

# COMPLEX FOR DISABLED CHILDREN CALLED 'A DREAM COME TRUE'

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**FEATURES - LIFE 01D**

By Dennis Fiely

**THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH**

How to help

\* Donations for the Miracle League baseball park can be sent to Miracle League of Central Ohio, 6347 Memorial Dr., Dublin, Ohio 43017.

\* Donations for the Universally Accessible Playground can be sent to Game Time, Miracle League Registration, 967 Worthington Woods Loop Rd., Worthington, Ohio 43085. Call 614- 766-1576.

Credit fate or coincidence, or a fortuitous alignment of the planets.

"Some things were just meant to be," said Marilee Chinnici-Zuercher, mayor of Dublin.

She was referring to the convergence of forces that created the first universally accessible outdoor sports-and-recreation complex in central Ohio, with the groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday at Darree Fields Park in Dublin.

Parents have already shed tears of joy over the prospect of a place for their disabled children to play.

"It is a dream come true," said Annette Reed, whose 8-year-old daughter, Madison, copes with a severe form of spinal muscular atrophy. "Madison wants to play just like any able-bodied child."

The complex, which includes a baseball park and playground, is a product of circumstance.

Its development began in the fall when a stranger, Dublin resident Terry Lyden, arrived at City Hall with a proposal related to the *Miracle League*, a national baseball program for handicapped children.

"Terry came out of the blue," said Fred Hahn, director of parks and open space in Dublin. "No one knew him, and he just showed up at my door with this idea about something he saw on a TV special."

Lyden, a lawyer and former business owner, offered to raise money to build a barrier-free field for the *league* if the city would donate the land.

He had impeccable timing, as his efforts coincided with three other initiatives that helped make the park and playground a reality:

\* The city was already planning to expand the park and decided to incorporate Lyden's ideas.

\* Duke Realty Corp. was looking for a philanthropic project and agreed to contribute to the construction.

\* Dublin resident Darla Minamyler independently contacted Hahn to lobby for an accessible playground -- a project that the city had explored for several years.

"We were going to construct a general playground anyway," Hahn said, "so we just decided to make it accessible near the ball field."

Suddenly, a complex was born.

The original park-expansion budget of \$950,000 has remained unchanged. *Miracle League* volunteers have raised \$350,000 of the \$450,000 needed to build the ball field.

A citizens' group also is seeking \$110,000 to make the playground fully accessible with adaptive swings, slides and sandboxes.

"All of this just fit together so perfectly, it's a *miracle*," Chinnici-Zuercher said.

With much of the zoning and other plans in place for the park expansion, the *Miracle League* field and Universally Accessible Playground are on a fast track.

"Neither Terry (Lyden) or Duke (Realty) wanted this to be a 'someday' thing," Hahn said. "We all said, 'Why piddle on this project?' Let's just rip into it and knock it out."

The ball field is expected to open in the fall, less than a year after Lyden contacted city officials.

The playground is set to open next spring.

"I just hope it is not too late for Madison," Mrs. Reed said of her daughter. "She is very fragile and lucky to be here at 8."

The *Miracle League* anticipates 250 players for its first season in the fall and 350 next year. They will play on a barrier-free field with a flat, cushioned surface -- suitable for wheelchairs.

Amenities include lights, dugouts, a public-address system and an electronic scoreboard.

The *league* plays "buddy ball" that teams players with volunteers to assist them during games.

The TV show *Real Sports* exposed Lyden to the *Miracle League* in 2001. He was moved to act last year when he saw another show about the *league* and his able-bodied son was born.

"I think he is a guy who recognizes that life has been good to him and it is not necessarily good to everybody," Hahn said. "He felt it was time to give back."

With dozens of chapters in the United States, *Miracle League* of Georgia aims to create an experience for kids that boosts self-esteem and provides social interactions.

"Many kids with wheelchairs and walkers are homebound," Lyden said. "They watch TV, play video games and interact with family members instead of friends."

"This park is not just a place for them to play baseball one or two hours but a place to hang out with other kids who may or may not be disadvantaged."

"You know how everybody hangs out in the kitchen at a party? We are going to make sure we build a heck of a kitchen for these kids."

Many so-called accessible playgrounds provide equipment that kids in chairs are unable to use.

"They might have a ramp, but where do you go from there?" Mrs. Reed said.

The *Miracle League* will operate the field, open to children throughout central Ohio.

Those without disabilities also will be permitted to use the playground and the ball field.

Mrs. Reed expects the complex to spare her the heartbreak of riding around the perimeters of playgrounds with her daughter, hoping that a few kids will join them.

"The saddest moments for me," she said, "are during school recess. . . . I always pray for bad weather."

The project also promises to fulfill a dream of her able-bodied 14-year-old son, Kenny.

"He always asks if there will ever be a time when he and Madison will be able to play together," Mrs. Reed said. "Finally, that time has come." [dfiely@dispatch.com](mailto:dfiely@dispatch.com)