

Local Rotary clubs spearhead effort at Blue Ball

Kids of all abilities welcome at new Can-Do Playground

By BETH MILLER
The News Journal

Samuel Clark and his big brother, Logan, were among scores of kids who spent Wednesday breaking in a new playground.

And they're just the sort of kids the Can-Do Playground is meant for.

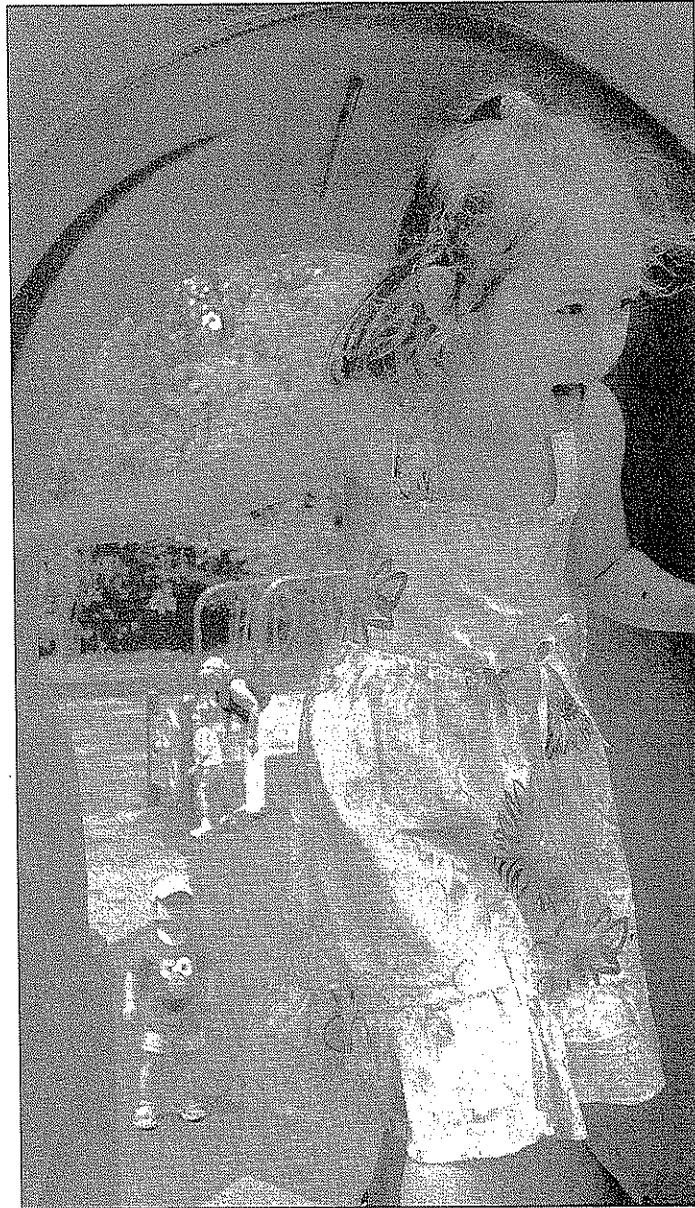
Samuel, 2, has cerebral palsy. Logan, 4, doesn't. They are able to play together at Can-Do, a barrier-free playground that enables kids with disabilities to play in the same environment as other kids.

Kids of all kinds were doing just that in the 23,000-square-foot playground in the new Alapocas Run State Park at Foulk and Weldin roads, just off Concord Pike (U.S. 202) north of Wilmington. Master of ceremonies and former Wilmington Rotary Club President Julian "Pete" Booker let them play even before the opening ceremony was complete and the ribbon across the entry was cut.

More than half a dozen participants in the Mary Campbell Center's Once Upon A Summer camp soon were testing the climbing wall and balance equipment. Others got acquainted with the shovel machines in the sand pit, climbed through tubes, soared on swings and whooshed down new slides.

All sorts of cool stuff awaits the kid who wants to play — sound tubes that carry a voice underground from one spot to another; twirly, swirly things to spin with your hand; kaleidoscopes to look into; stepping-stones to follow.

Plans started in 2003, as six Wilmington-area Rotary International clubs chose to build the project in celebration of Rotary's 100 years of service. A two-year delay actually proved beneficial, organizers said, as improvements and new elements — like the double wheelchair ramp — became available during the delay.



The News Journal/SHANNON LEE ZIRKLE
Matera Nefferdorf, 4, of Wilmington, tries out the Can-Do Playground after its grand opening Wednesday.

Rich and Samantha Clark of Brandywine Hundred brought their boys when they found out the park they had heard so much about was finally opening.

"This is great," Rich Clark said. "We're really glad that something like this was put in."

Jacob Vassalotti, 9, of Newark, had a hand in making this day possible. He celebrated his sixth birthday in 2004 by asking friends to bring "Can-Do" donations instead of gifts to his party.

About \$400 went to the project as a result of that decision, said his mom, Tina. Jacob's father, Tony, is a member of the Caesar Rodney Rotary Club and all three attended opening day.

Overall, more than \$489,000 was raised to complete the four-year project — the work of approximately 450 volunteers who joined forces with state agencies, elected officials, foundations and others to find the ground and make something special out of it.

With the help of state Rep. Robert Valihura, R-Laurel Ridge, the plan was attached to the Blue Ball project on U.S. 202 just north of I-95, a project that is developing state parkland around a historic property and roadway improvements. Rep. Greg Lavelle, R-Sharples, got last-minute funding to add restrooms.

State agencies provided about \$500,000 in land and site preparation, with Charles "Chazz" Salkin, director of the Division of Parks and Recreation, managing many of those efforts.

Rotarians and developers worked with the Connecticut-based National Center for Boundless Playgrounds to incorporate a variety of options for kids at play. Boundless Playgrounds founder Amy Jaffe Barzach was on hand to see the 110th such playground open, the first in Delaware. Her inspiration for such projects came in 1994, when she saw a young girl in a wheelchair crying at the edge of a playground. She couldn't play with the other kids there.

"My vision is that by 2020 people wouldn't even think of building a playground that segregates kids by ability," Barzach said.

"Play really is a fundamental joy," said Tom Talley, president of the Brandywine Rotary, who chaired the foundation established for the project. "And it's an important way children learn to navigate the world."

The entry is marked by two hunks of polished Brandywine granite which - thanks to Arden artist Rick Rothrock - now artfully bear the playground's logo and hold a mirror to their surroundings.

"The mirror image shows there are other ways to see the world," Rothrock said.

This playground proves it. Three play groupings accommodate the needs of kids with physical, developmental and

cognitive disabilities. Kids seem to know just what to do.

"I have watched kids barely old enough to walk just climb on it," said Kai Lassen, secretary of the Wilmington Rotary Club.

"I think it's great that they thought of this," said Kim Siegel of the Autism Society of Delaware. "It's inclusive of different styles of play. They can have time to themselves if they want to and rejoin others if they want to."

Naomi Davis' eyes welled with tears when she saw her 22-year-old daughter, Rebekah, go down the slide. She couldn't do that in other playgrounds, Davis said. But here, Rebekah - who has Down syndrome - fits on the slide and on the swings and just about anywhere she wants to go.

"Mentally, she's 5 years old," her mother said. "What 5-year-old doesn't want to play in a playground?"

The Davis family - including Rebekah's dad, Matthew, and her brother Chris of Prague, Okla. - was in town to visit Matthew's parents, Bob and Marie Davis. Bob Davis is a past district governor for Rotary.

"This is a fantastic thing," Bob Davis said. "I can sit on one of those benches and watch all of them play and just enjoy it."

Samantha Clark, mother of Samuel and Logan, was just happy that her boys can play in the same place.

"We can let them play together," she said, "and that gives them a way to interact with each other. They pick so much up from other kids."

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ONLINE EXTRA

Watch video of
the playground at
[www.delaware
online.com](http://www.delawareonline.com).