

Inclusive park eliminates barriers

Park

Ribbon cutting held Thursday at Geib Pavilion in Tawawa Park

By Kyle Shaner

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SIDNEY – More than \$200,000 was raised for Shelby County’s first inclusive playground. For Jackie Ward, the park and the opportunities it will provide her family are priceless.

“For families like ours, it’s an open door,” said Ward, whose 5-year-old daughter, Ellie, has Down syndrome. “It’s a beautiful, very colorful, musical reminder that you see us, that you see us and our children. And it’s really, as parents, what we want most of all, for them to be seen.”

A ribbon cutting was held for the inclusive playground Thursday afternoon at Geib Pavilion in Tawawa Park. The playground is designed to promote community play between people of all abilities.

“Playgrounds such as this will help children of all developmental skill levels to have the opportunity to play, to develop their social skills, to create friendships and over their lifetime to create memories,” Shelby County Commissioner Julie Ehemann said. “This is not just a playground then. This space will change the lives of children who come here to play.”

The idea for an inclusive playground was first proposed by Shelby County United Way Executive Director Scott Barr in early 2018. Jessica Guillozet, Shelby County Board of Developmental Disabilities community connections facilitator and past Sidney Kiwanis Club president, heard about the idea and quickly supported it.

Sidney Parks Director Duane Gaier, the Rotary Club of Sidney, Sidney Kiwanis Club and the Shelby County Board of DD all backed the project so a steering committee was formed in March 2018 to proceed with plans.

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Ellie Ward, left, 5, swings with her mother, Jackie Ward, both of Sidney, at the inclusive play area shortly after a ribbon cutting ceremony for the new play area on Thursday, Oct. 31. The play area is located next to Geib Pavilion in Tawawa Park.

Photos by Luke Gronneberg | Sidney Daily News



Emerson Climate Technologies, Inc., Vice President and General Manager for Residential Air Conditioning Brandy Powell speaks during the ribbon cutting ceremony for a new inclusive play area Thursday, Oct. 31. The play area is located next to Geib Pavilion in Tawawa Park. Emerson Climate Technologies, Inc., donated funds for the play area.

Inclusive park eliminates barriers who has worked in the playground industry throughout Ohio and Kentucky for more than 30 years.

Park

often sit on the sidelines not engaged in active play with others. This playground provides the opportunity for all children,

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Guillozet, Jennifer Bruns and John Coffield from Kiwanis and Steve Shuchat, John Bertsch and Gaier from Rotary led the steering committee and set a goal of raising \$160,000 for the playground.

With \$10,000 from both Kiwanis and Rotary, \$40,000 from the United Way, \$50,000 from Emerson Climate Technologies and other donations, the goal was quickly reached.

“While everyone’s contribution made the play area a reality, the Emerson Foundation’s \$50,000 and Shelby County United Way \$40,000 gift really set the pace and brought some validity to the project in the community,” Gaier said.

Approximately \$215,000 was raised for the inclusive playground, which allowed organizers to expand its size and amenities. There also were donations of site preparation, architectural services, landscaping design, landscaping installation, water line installation and more, which saved the group approximately \$35,000, Gaier said.

“This park is proof that when we believe something is possible, the people of Shelby County make it happen,” Sidney Kiwanis President Ricki Unterbrink said.

Members of Rotary and Kiwanis along with parks employees, teachers and students helped build the park in September.

Robert Greiwe, president of DWA Recreation, which designed the playground, said it would have cost more than \$500,000 if a general contractor had been hired to lead the project instead of local volunteers.

“The buy-in here is so unreal,” said Greiwe,

The inclusive playground features ramps and a rubber surface that allows anyone to navigate it, including individuals who use wheelchairs.

“We’re just in awe,” said Ward, who has two sons and a daughter with her husband, Brandon. “We have watched it come together, we’ve been looking at plans for a long time, and we are in awe of the love that was poured out in making this project a reality.”

Ward said she could envision her son’s friend, who uses a wheelchair, zipping around the playground completely free. And the Sidney resident could envision her daughter running around without needing her parents or older brothers to protect her or help her up steps.

“This is a place where she can slowly navigate the playground without any obstacles or barriers, and that means so much,” Ward said.

Guillozet said the playground also provides accessibility for grandparents to play with their grandchildren or anyone else who wants to utilize it.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean someone who has a developmental disability or a physical disability,” she said. “Anybody can get on the park.”

PlayCore has designated the playground as a National Demonstration Site. The park will be featured on PlayCore’s website, allowing people nationwide to see that Sidney has an inclusive park available to visit.

“I fully believe that every child, no matter of their ability, should have the opportunity to enjoy playing with other kids,” Sidney Mayor

regardless of their abilities, to have the same freedom to explore, discover and socialize with others while they are here.”

Greiwe said there also is a QR code on a sign at the entrance to the park, which will allow guests to provide input and shape future inclusive park designs.

“The smiles of those who can now swing, glide, play and enjoy the inclusive play area will be with us for a long, long time,” Sidney Rotary President Wayne Thompson said. “The joy from those who can now experience the features in this park is priceless, and their joy should warm our hearts each and every day.”

Brandy Powell, Emerson’s vice president and general manager for residential air conditioning, praised Shelby County for creating an inclusive environment.

“It is not natural, it’s not typical, and it’s not organic,” she said. “It really has to be intentional, and I think this is a tremendous demonstration. You guys have brought this to life, and it is intentional.”

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— Jackie Ward,

Local parent

Mike Barhorst said. “Unfortunately
kids with disabilities