

A community builds a park

Five days of heavy lifting, mindful drilling, and new friendships at the Niantic Park Playground Project.

By Tom Dresser - October 21, 2015



left to right, front row first First row: Nina Hitchen, Dylan Hitchen, Ondeen Hitchen, Stefanie and Sofia Wolfe, Mark Baumhofer, Jocelyn Smyth, Wren Robertson, Elizabeth Bonifacio, Hazel Erham, Holly Thomas, Greg Ehrman, Ella Ehrman, Cathy Lotte, Siena Solarazza, Tricia Daley, Francis Moffat, Anderson, Matt and Charlotte Cramer, Evie Moffat, Angie Francis, Abby Gatchell, Nevah and Olivia Fitzgerald and Declan Diriwachter. Second row: Humberto Jr., Jane, Sophia, Humberto Sr. and Mary Grace Sampaio; Zoe Tucker; Peter Hitchen; Roger Schilling Jr.; Bella Schilling; Shealyn Smyth; Joyce Dresser; Emily Solarazza; Jen Gatchell; Polly Erhman; Hannah and Veronika Buckley; Phyllis Auerbach; Ewell Hopkins; Barbara Plesser; Deidre Bohan; Bea Peters and Jason Rivers. Third row: Chuck Fisher, Albert Lau, Marc Rivers, Larry Mattingly of Leathers and Associates, Adrienne, Sean and Sophie Doherty, Mika and Elke Durrell, Maura McGroarty, Cassandra Matthews, Priscilla Tremblay, Jen and Pete Smyth, Tom Dresser, Brian Packish, Kyle and Jacob Gatchell, Tony Erhman, Gary Buckley, Steve Auerbach, James Moffat, Andy and Susie Herr, Emily Cavanagh, Dave Diriwachter and Glenn and Judith Rogers. Fourth row: Steve McCollough, Ben and Olive Durrell, Shelley Christiansen, Jen Schilling, Roger Schilling Sr., Josh Tucker and Eric Fisher. — Photo by Sam Moore

For five days last week, professional carpenters worked alongside novice woodworkers to create a playground out of a sandy park. The Niantic Park Playground Project brought out dozens of Island businesses and hundreds of volunteers, who devoted hours and talent to a “Community Build” that has been in the works for over a year. By the end of Sunday night, more than 500 volunteers had worked hundreds of four-hour shifts, from sunrise to beyond sunset, to create a unique playground at Niantic Park off Circuit Avenue in Oak Bluffs.

“Can you believe it’s really begun?” said Guinevere Cramer, a blogger for Point B Realty in Edgartown (among other things), as she flitted across the lot on opening day. My own thoughts centered on hoisting an 18-foot compressed beam, weighing some 150 pounds, and maneuvering it upright as a stanchion for a three-story gingerbread house — the centerpiece of the park. That was just the beginning of five days of heavy lifting, careful measuring, cautious sawing, mindful drilling, and constant sharing of tools, equipment, and friendly comments among the steady stream of volunteers.

The committee behind the Playground Project did a fine job organizing the work, gently prodding their charges along. The workload was parsed out by skill level, so everyone could participate. Captains were assigned to oversee individual assignments: Mark Baumhofer oversaw construction of the gingerbread cottage, from foundation form to final final. Kyle Gatchell oversaw the erection of the lighthouse, and Matt Cramer took on the steamboat, which includes a sandbox in the bow and a slide off the stern.

Jen Schilling of the planning committee, also a captain, said, “It was wonderful how everyone contributed what they could to the



project.” Greg Ehrman, the general contractor, was “captain of all captains. And a good one, at that!” Jen added. He served as liaison with Larry Mattingly, the playground construction consultant, of Leathers & Associates, designers of the project.

Volunteers arrived — dozens and dozens of them — from Cub Scouts to high school students to teachers from the Oak Bluffs School. On Saturday morning, 120 people worked side by side on site. Workers wore badges with first names only. Many came for a four-hour shift and stayed through the day. Friendships formed over problem-solving sessions. I worked with Peter and Chris; Larry, Matt, and Gordon helped; April was amazing with the impactor (driving bolts into beams). Over the five days, volunteers filled more than 700 four-hour shifts.

Tools and equipment were loaned to the project, then distributed under the protective eyes of Ewell Hopkins and Dave Diriwachter, who handed out each drill and shovel, then carefully received it when the job was done. Brian Packish arranged a cement truck to fill the holes that supported the beams of the main structures. A Hinckley’s crane raised the roof of the gingerbread cottage, one of the few moments when everyone stopped work to watch the crowning glory of the project. The pinnacle of the lighthouse was raised in a similar fashion.

The atmosphere was friendly and upbeat throughout. Work began at 7 am and ran until 9 pm under the lights. Coffee and muffins were available, and generous meal servings brought 50 or so volunteers under the food tent at noon and 5 pm. Island restaurants — Rocco’s, Giordano’s, Slice of Life, Black Dog, and Edgartown Pizza, among others — donated food. Jen Smyth coordinated food donations, including the massive potluck party Sunday night. Close to a hundred volunteers shared the celebratory dinner, beaming with pride in their completed work, basking in newfound friendships. Squealing kids raced over to try out the new slides, the jungle gym, and the rope swing, and climbed through the new apparatus, bringing smiles to the weary volunteers.

Marc Rivers, Oak Bluffs recreation director, sounded a note of caution as the project drew to a close Sunday night: The playground is not complete, and will not be open until next spring. The ground cover must be applied around the equipment, swings have to be installed, wheelchair access provided, fencing erected. He admitted, “It’s like having a birthday party and letting the child see the presents, but not play with them.” However, safety comes first. The community build got the big job done; the rest of the park must be completed. Next year the playground will be safe and open.

Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of the project was how professionals and novices bonded on the job. Each unit solved myriad problems in the intricate construction of the gingerbread cottage, the sidewheel steamboat and the two-story lighthouse. Job assignments evolved into more intricate work, down to the climbing steps up into the lighthouse and the paddles on the ferry.



The Playground Project was an exercise in community input, primarily through sweat equity. The return on investment will be measured over the coming years as generations of children, parents, and grandparents appreciate the value of this redefined playground and park.

From general contractor Greg Ehrman's perspective, "the best thing to come out of this was that every day there was a glitch or a challenge, and someone showed up to solve it. Businesses opened their doors for us, people came through for us." Because the project had already built goodwill and excitement, "people were willing to give time and money and resources to help reach the goal." When it was completed, "we all knew people a lot better." Looking at the result of months of planning, he said, "it was a pretty amazing experience. It was great for the town and the Island."



The backstory: How to start a community build

By Siobhan Beasley

It all started with a few parents noticing how disjointed the Niantic Park playground had become. Jennifer Schilling of Oak Bluffs, mother of two, had a hard time trying to watch more than one child at a time, and because of that rarely used the playground. Greg Ehrman, a parent and local architect, noticed how every year or so a part of the playground would break and be removed. He wanted to help bring the park back to its "full original glory," and create fun and accessible play spaces for children 2 and up. And so a small group of parents decided to start attending the Oak Bluffs town meetings. "We had no idea it would turn into such a big project" said Jennifer Schilling, "but we decided, 'Let's just do it. Dream big.'"

Several parents soon turned into a group of 12, and the Town of Oak Bluffs eventually gave the 12 permission to take over the playground redesign. The parents increased the budget from \$46,000 (from the town) to \$126,000, raising the extra \$80,000 themselves. They partnered with Leathers & Associates, who had a reputation for being the best in the business when it came to community-supported building projects, according to Greg Ehrman.

Two years later, the ground was broken, and hundreds of volunteers and countless businesses joined in to provide labor, equipment, food, and support. "Twelve of us started it, but it's the community making it happen," said Guinevere Cramer, looking out over the build site watching teams of volunteers begin the initial construction of the park. "We are touched, overwhelmed, and amazed."

Even local schoolkids helped out by creating handmade placemats for the volunteer food tent. Images of thanks, love, and gratitude were evident in the drawings and messages from the children.

Joyce Dresser of Oak Bluffs said it was great to see so many generations of Vineyarders helping out. Joyce used to bring her children to the park, and is now volunteering alongside her grown daughter to help create a playspace for the younger generations. "It's work. It's really fun. It's gratifying. I'm just hoping to live through it," she joked.