

A Place Where Everyone Can Play

Redwood City's new Magical Bridge Playground will bring together disabled kids and adults with the "typical" community.

By Scott Dailey



Ava Villareal needed a place to play.

At six years of age, she was developing normally on a physical scale. But cognitively, she functioned as younger than a year-old. Her mother, Palo Alto resident Olen-Villareal, was uncomfortable with the stares Ava received at local parks – and frustrated Ava’s cognitive challenges kept her from using traditional playground equipment.

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The first Magical Bridge Playground at Mitchell Park in Palo Alto.

The elder Villareal approached the City of Palo Alto, which provided a corner of Mitchell Park on the town's south side for a new playground concept – one that would offer swings, slides and other equipment that could be enjoyed by children and adults with both physical and cognitive disabilities, and by everyone else, as well.

From the start, the idea was decidedly not to create a “disabled playground.” Instead, it was to bring together the disabled and non-disabled with imaginatively designed features that would appeal to everyone, and would be accessible not just to people in wheelchairs – the main focus of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act – but also to those whose disabilities involved something other than restricted movement – for example, autism and visual and hearing impairments.

That was seven years ago. In April 2015, after extensive fundraising, design work and a worldwide search for suitable equipment, the “Magical Bridge” playground opened at Mitchell Park. The name, suggested by Villareal's other daughter, Emma, stems from the arched bridge that connects the playground with the rest of the park, and from the idea that there's something “magical” both about play and about bringing people together.

At typical city parks, children's play areas often have swings, slides, monkey bars and other equipment clustered together. Villareal explains that that doesn't work, for example, for people with autism, who often find the crowded play area overstimulating. Consequently, the Magical Bridge playground is divided into spread-out zones, for swinging, sliding and climbing, spinning (on a wheelchair-accessible carousel) and other play.

One of the most impressive areas is the music zone, where a tall arch called the “laser harp” plays musical tones in



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response to people moving or dancing underneath and breaking laser beams that trigger the sounds. The music is programmed in particular to be soothing to people with autism. The entire playground is surfaced with spongy-feeling outdoor carpet that's soft to fall on but sturdy enough to support a wheelchair.

Now the next Magical Bridge playground is getting underway, at Red Morton Park in Redwood City. The City Council approved the project Sept. 12, allocating \$1.5 million toward the estimated \$3.3 million cost. The money had already been set aside to renovate Red Morton's playground, and Redwood City Parks, Recreation and Community Ser-

vices Director Chris Beth says Villareal and co-founders Jill Asher and Kris Loew, who together have started the Magical Bridge Foundation to spread the concept pioneered in Palo Alto, captured the city staff's imagination, especially when the subject was funding.

“I had heard of this in Palo Alto,” Beth says, “and being a fully inclusive and accessible playground for all is pretty terrific. But I've known, too, that it gets to be very expensive with the type of equipment and surfacing and everything that is needed to make that happen...But when Magical Bridge came and said, ‘Hey, we can do this, and we also have good connections for fundraising, and through our foundation we can help close that gap,’ then we were all in.”

The plan is to complete fundraising by the end of this year, and to finish the playground, adjacent to Valota Road at Red Morton Park, by late 2017 or early 2018. Beth says his department will invite the public to offer ideas at meetings and also online during the next two months.

Even before the city council took official action, Villareal and Asher were busily spreading the word at a coffee klatch in the Emerald Hills neighborhood in early September. The approximately 25 guests were enthusiastic about the concept.

“For me, it's about trying to bring communities together that otherwise would be separate,” said Beth Nowell of Redwood City. Added Amy Stratton, a San Mateo marriage and family therapist who works primarily with families that have special needs, “What I've heard a lot is that (parents) will take their kids to parks and sometimes they aren't accepted because they play differently than other kids, and so they feel they aren't welcomed at regular parks, so they've stopped going to parks. And something about Magical Bridge – it's physically ac-

cessible for a lot of kids, but also it's nice that everybody goes in with an open mind and accepts everybody in their uniqueness, and so people feel more welcomed at a place like that."

By "playing differently," Stratton said children with cognitive issues might want to play alone, or simply push an empty swing that another child might view as available and jump on. Stratton also said certain disabled children make vocal sounds that other children or parents might find confusing and tend to shy away from.

A visit to the Magical Bridge playground in Palo Alto on a recent weekday morning revealed several young children playing, and, according to their parents and grandparents, none had disabilities. Those parents and grandparents, however, were delighted with the playground.

Rachel Solomin, a Mountain View educator and parent, described herself as "very much of an advocate of sensory play for all children as being a very vital part of their education and their emotional and personal development." She said she had explained to her seven-year-old son that "people who have physical disabilities or disabilities of all kinds – visible and invisible – are part of our community and that they are as deserving of wonderful play spaces as we are. And also I like showing him that he can play beside children who can't push their own swing or who can't spin for themselves, and that he shouldn't look away from such children, and that he should ask their names and do all the things he would do with a child who is visibly neurotypical and physically unburdened by other types of disabilities."

Bill Vanderbeek, a Reno resident who lived in Palo Alto for decades, was visiting the playground with his young grandson, Chase. "I like the park because they've got a lot of interesting things that



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you don't see in other parks, which is probably because of the (accommodation of) disabilities," Vanderbeek said. "And it gives my grandsons a chance to be with other kids who do have disabilities. And they get to ride on some different stuff that you wouldn't see elsewhere." (Vanderbeek said Chase's favorite apparatus at the playground was a slide with rollers that spun and vibrated as kids slid down.)

In addition to starting the new playground at Red Morton, Villareal says the Magical Bridge organization is currently talking with people in Lafayette, Saratoga, Mountain View, Cupertino and Morgan Hill. The long-term vision, Villareal says, is "to create a solution that is easily reproducible and financially accessible to more communities, and ultimately to be able to create a playground that would be placed in our schools that would be mindfully designed, so that our schools that are teaching our children about including everyone can really underscore that during recess."

More information about the Magical Bridge playground at Red Morton Park is available on the Magical Bridge Foundation's website at www.magicalbridge.org.

