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Excitement abounds at all-access playground opening

By B. B. Kaye



A group of children gathered in the front line of a big crowd watch Moraga Rotary President Dianne Wilson and Moraga Mayor Dave Trotter cut the ceremonial ribbon. Photo Carol & Gary Irwin

A large crowd attended a sunny, balloon-festooned inaugural ceremony Jan. 28 for the new, all-access playground in Moraga Commons Park. Children thronged at the entrance, waiting for the moment a red ceremonial ribbon would be cut to officially welcome them in to play.

According to the Orinda Union School District and the Lafayette School District SARC reports from the 2016-17 school year, approximately 10 percent of the local school population of 9,293 children receives special education services. Many of these children have difficulty accessing a public playground; the all-access playground is designed for them to safely engage in unscheduled free-play and mingle with kids of differing abilities.

Moraga Rotary Club past president Kevin Reneau spoke to those assembled about how the park came about: "We got together and said we should do something for the community in honor of our 50th anniversary."

Rotary members started talking and member Cliff Dochterman (master of ceremonies for the opening) suggested a playground for the children of Lamorinda and the greater community. The club thought it would be a \$25,000-30,000 project. "It evolved," said Reneau. "As we got in and did some research, we decided we needed a more robust playground." The town of Moraga played a big role. The Club thought about the Rancho Laguna Park, but the council said that for something like this, it should be in the center of town. "We wanted to attract people from throughout Lamorinda and Contra Costa County. We settled on this spot which was underutilized, but we never in our wildest dreams thought we'd raise over \$340,000," said Reneau, who noted how the donation was the biggest gift to the town in its history. "And, as anyone who came early saw, there's no way to keep the kids out. They see a great looking playground and, yellow tape or not, they're coming in!"

According to its website, the Moraga Rotary Club's mission is to "help make children better citizens of the world, through peace and understanding ... all children, rich and poor, everywhere in the world." The club "donates an average of \$40,000 each year to charitable activities throughout the world. That's making dreams real for those that receive our prosthetic hands, and wheelchairs, and clean water, and shelter, giving them a new chance at a happier life with dignity."

Answering the club's plea to support the idea, multiple Moraga, Orinda and Lafayette foundations, nearby Rotary clubs, community organizations, businesses, Boy Scouts, local students, and individuals enthusiastically stepped forward to help with generous donations of cash, materials, and actual physical labor.

Lafayette resident Steve Parlatt, who joined the playground committee in 2016, said, "My son, Adam, has a limited ability to communicate. When you add a little bit of extra effort, and add some fun and joy to his day, he will turn, look at you, and smile; when you get that smile, it's gold. This playground is going to create so many smiles for so many years to come, and that is the best type of gratitude you can ask for."

Moraga Mayor Dave Trotter said, "The fact of the matter is, we're going to hear a lot of gleeful laughter and shouts and joy, and that's what this is all about. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to the Rotary Foundation for pulling this off for the greater benefit of the Moraga community."

"Parks make life better," said Assemblywoman Catharine Baker. She attended the opening not only as a public official but as a mom of twins. Baker talked about raising her kids within a twin playgroup that included a set of twins with one child who used a wheelchair. "It was really a challenge to make sure we could find parks and places for both of the boys and everyone in our playgroup to come to play together," Baker said. "It's wonderful to celebrate this today. This is for people all across the Lamorinda community, and as far as you can travel."

Dochterman presented Moraga Rotary Club President Dianne Wilson, Trotter, and Reneau with a large pair of scissors to cut the ribbon across the entrance. The crowd of children streamed in at once, running to play on the new equipment, and the air was filled with happy shouts.

Parlatt said, "I just tried to help with the perspective of families who have a child with special needs, as well as trying to get Lafayette involved, and Orinda as well, because I believed it needed to be a three town

effort as much as possible."

Parlatt said that he looked for a combination of the right surface and the right equipment that would provide something for both able-bodied and special needs kids to play on. He praised Moraga Commons for providing three distinct playgrounds, for children of all ages and abilities.

"I feel that families can agree, if it's a nice sunny day, lets' go to Moraga Commons where everyone can run around and do different things," Parlatt said.

Lamorinda parent Jennifer Montague Clark moved with her family to the area five years ago. Her son Will has Down syndrome and autism, and Clark said he has trouble keeping up with his athletic brothers.

"They love to climb play structures and run around, play football, and he isn't able to do that," Clark said. She loved the idea that Will could enjoy the new playground as much as his brothers did. "Any place like this that can make it better for him in the community is a win for everyone," Clark said.



Photos Carol & Gary Irwin



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