



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Volunteers help build new playground

Forest Park kids can play at home

Thursday, September 02, 2010

By **Shelita Dalton**

Contributing writer

As 200 volunteers gathered last week to create a playground for the Forest Park Apartments and the surrounding area in Algiers, they were asked to close their eyes and imagine what the playground could become.

Volunteer Sharon Colar Poleate said that as she shut her eyes, "I could see a child in this neighborhood on a swing being just happy."

"A lot of the parents here are single parents and lower income, and it's harder for them to get transportation to get to the next playground. Now they'll have one right at home."

The project is special to Poleate because Forest Park was her first home about 30 years ago when she moved away from home.

The volunteers were from several different businesses and organizations, including The Home Depot, KaBOOM!, The National Housing Partnership (NHP) Foundation, Latter & Blum and Sodexo.

The groups came together to build a 2,500-square-foot playground in just six hours. The Home Depot Foundation financed the project with a \$65,000 grant. The NHP Foundation contributed \$7,500.

Christopher Bentivegna, assistant national director of resident services for the NHP Foundation, the nonprofit that owns the property, said, "I started working at this property 5 1/2 years ago, a couple of months before Katrina."

"Before I started working here, there was a playground structure and it was something that the kids utilized all of the time."

He said that after Hurricane Katrina, the property was damaged and closed for more than a year. When the apartments were finally repaired, there was no room in the budget for a new playground. So, the new playground is something that will definitely be an asset to the area.

Bentivegna added that the goal is to provide not only a fun place to play for children in the Forest Park Apartments, but also the whole neighborhood.

"Garden Oaks Drive is full of apartment complexes and there's nothing like this in walking distance," he said. "It's also a matter of safety because now they don't have to walk on a busy highway to get to a park."

Craig Fishel, the senior manager of public relations for The Home Depot, said he has enjoyed

working with KaBOOM! and NHP.

"We've been partnering with KaBOOM! for 13 years and it's been a fantastic partnership," he said. "NHP has been invaluable locally, whether it's site selection or helping to coordinate; they really are the local voice when it comes to this and they've been fantastic to work with as well."

Kenny Altenburg, project manager with KaBOOM!, said the greatness and importance of these projects is not just to build a playground.

"Don't get me wrong; these kids need a playground and that is the reason we were out here," he said. "We're also bringing out community members to show them what a difference they can make in their community."

"The empowerment that this gives people is what we really pride ourselves on."

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