'A place that will change lives': Newark celebrates opening of Preston's Playground

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For Deb Buenaga, it all started with a dream – a dream that her son, Preston, could have a way to play on a playground with other kids.

That dream snowballed into an unprecedented community-wide philanthropic effort and culminated Monday morning with the grand opening of Preston's Playground at the base of the Newark Reservoir.

"Everyone is differently abled, and we all want to play together," Buenaga said to a crowd of more than 100 people who gathered to celebrate the playground's completion. "It's not a playground for children with special needs; it's a playground for everybody."

The 6,000-square-foot playground is designed with accessibility in mind so that all kids, regardless of their abilities, are able to take part in the fun. Ramps allow kids in wheelchairs and on walkers to get up on the platforms. The ground is covered with a rubberized surface, rather than mulch, which is hard to navigate in a wheelchair.

The effort to build the playground dates back to 2015 when Buenaga and her family visited an accessible playground in Virginia and decided Newark needed something similar. Preston, who was 16 when the project began and recently turned 20, has mitochondrial disease and spends much of his time in a wheelchair.

Buenaga enlisted the help of Nic DeCaire, a Main Street gym owner with an uncanny ability to marshal community support for his charitable efforts. Together, they embarked on an ambitious endeavor to raise more than $500,000 to make the playground a reality.

The city of Newark quickly signed on, agreeing to host the playground on city parkland, and later agreed to fund the water and sewer infrastructure needed for handicapped-accessible bathrooms at the site.

As word of the effort spread, excitement in the community grew and thousands of Newarkers played a part in raising the money.
Large donations, such as a $100,000 grant from the Longwood Foundation certainly helped, but the majority of the funds came from small donations. DeCaire estimated that almost 100 businesses helped out, either by donating money or hosting guest bartending events, golf outings, wing-eating contests and other fundraisers. Local schools pitched in, raising money through runs and dress-down days. DeCaire's daughter contributed $100 through selling cookies outside National 5 and 10.

When it came time to build the playground, the community stepped up again. With the help of city workers and a contracted construction company, 180 volunteers worked through scorching heat in August to put together the playground equipment.

"Preston's Playground is truly a Newark community project," Parks and Recreation Director Joe Spadafino said. "A lot of people put a lot of time into that playground."

Spadafino said it's the largest community-involved project he has been part of during his 23 years working for Newark.

"When you meet Preston and you meet Deb, it's hard not to be motivated to get the job done," he said.

While the playground is complete, DeCaire is still raising money to build the bathrooms, which he hopes to have done by the spring.

DeCaire called Preston's Playground "one of the coolest playgrounds the state has ever seen" but noted its impact goes much farther than that.

"This is so much more than a playground," he said. "It is a place where children and adults can come together and learn that no matter what your abilities are, you're accepted. It is a place to laugh, smile and enjoy the simple pleasures in life. It is a place that will change lives."

Mayor Polly Sierer said the playground will be a destination for families for years to come.

"This is a very, very, very, very special day," Sierer said. "This is the epitome of a community coming together."

Monday's grand opening drew a large crowd, including many of the volunteers who worked on the playground as well as local children eager to experience the playground firsthand.

The man of the hour, Preston, soaked up all the attention. But after all the speeches were made, all the photos were taken, and all the hugs and high-fives were doled out, it was time to play.

As the morning's clouds gave way to sun, laughter and shrieks of delight filled the playground as dozens of kids explored it for the first time. Kids ran up and down the ramps, climbed the monkey bars and swung on the swings.
DeCaire's 9-year-old daughter, Josephine, found Preston and put her arm around him. He leaned his head on her shoulder. Josephine grabbed hold of Preston's wheelchair and pushed him up a ramp and through the maze of platforms and other play equipment.

Wide smiles on both their faces, they laughed together and they played together – two people of different ages and different abilities, united by friendship.

Just like Deb dreamed.