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'A dream come true'

Facility gives all children a place to play

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BY JERRY L. GLEASON

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Reilly Johnson no longer has to watch from the sidelines as other children have fun swinging, working their way to the top of a treehouse or building sand castles.

Despite being in a wheelchair, Reilly can use all of the facilities at the new Possibility Place playground in Lower Paxton Twp.

"It's very cool," Reilly, 8, said. "There are lots of things I can do here."

Possibility Place, which is in George Park on Nyes Road, is the first fully handicap-accessible playground in central Pennsylvania. The playground opened yesterday.

"This is a playground where all children, with or without physical challenges, can play together and stretch their imaginations," said Janis Creason, vice president of Inspired Recreation, the committee that directed the playground project.

Reilly, son of Nan and Neal Johnson of Lower Paxton Twp., was one of the inspirations for the park. He has spinal muscular atrophy, a form of muscular dystrophy, but that doesn't keep him from wanting to play like other kids.

Creason said she was at a picnic with the Johnson family two years ago when she noticed that Reilly couldn't join the children on the playground.

"Reilly said he wished he could be out there, with the other kids, and that got me thinking of how do children in wheelchairs or with any physical challenge use a playground," Creason said.

Creason talked to David Blain, a Lower Paxton Twp. supervisor, about making a township playground handicap accessible. Blain introduced her to Ann Phillips, who wanted to create a playground in an open field near her home.

Together, Creason and Phillips formed a committee to make it a possibility.

"It was time to put a playground of this quality in Lower Paxton Twp.," Phillips said.

The committee raised \$250,000 in cash and more than twice that in in-kind donations, and enlisted the help of 1,500 volunteers to build the playground.

It also received the assistance of the Pennsylvania Air National Guard's 193rd Civil Engineer Squadron, which installed water and electrical service for the playground and helped build the facilities.

Some of the components at Possibility Place are a large treehouse with ramps at different levels, a recording studio and stage, a large kaleidoscope in a lookout tower, and play areas connected by wide ramps and open spaces. A resilient ground cover was designed to make the travel of those in wheelchairs, on crutches or pushing strollers easier and safer.

RoseAnne Horan said her son, Jordan , loves to swing and to slide, but he uses a wheelchair, making it difficult to use most playgrounds. Now that he weighs 100 pounds, it is tough for her to lift him onto the equipment.

" Jordan has cerebral palsy, and while he is physically challenged, he participates in horseback riding, bowling and other activities," Horan said. "The only missing link in his life was going to the playground.

"When I heard that they were planning a handicap-accessible playground I said I will believe it when I see it. And, boy, do I believe it! We can't wait to try it out."

Nan and Neal Johnson said the playground is a blessing for families with physically challenged children.

"We would take Reilly to the park, but there wasn't anything he could really do at most playgrounds," Nan Johnson said.

"This is a dream come true. You want your kids to do normal things, and here Reilly can do those things."

The playground feature Reilly is looking most forward to using is a recording and performance stage, where he hopes to present concerts.

Reilly loves to sing and has presented public performances, including singing at a political rally for President George W. Bush in Lancaster two years ago. He sang "God Bless America " yesterday for the playground's opening ceremony.

"I love to sing," he said.

JERRY L. GLEASON: 975-9782 or jgleason@patriot-news.com