

# Children with disabilities get a place to play

Chicago Tribune  
June 1, 2010  
By Margaret Ramierz  
maramirez@tribune.com

Like most children, Thaddeus Weisner loved playing in the park, especially going down the slide.

But because Thaddeus had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair, Thomas and Marilyn Weisner – now mayor and first lady of Aurora – would carry their son up the ladder and slide down with him.

Thad died in January 2006 at age 21. Last week, in Thad's memory, city officials dedicated a new 5,500-square-foot playground for children with disabilities, the first such park in the city.

The centerpiece of Thaddeus James Weisner Park, which stands at Fourth and Flagg streets, is a slide with an 8-foot-long accessible ramp to assist children in wheelchairs as they make their way to the top. At the top of the slide, a child in a wheelchair has enough room to move and interact with other children. After the child slides down, another child could roll the chair back down the ramp to him.

At the park dedication, Mayor Weisner was overcome with emotion as he remembered his son.

"Thad would have absolutely loved this park," Weisner said. "We always marveled that someone who couldn't walk, who could not talk, could not do most things that most people do, somehow made so many friends. ... Many of you are here today ... to celebrate with us ... and I appreciate that so very much, all of you."

At that, the mayor paused and his eyes filled with tears.

"This park is dedicated in Thaddeus' name, but it's dedicated to everyone in this community, and I hope that everyone will take time to enjoy it," Weisner said.

The idea to create a playground for children with disabilities came from Ald. Juany Garza, who has become a vocal advocate for creating more parks and open spaces in Aurora's densely populated second ward. The cost for the park was about \$90,000.

Architect Tod J. Stanton, president of the Naperville-based firm Design Perspectives, said the biggest challenge in building the playground was fitting the long, concrete wheelchair ramp into the small corner lot.

Stanton said the playground surface is covered with a poured-in-place rubber product made from recycled tires that is well-suited for wheelchair use and cushioning falls. The park also includes a maypole that kids can grab onto as it spins them around. There is also a picnic table that allows enough clearance between benches for a wheelchair.

"Accessibility provides opportunity for anyone, but especially for children," said Marilyn Weisner. "This accessible park provides an opportunity for children who are differently abled to play and learn, right alongside other children. And that is an invaluable opportunity."

At the dedication, one of Thad's former teachers from the Hope D. Wall School, Lynette Olexa, expressed her excitement for the new park. The Wall School is an Aurora public school that educates students with special needs from ages 3 to 21. Olexa said she planned to bring her students to the park every week.

"When you're in a wheelchair and you go to most parks, you feel like you're not wanted. But when you come to a place like this, you know you have a place.

"This is huge for us. It's a huge statement of inclusion," she said.

