

BUILD DAY!

by Eileen J. Moskowitz

January 19, 2005 was a beautiful, warm, sunny day - one that brought the old barn raising spirit back to life, at Odyssey. Like the saying "All for one and one for all," we saw a great example of a community coming together - one that built the new playground for our kids.

From a flat, earthen space was raised a colorful, fantasy play structure and sandbox - in just 6 hours! All this thanks to the wonderful generosity of **The Home Depot** - which funded most of the costs and provided most of the labor – the fabulous facilitation of the non-profit organization **kaBOOM!**, and the committed parents and friends of Odyssey.

Starting at 7:30 AM, more than 200 volunteers began to assemble for a momentous day of building, planting, mulching and muraling - including over 65 Odyssey parents and friends. Working alongside the orange shirts of The Home Depot employees (who gave up their day off to do this), they also prepared and served the food and refreshments; planted new flower gardens; and helped to construct the exquisite new mosaic murals on the lower and upper levels of the school building.

Many of the children got into the act too, as the school schedule that day allowed for each class to participate in either gardening or the mosaic mural. They also made thank you cards for the volunteers.

This amazing effort began back in September when kaBOOM! asked Odyssey to apply for their community-partnered playground builds. Former OCS Board Parent Rep. **Wendy Osmundson** wrote the proposal. After getting KaBOOM!'s okay, it went on to Home Depot for final approval. Apparently, there was no coincidence with their timing: Home Depot had a float going right past our school in the Rose Parade this past New Year's Day – and several of our students actually got to ride on it!

Part of the deal was that OCS had to prepare the site itself. The challenge was raising the \$11.5 thousand cost to do it. Fundraising immediately began and in two weeks, most of it was raised from families, friends and corporate sponsors. Then Home Depot kicked in another \$10 thousand (above the \$50 thousand cost of the play structure they purchased for us from Playworld Systems of Lewisburg, PA) and we used the extra money for food, plants, flowers, and other side projects.

Both Wendy and Assistant School Director, **Lauren O'Neill** were the driving forces behind the project, and it is through their extraordinary efforts that the necessary funds were raised. "She and I built a really good team to do this,"

Wendy said. “And kaBOOM! is incredibly organized. They made it really easy,” she added.

Also, it was Ms. Lauren’s idea to do the mosaic murals. She said, “I’ve wanted to do it for years...and it was a great way to involve the kids.” Many of the children hand-painted the tiles that were eventually placed around the mosaic murals as borders. And former OCS paraprofessional **Bryan Matsumoto** helped design and execute the mural project. “He worked really hard on the mosaics,” Ms. Lauren said.

The kick-off began at 8:30 AM (after bagels and coffee in the church basement) with a speech by **Whitney Hampton**, Project Manager for kaBOOM! from their Redwood City office. Headquartered in Washington, DC, kaBOOM! has facilitated the construction of over 700 playgrounds since they began in 1996. Ours is the 244th one they have done with Home Depot. She explained, “Our mission - through partnership with communities - is that every child should have play opportunities. We see play not as a privilege, but as a right.”

Speaking next was **Vicki Datt**, District Manager for The Home Depot. She clarified why they had come: “The joy of a safe playground for the kids is what it’s all about.”

After a rousing pep talk and cheer from three Home Depot store managers, we broke into teams. Nametags had different sticker symbols attached so you knew which team you were on when you checked in. (Parents **Vicki Mastro**, **Diane Smith** and **Cathy Barth** got the registration and liability sign-offs well taken care of from their position in the parking lot).

Then the DJ turned on the music and the workday got started! (If you didn’t catch Vicki Mastro getting into the spirit of the day with her dancing – you really missed out).

Off we went with our Team Captains – each holding up one of the team symbols. Those who signed up for planting were assigned to the Hello Kitty Team; Alligators and Candy worked with tiles for the mosaics; Butterflies, Ladybugs, Handprints and Bumble Bees handled the structure’s components; Smiles were on decks and posts; and Sponge Bob and Flags worked on the mulching.

Soon the campus was all abuzz with busy worker bees assembling the structure’s components, tilling the garden’s soil, hammering the tiles into pieces, transporting sand and mulch by tarp (takes four people lifting – one for each corner), cooking the meatballs and spaghetti....and watching Vicki dancing!

Everywhere, a cacophony of sounds and sights – all with one common goal: a “community of hearts” working together for our kids. And when you saw the smiles on their faces, you knew it was all worthwhile.

Here's what a few of the people involved had to say about why they had come:

Damon – a 10-year employee and store manager from Covina's Home Depot: "The community supports us and we want to give back to it. It's the right thing to do - we're looking out for each other. This is making us feel good, and that's what it's all about."

When asked why he was giving up a day off to help put up the playground, another Home Depot employee, **Tito**, said: "I have five kids. I understand."

Floyd, who has only worked three months for Home Depot, said about his first kaBoom! experience: "I think it's great that kaBOOM! and Home Depot can get together to help the community. Personally, I volunteered because I like to give back to the community for those less fortunate."

Stacey Hitt, Build Captain, is a newcomer to Home Depot, but has done construction work for 22 years. She loves it because "it's outdoors. And I volunteered because I love kids and it's fun."

Dennis Fleitas, Mosaic Team Captain (this was his fourth playground with kaBOOM!), has been working at the Alhambra Home Depot for eight years: "To see the smiles of the kids...is one of the most rewarding things for me."

Bonnie Dillard, grandmother to Anthony Mejia, 6th grade: "I think it's fantastic. I'm having a great time! It's great having the parents come together for the children to see. Shows the kids we care. It's a good lesson that lots of Ones make a Whole – a lot of people can do more together than alone."

Kim Drake, who has worked six years at The Home Depot in Glendora: "Working with the community – it's exciting to see the children's faces."

Laurie Gould, parent of Cody, 7th grade: "It's a lot of fun. I was in the kitchen helping and then migrated to the mosaics. We needed more color, so I went home and got some tiles from my garage. I'm just working wherever I'm needed."

Starting about 11:15 AM, people began heading for the church basement and a well-deserved lunch break. Kitchen Coordinator – parent **Susan Ruffins** – explained her responsibilities: "We were told to prepare for 200 breakfasts and 200 lunches, served in four shifts of 50 each."

Curious to know how much of everything they needed to feed everyone? Susan recited the list by heart: "Twenty five cases of water; 20 cases of soda; 8 dozen each of muffins, donuts and bagels, 72 lbs. of meatballs, 250 rolls, 500 bags of chips, 500 brownies, 213 gallons of tomato sauce, 5 lbs. of cream cheese, 10

lbs. of parmesan cheese, 12 lbs. of salad, 3 quarts of vinaigrette, 15 gallons of juice, and 200 lbs. of ice!"

Also helping out in the kitchen were the following parents: **Beatriz Aguilar, Valerie Barth, Cheryl Burton, Yvonne Enriquez, Pilar Grant, Robynn Johnson, Kristy Larsen, Sheri Norwood, Linda Persi, Rosa Rodriguez, and Marisa Trujillo.**

Besides the volunteers, we need to thank the many community donations, including those from **Trader Joe's, Noah's Bagels, Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf** and the **Sierra Madre United Methodist Church** for loaning us the tables and chairs.

At around 2 PM, the teachers began to lead their students, one class at a time, over to the playground area. Many of the children, seeing it for the first time, stared at the equipment in amazement as they quietly gathered in front of the structure. Gone were the swings and the little house – but in their place was a bright green, yellow, and blue formation of fun! They gazed in wonderment, thinking, no doubt, about all the new play possibilities awaiting them.

The children themselves had gotten to vote on the design from three configurations presented to them. This was truly theirs! A three-person slide – rock-climbing walls – a glider – and teeter-totter - awesome! You could see the excitement in their widening eyes and glowing smiles.

At 2:30 PM, the official Board Cutting began. Whitney from kaBOOM! took the microphone first and thanked everyone. Then Vicki Datt, The Home Depot District Manager spoke, acknowledging the “awesome turnout today.” She called up all the store managers: **Damon** from Covina, **Mike** from Monrovia, **Andy** from Alhambra, **Cindy** from Glendora, and **Paulo** from El Monte.

They spoke of the passion and pride of The Home Depot employees – and how the experience of this day regenerated their passions. They talked about “giving back to the community.” And we all cheered in appreciation!

Surrounding them was the entire student body, teachers, staff, parents and friends, Student President **Tomio Seki**, OCS Board members, including teacher **Daniel Schmidt**, parent **Susan Ruffins**, treasurer **Ray Joseph**, chair **Ben Rozwood**, founder **Kathleen O'Sullivan**, California Charter Schools Association COO **George Clayton Fatheree, III**, Pasadena Mayor **Bill Bogaard**, **Teresa Ann Simpson** (representing Congressman **Adam Schiff**), **Rita Radjimanoukian** from the office of Los Angeles County Supervisor **Michael D. Antonovich**, and **Lena Kennedy**, on behalf of California State Assemblywoman **Carol Liu**.

Then Ms. Lauren and Ms. Franca sawed through an orange plank which had “Thank you Home Depot and kaBOOM!” written on it. The crowd roared!

And then came the official recognitions:

Ms. O’Sullivan said: “Emotional well-being is very important, and one of the ways it is achieved is through play.”

Mayor Bogaard: “The experience goes beyond the playground. Congratulations to all who worked together on this as a team – a great example for similar challenges in the future.”

Congressman Schiff’s office presented a *Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition* to OCS “in recognition of outstanding and invaluable service to the community.”

Supervisor Antonovich’s representative presented three certificates: to OCS, kaBOOM!, and The Home Depot - in honor of the playground dedication.

And finally, Assemblywoman Liu’s office presented a *Certificate of Recognition* from the State Assembly to OCS with the advice to “Enjoy and play safely.” On her behalf, Ms. Kennedy added, “Thank you to Home Depot for investing in our children and investing in their future.”

The kids had plenty to say as well:

Justin (1st grade): “It’s really cool and thank you Home Dept and kaBOOM!”

Franklin (1): “I think we can slide down the slide and climb up the structure.”

Caleb (K): “Cool! You can play on the teeter-totter and do rock-climbing.”

Leroy (K): “I like the way we can climb on the rocks.”

Tarren (2): “I like all the new things we have on it.”

Sophia (3): “It was good watching them build the play structure.”

Abigail (6): “I’ll miss the house.”

Danielle (8): “Amazing how many people were here. Impressive. Outstanding - how so many people cared.”

Gabriel (6): “It was fun watching the playground go up today. I liked helping. I planted some plants.”

When asked what she thought of the day’s event, School Director **Franca Campopiano** said: “I’m actually in awe. I didn’t know how it was going to get done in one day. A hundred and forty yards of mulch on the blacktop! But as soon as they started, I got it. I’m just really happy. “

Later, she added: “The playground is not only a great gift to our students to play and grow with, but it serves as a symbol for the wonderful lesson of giving, teamwork and making the world a better place - one step at a time.”

QUOTES

“We see play not as a privilege, but as a right.” – Whitney Hampton

“The joy of a safe playground for the kids is what it’s all about.” – Vicki Dack

“The community supports us and we want to give back to it.” – Damon

“I volunteered because I love kids and it’s fun.” - Stacey Hitt

“It’s really cool. And thank you Home Dept and kaBOOM!” – Justin (1st grade)

“The playground ... serves as a symbol for the wonderful lesson of giving, teamwork and making the world a better place...” - Franca Campopiano

“Outstanding - how so many people cared.” - 8th grader Danielle