

# Open Hearts, Open Access at New Children's Center Playground

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A local group's attempts to assist those in need has produced both happiness and gratitude from a group of children and the adults who care for them.

Members of the Izzy Foundation, originally formed to provide assistance to a young cancer patient's family with finances incurred from her treatment, saw the need for new playground facilities at Sandhills Children's Center in Southern Pines. The school, a private, non-profit organization that offers "an inclusive child developmental day program" for children with and without special developmental needs, had playground facilities that were not handicapped accessible.

Julie Wohlrab of the Izzy Foundation said her group saw the need for renovations to the playground that would benefit all children at the Center.

The Izzy Foundation was named for Isabelle Marie Wohlrab, known as Izzy, who was diagnosed with stage 4 rhabdomyosarcoma at the age of 13 months. She underwent chemotherapy, surgery and radiation in attempts to eradicate her cancer, but passed away in 2012 from her illness. The Izzy Foundation was named in her honor.

"There were no concrete exits from the school doors that would allow wheelchairs or otherwise physically challenged children to access the playground," Wohlrab said.

“There was a huge need, but since the school is a nonprofit, the funds were not there to redesign the area. It really touched me when I saw their situation.”

The playground project is the Izzy Foundation’s second major endeavor.

“Izzy, who was my niece, lived in Providence, R.I., and we raised \$100,000 for her benefit,” Wohlrab said. “After Izzy passed away at age 3 in March 2012, we started the Izzy Foundation.

“Our first project was to create the Izzy Family Room in Hasbro Children’s Hospital in Rhode Island in Izzy’s name, and this playground is our second. Our group’s tagline is ‘Live, Laugh, Love and Play,’ and since not all of the kids could go outside to the playground, we thought this would be a good way to assist these children.”

The group invested \$50,000 for the playground upgrade, Wohlrab said, although the actual cost was much higher.

“Green Dreams Landscaping Company stepped in and donated sod, rocks, labor and more,” she said. “We received a discount from others, and many people ended up giving their time and energy toward this project. The students from Young Life, the Leo Club at Union Pines, and others spread mulch, dug holes and helped in incredible ways. Chick-Fil-A donated lunch.

“It really touches the heart to see how much the community helped out.”

Green Dreams owners Dana Shook and Lewis Bennett said the donated items and labor were in part to repay what the Sandhills Children’s Center had done for Shook’s family in the past.

“My nephew, who has borderline Asperger’s Syndrome, was a student at the Center when he was 2 and 3 years old,” Shook said. “He is now preparing to graduate from

North Carolina State University. If not for the Sandhills Children's Center, I don't know where he would be today."

"We have pumping water, stages, and an interactiveness that reminds me of a big city park," Bennett said. "It's great to know that my employees could give back to the community in this way."

Erin Newcomb, director of Center Services at the school, said the new playground was "amazing."

"We are very blessed to have this done for our children," Newcomb said. "It makes a huge difference for all of us."

Newcomb said that Wohlrab's involvement came following a tour of the grounds.

"She realized that some of the kids were unable to access the grounds without support, and that's when she stepped in," she said. "Before, we had to pick the children up who were in wheelchairs and transport them to the facilities, but now they can be easily rolled out. The flower beds have been raised as well, to facilitate access to them for those who are wheelchair bound."

The Center accommodates 128 students.

Students Marina Keane and William McCall, both 5, said they were enjoying the new play area, especially the wide cement pathways that made riding their tricycles more fun.

"I love the new tricycles," William said. "We can pass each other now, and we have road signs and cones. And they can turn tight."

Marina agreed.

"It's like a big '8'," she said, referring to the track. "And I like the playhouse furniture."

Newcomb said the new facilities were “an extension of the classroom.”

“They can study music and movement, art, and dramatic play, and they have sand, water, a building, swings and more, and it’s all accessible now,” she said. “It’s a wonderful, outdoor learning environment.”

Wohlrab said she was “relieved” that the project was finished.

“It’s been super rewarding,” she said. “I’m so proud to see the kids playing and having fun on the new swings and all the other new equipment. It’s awesome to see what they had before compared to what it looks like now.”