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Playground of Dreams

Ever since Jennifer Harter can remember, she was surrounded by playgrounds. Literally. Her father, Scott, is the BCI Burke representative in Scottsdale and surrounding territory. While growing up, she was not only a great test case for Scott's playgrounds, in addition, at a very young age; she developed a deep conviction that every child should have a playground.

So when her Desert Mountain High School Service Learning teacher challenged her to develop a project that would engage her and make a significant impact in the community, the decision for her was easy: she would build a playground at Roadrunner School in Phoenix, a local K-12 school that entirely serves special needs students. Their diagnoses of the children are varied and many. Numerous students are from abusive homes and some have chemical imbalances. The most important thing to Jennifer in choosing Roadrunner was that they needed a playspace for the kids to grow, learn and have fun.

Planning the dream playground was easy, but when Jennifer came to the point of the budget, she was initially overwhelmed with the \$22,500 amount she was charged to raise for the project.

"I didn't know if I could make it happen," said Jennifer, "but it made me want to do it even more."

Because Jennifer's Service Learning project was so unique, there was not a plan for her to follow. However, she did have her father's expertise to draw on and he was readily available to consult about how to put together a community build playground project.

Although she did not have any experience raising money, Jennifer dug in her heels and searched websites for corporate donors, filed grant applications, and wrote proposals and letters to gain support for the project. Discouragement could have easily got the best of her as the money was slow to come in, but there was not time or energy for that. Jennifer's determination and relentless effort paid off and approximately 18 months later, Jennifer had \$22,500 to build her playground.

The next step was getting volunteers to help build the playground. Jennifer recruited help by posting a volunteer sign-up at school and was overwhelmed with elation when over 80 students volunteered to help. With the enormous help of her father, Jennifer and all 80-plus volunteers including fellow students, Desert Mountain High principal and other school personnel, and Roadrunner principal and staff, the playground was installed in four hours.

The poignant culmination for Jennifer was watching the children of Roadrunner play on the red, white, and blue playground—the colors they had asked for—including three slides, a steering wheel, bridge, stair climb and fire pole, all provided by BCI Burke and Scott Harter at cost. A shade structure was also donated by Shade 'N Net to help protect the children from the potentially damaging rays of the sun.

“This project has changed me as a person,” said Jennifer, “Making a difference in someone else's life makes a giant difference in your own. There is no greater feeling.”

Jennifer also learned a valuable life lesson that tenacity and commitment reap big rewards. Each time she passes the playground she built she will be reminded that that she had a dream for the children of Roadrunner that she made into a reality. She will also be reminded that with hard work and the support of family, friends, classmates and an entire community, anything can be accomplished.