver Summit: A Playground for Everyone Facebook page.

designs of the 70s and 80s to the slick, injection-molded OmniSpinner of today (a Landscape Structures merry-go-round with transfer points and supported seatbacks), inclusive playground equipment has come a long way. The problem is, well-intentioned equipment designers are usually able bodied and don't always see things from a child's point of view.

Collect images from the Internet and create a fun, colorful PowerPoint slide show of accessible playgrounds from around the world and the latest designs from reputable equipment companies that work hard to serve kids of all abilities. Landscape Structures, Kompan, and others offer long-term warranties, safety certifications (IPEMA and ASTM), and durable, innovative pieces.

Next, gather kids for focus groups. We held separate groups for kids using wheeled mobility and kids on the autism spectrum. We also consulted with kids who had low vision and/or hearing difficulty, and able-bodied kids (to ensure the playground would be exciting for them too).

Show these groups your PowerPoint, discussing what appeals to them and what they don't like. Give them a paper survey with photos of equipment using the "smiley face" scale so you can crunch numbers later. Inform kids of your budget and any safety concerns and let them debate tradeoffs. For example, a swing that accommodates a wheelchair can cost over \$50,000. Our wheeled mobility focus group decided the money would be better spent elsewhere, given the cost and also the safety concerns of a such a heavy swing hitting small children. The children and youth in the focus groups chose \$500 adaptive swings to which they could transfer.

Allowing kids with disabilities to drive the design process not only results in a better playground, it offers many children their first chance at public advocacy. Kids said it was empowering for them to tell Parks & Recreation staff, "Your regular playgrounds aren't working for us," and to be part of creating an exciting alternative. Their input has gone on to influence the design of new neighborhood playgrounds in Missoula, where a basket swing, accessible ZipKrooz zip-line, or high quality musical instruments along paved pathways ensure that everyone will find something to enjoy. Five years later, some of these focus groups kids have gone

on to do public speaking or advocate at state and federal levels about disability issues.

These kids also saw the power of fundraising, as they brought in tens of thousands of dollars in pledges for the playground through their adaptive baseball game and other events. Their fundraising efforts pulled in hundreds of friends, families, and community partners and raised awareness about inclusive playgrounds and community design.

Find local leaders who get it

Disability touches everyone, but some members of your community will have a highly personal connection to your cause. Our first major donation (\$5,000 from a local hospital foundation) was facilitated by a hospital staffer whose son has vision impairment. Our all-abilities baseball game raised over \$50,000 in pledges and sponsorships, thanks to the help of our local minor-league team owners, who had a young family member with a seizure disorder. Local police, highway patrol, postal and sanitation workers also supported the event as volunteers and donors.

As we conducted our fundraising "roadshow," visiting charitable groups and applying for grants, we met many community leaders with disabilities as well as parents, grandparents, siblings and friends of those with disabilities. They understood exactly what we were aiming at, nodded vigorously throughout our presentations, and were passionately motivated to give, get involved, or make requests on our behalf to others in a position to help.

Level the playing field

Budget constraints are real, but if at all possible, don't let them stop you from staying true to your goal and choosing accessible surfacing. It's incredibly disappointing to a child using a wheelchair to see accessible play equipment planted in a sea of impassable wood chips. Make pour-in-place rubber or artificial turf a priority for your playground and you will never regret it! While it may chew up \$50,000-\$300,000 of your hard-won fundraising dollars, depending on playground size, it is a necessity. In our focus group, kids using wheeled mobility vented at length about the frustrations of muscling through or getting stuck in

wood chips, grass, and sand in public recreational spaces. It was their number one priority to have smooth surfacing, allowing them to speed alongside their playmates and use their energy for playing and having fun. Rubberized surfacing is also a boon to aspiring walkers, seniors, and toddlers, offering a bit of cushion should a fall occur.

Can you add rubberized surfacing after the fact, pouring it around existing equipment? Sadly, no. It requires a full site excavation, a special gravel substrate, and other prep work specific to the job. It is always best to plan for and install pour-in-place surfacing from the very beginning.

“Likes” pave the way: social media and messaging

The day after meeting with our Parks director, a friend and I started a Facebook page for our “Playground Project.” It spread like wildfire, gaining hundreds of likes within 24 hours. Parents commented, asked how they could get involved, and shared our page with others. A grassroots group formed literally overnight, our list of potential donors was growing, and our enthusiasm was sky-high as we realized from the community’s response that the playground would eventually become a reality.

A graphic designer volunteered to create our logo, business cards, and stationery (we sent thank you notes to every donor). With a little trial and error, we managed to mount a WordPress website in a few nights, complete with a PayPal donate button. Over the next three years, we used our social media presence to gather volunteers, build focus groups, publicize fundraising events, feature kids who got involved, ask for feedback on equipment, and thank donors. Without Facebook, I’m not sure how we would have done it.

Consider including your playground’s hashtag on the welcome sign, enabling visitors to tag photos of their visit and encouraging a sense of community online as well as at the playground.

Look to the long-term

It took us over three years to bring our project from conception to completion, a year longer than we originally planned. We hit snags and roadblocks, the cost of our playground rose as we added more features, we cycled through burn out,

and our kids were getting older. Would we finish in time for them to enjoy the playground?

We did! But we had to pace ourselves and keep the long game in mind. It takes steady effort and patience to continue reaching out to potential donors, giving fundraising presentations, attending planning meetings, and stoking community enthusiasm through social media and marketing. The good news is, it gets easier...your first big grant application becomes the template for the all the others. You become more confident about asking for funds. Eventually, the end goal is finally in sight. “All we have to do is not give up,” my husband said when we were in the difficult early stages of starting a business. The same holds true for creating a playground.

Look to the long-term when choosing equipment and materials as well. Don’t skimp when budgeting—it is better to add one year of fundraising so you can build a playground that will last five to ten years longer. (The average shelf life of a playground is 25 years.) Also, try to keep some money in the bank after the playground opens, to replace equipment or add features as innovative pieces come on the market.

Legislators and officials can help

Here in Montana, Representative Jean Price introduced a bill in our state legislature setting aside \$100,000 in matching funds from Fish, Wildlife and Parks for communities to make their playgrounds more accessible. The lobbyist from our local Independent Living Center helped us approach her with simple draft legislation, which she was happy to carry forward.

Your state, city, or school may also be willing to allocate funds to address the lack of options for kids with disabilities. Many people are still unaware of the problem, but once you find a champion in your mayor, city council member, local representative, or school board member, they will speak eloquently on your behalf and add legitimacy to your cause. Include them in fundraisers, get quotes for press releases, and make them a big part of your ribbon cutting celebration.

Above all, don’t give up. Accessible playgrounds are a model for inclusive society. It makes a strong impression on children to visit a

place where people with differences are considered, accommodated and fully included. Whether your goal is a single adaptive swing or a million-dollar destination playground, it will be among your most gratifying accomplishments to join the movement for inclusive play.

Legacies inform the future

Even after the ribbon cutting, your playground will continue to impact lives for years to come. Thousands of children and families will create memories there. Birthday parties, play dates and summer camps will fill the space with laughter and exhilaration. Playground planners in your own city will think twice before installing inaccessible features and other communities will reach out to learn from your work. One day, your playground will be replaced by a better one, as equipment companies bring forth new designs and better materials in response to feedback from kids and families about playgrounds like yours.

In order to make inclusion as successful as possible at your playground, meet with your Parks department and have a frank conversation about future programming and staffing. Now that you have an accessible play space, what's possible? What other ideas does it inspire? In Missoula, our Parks director hired an Outdoor Recreation Specialist with a strong background in inclusive programming shortly after our playground opened. Soon, there were a plethora of after-school and summer offerings able to accommodate a much wider range of children than before. From accessible river rafting to adaptive cycling and ropes course challenges, kids with disabilities had more to choose from and were able to recreate side by side with their typical peers. Newly hired Parks staff received thorough training on inclusion and learned

to improvise confidently when accommodating children of all abilities. Accessible transport options were added and the playground was incorporated into many camp activities.

As change builds upon change, as friendships form and connections are forged, your playground's legacy may be much greater than you now imagine. As a new generation of kids, families and communities come to see inclusion as the norm, who can imagine what surprises the future of play holds in store?

Written by:

Jenny Montgomery

Resources:

- The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) is a public health practice and resource center on health promotion for people with disability. Check out their playground resources here! <https://www.nchpad.org/10/36/Playgrounds~for~All>
- A film about Silver Summit, "For All:" <https://vimeo.com/117884009>
- A webinar with reports on inclusive playgrounds in Missoula and Helena. <http://healthinfo.montana.edu/health-wellness/rhi-webinars.html> (see webinar archived in August 2014)

For Additional Information

Montana Disability & Health Program

The University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities

52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056

(888) 268-2743 or (406) 246-5467

(460) 243-4200 (TTY), (406) 243-2349 (Fax)

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