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A playground for fun - and hope

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It's a playground any child would love, and it's designed so every child can play there.

Preston's H.O.P.E. opens Monday to the public on the grounds of the Jewish Community Center in Beachwood.

The 60,000-square-foot playground, which cost more than \$2.5 million, is named in honor of Preston Fisher, a 9-year-old with spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic disorder that keeps him in a wheelchair.

His mom, Jackie Fisher, and her friend Stacie Halpern, both of Moreland Hills, planned and raised money for the project for more than seven years. During that time, they asked everyone, from kids and parents to teachers, occupational therapists and landscape architects about how to create a place where children with and without disabilities could play together.

"There was a lot of waking up in the middle of the night," said Fisher, as she watched workers put the finishing touches on Preston's H.O.P.E. (Helping Others Play & Enjoy). "But it was worth it. As much as we imagined it being, it's even better."

And all their research paid off with custom-designed elements to accommodate youngsters with mobility issues, vision or hearing problems and even those sensitive to light.

The playground is wired with a series of distinctive sounds - a train whistle and the sound of flowing water, for example - so that a child whose sight is impaired can navigate more easily. There are multiple windows in Imagination Village's kid-size structures at the heart of the play area, allowing parents to use sign language to communicate with hearing-impaired youngsters inside.

The buildings also give kids who can't tolerate sunlight a safe place to play, and broad ramps - Preston's favorite feature - let those in wheelchairs get a loftier view of the world.

Slides have transfer decks so children in wheelchairs can be helped onto the equipment, and at the base of the slides are seats where a child can wait while a caregiver retrieves the wheelchair. A spongy landing area surrounds all the equipment.

"It's just so important that kids can play side by side, interacting. No one is segmented," said Halpern. "They can just be kids."

Swings range from the bucket variety to a hammock-type for disabled children. Next to the sand pit, where kids can dig for faux dinosaur fossils, is a sand table so children using wheelchairs can play, too. An outdoor stage is for aspiring stars of all abilities.

It's just off Imagination Village, seven buildings meant to educate as well as entertain.

There's a bank, a town center, a gym, a firehouse, a school and a house that introduces construction

concepts. One building has particular significance for Halpern and her family. Arnold's salon honors her late father, Arnold Miller, who co-founded Matrix Essentials with his wife, Sydell, and used to run a beauty shop named for him at Cedar Center.

Near the entrance to the playground is Granny's Pavilion, donated by Fisher's father, Lake County developer Jerome T. Osborne Sr., in memory of his wife, Georgeanne, known as Granny to her more than 50 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The Jewish Community Center donated 1.5 acres for the playground and will maintain it with a \$400,000 endowment. Fisher and Halpern still are raising that money.

The playground will be open daily from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and admission is free. The Jewish Community Center is at 26001 South Woodland Rd., Beachwood.

More information, including how to donate, is available at www.prestonshope.com.

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