

More than just a place to play

Rotary clubs, parents unite to raise \$60,000 for Riverbend Elementary playground equipment

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By [PAULA ANN SOLIS](#)

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When the children at Riverbend Elementary set their eyes on the school's new playground, they'll see bright colors, nets to climb over and smooth gravel to run across. The only thing missing from their sights will be the community that worked almost five years to make their recess dream a reality.

School principal Michelle Byer doesn't mince her words about the state of the old playground — it was a sad and pathetic site. Dirt hills and trees were more often part of children's games than the worn-out equipment was.

"Broken, old pieces of (the playground) kept getting taken away," Byer said. "There was just this empty space and it would never get filled. It was just too expensive."

The issue of a decaying, worn out playground wasn't a concern just for aesthetics.

Research out of Stanford University has shown recess, though normally not considered part of a school's learning environment, is critical to keeping a student's attendance up and their attention in the classroom, especially in low-income schools.

Lisa Peters, administrative assistant at Riverbend, first said something about the need to make a change five years ago, during a different principal's time at the school. Wheels started turning, Rotary members were interested in helping, and the Parent Teacher Organization had willing volunteers. Then the principal left the school and plans fell to the side.

It took a combination of a principal with a drive for change, a tri-Rotary club commitment and PTO members willing to put in the hours. That combination came together two years ago, and the momentum to make the playground a reality sped up and never slowed down.

"For us as a school, it's just amazing how the community has come together and helped us see our vision," Peters said.

Businesses donated supplies at discounted prices, others gave large sums of money, and parents met weekly to organize fundraisers.

"Our playground is a community hub," Byer said. "Kids from RALLY, (Juneau Youth Services), reading and science camps, Mendenhall Valley Library, families in the community — they all use this playground."

Now that \$60,000 playground, fully installed with three new pieces as of Saturday, is something the school can be proud to present to the community. The installation crew, in keeping with the charitable community spirit, was made up of volunteers from Juneau Rotary clubs, Juneau School District maintenance employees and parents.

"Not only did Rotary help us raise money for this project and did all they could for this project, but they also donated their time," Peters said.

Charlie Williams, president of the Juneau Glacier Valley Rotary, took a few days off from work to spend his time, from morning until the crew was gone, to install the playground pieces. As a Rotarian, he said the project was more than just fulfilling a volunteering requirement.

"When I'm working on this project, I'm thinking about the kids, 100 at a time, twice a day, every school day, who are going to be out here," Williams said. "This is something that is going to bring a lot of joy to a lot of kids for a long time."

Williams was hesitant to take credit, explaining the commitment by local businesses to donate however they could made the project possible. Some businesses did more than asked, improving areas near the playground and solving drainage issues just because they were already there and saw a need.

"See a need, fill a need," said Anna Burton, the Riverbend PTO vice president and a mother of two students who attend the school. (Full disclosure: Anna Burton is the wife of Empire Publisher Rustan Burton.)

Byer and others at the project site described Burton as a crucial member during the planning and building process, adding she also provided meals and snacks for the workers.

“I just want to come on the first day and watch the kids,” Burton said, “to see their excited faces.”

Byer is looking forward to providing a formal “thank you” to the many partners who made the playground a reality. A formal ceremony with members from Superintendent Mark Miller’s office and other volunteers is in the works.

“We need to figure out some way to thank this community for what they’ve done for us,” she said.

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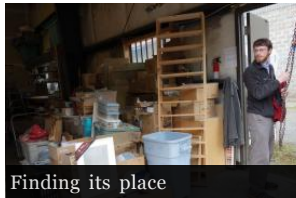
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