

# 'Castle' To Give Way to Playscape Highlighting Nature

## Beverley Hills Church Preschool playground being transformed.

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**A**fter being on hold for more than four years, the renovation and revitalization of Alexandria's Beverley Hills

Church Preschool playground is officially underway. On Wednesday, April 17, the playground fundraising committee is participating in Act for Alexandria's Spring2ACTion, a day devoted to online advertising and fundraising for non-profit organizations in the city of Alexandria, according to the preschool's former director Sissy Walker.

Walker said the goal of the preschool is to align the playground design with the academic outlook of the school.

"We want children to encounter nature first hand," said Walker, who is now the alumni outreach coordinator. "This is a cooperative preschool, with parents working on committees. It is very all hands on deck. The school has a very progressive educational philosophy, with an emphasis on creativity and problem solving."

Originally slated as a project to begin in 2008, the preschool's parents, staff and board of directors halted fundraising as the "economy tanked," according to Walker.

According to members of the preschool community, the church playground has played a significant role in the community for decades.

"Since the church was built in 1938, the outdoor space was always somewhere that people could go and play with their kids," Walker said. "It is private property, which the church very generously shares with the community when there aren't programs [like preschool] going on. It was always just a space for children to play very vigorously, a place for families to gather."

**EVEN BEFORE** the first wooden playground structures were built in 1984, Walker said the property was unique and special in the community.

"The property owned by church is a wooded hillside, which you don't find in Alexandria," Walker said. "There are lots of mature shade trees and lots of green space, so it is a bit of an oasis."

It was in the 1980s that planning for the actual playground began. Walker said parents of the Beverley Hills Church preschoolers wanted to take advantage of the picturesque setting and build a playground according to what was then considered a natural design.

"Back when I was a parent at the preschool, which would have been in the 1980s, the parents of the preschool wanted to really create a natural playground space



From the early days ...



... to the Castle construction in 1984.

with lots of wooden structures," Walker said. "That is what was created back in 1984 with a company called Robert Leathers Company."

She added that it was a true community built and kept playground with parent and community volunteers. Members of the community lovingly referred to this wooden playground as "the Castle."

She said that between the board of directors and committees of involved parents and alumni, "the Castle was a huge collaborative effort."

Unfortunately, though, as Walker said, the wooden structures were not going to last forever. The board and preschool parents acknowledged that the oasis needed a rebuild by the later 2000s.

**"A R O U N D 2006,** we started to be more thoughtful about what was it going to be — what we were going to replace the wooden structures with," Walker said. "It was just eventually going to fall down."

At the same time, she said a back-to-nature movement of sorts was happening in the education field.

"There was a lot of conversation in educational fields about children's disconnect from nature," Walker said. "We really began to want to have a more dynamic and naturalized space."

The planning went hand in hand with the notion that "outdoor time is just as important as indoor time," according to Walker. In 2008, they were even able to select The National Playground Company as the official designer.

Walker said the financial crisis of 2008 stopped all the fundraising in its tracks.

"We had committed to fundraising with alumni, but then everything went south," Walker said. "It was not the right time. Everyone felt this way, so the project was just tabled."

In the years since this decision to delay

building, Walker said none of the initial playground pieces had been demolished.

"A few things were removed over the years, but the basic, big structure in the middle has been there forever," she added.

Kelly Organeck, the Beverley Hills Church Preschool director that followed Walker, was responsible for "bringing the project back to the fore," according to Walker.

Organeck, the preschool director from 2008-2012, said the playground planning committee began meeting again at the beginning of 2011 after the economy began

to stabilize and both church members and preschool families were comfortable with planning for a new playground on the property.

"The playground planning committee began meeting at the beginning of 2011," Organeck said. "It took a couple years for the economy to shift and for [the preschool admin-

istrators and parents] to make sure they had the resources."

She said that while some members of the community have grown attached to the older playground structures, redoing its design is a necessary change for the preschool and for the surrounding community.

"The current playground is symbolic for people," Organeck said, "but this is a change that matches the educational philosophy of the school — that the learning that goes on outside reflects what goes on inside the classroom. Inquiry followed by explanations is supported by this type of playground."

Beverley Hills Church Preschool parent Melissa Miller said her children will always have great memories of the Castle, but that a newer and safer "play scape" is crucial for the students as well as for the community.

"I am very excited," Miller said. "The Castle has provided so many incredible memories for our children, but I know the new playscape will be such a unique playground for our community. I have been to

other parts of [Northern Virginia] with the natural playscapes, and I just feel that for us to bring one not only to the church and school, but to the community, it will provide a lot of excitement and memories that people will have for a lifetime."

Miller added that she is proud to send her children to such a special preschool, and that the new playground will complement the preschool's Reggio approach, which encourages exploration and discovery in early education.

**THE NEW PLAYGROUND,** Organeck said, will most certainly be very different from modern day playgrounds.

"There will be much fewer static structures. Most modern day playgrounds have some kind of structure at a focal point," she said. "In nature, it is natural elements that make up [a setting,] not one central, static focal point. The new playground will have several elements that inspire children to move, discover, explore."

She said another crucial characteristic of the new playground is that it will be captivating to much wider age range of children.

"Children of all ages can use it," Organeck said. "It is not something that will bore a 12 year old because the equipment is too small. But it will also be accessible for an 18 month old. Nature has no age parameters and neither will this playscape."

Both Organeck and Walker said the playground will be unique to Alexandria and it will benefit the community for years to come.

"I think that what makes the excitement is that there isn't any other place like this in Alexandria," Organeck said. "The preschool community is able to build it and provide it for the community [at large]. Even as kids grow older they can continue to enjoy it."

Walker added that it will be a very important play place for children in Alexandria who would not otherwise have easy access to a great play-learning environment.

Walker said that while parents, teachers and board members have been fundraising within the alumni network, they still need to and believe they will fundraise between 15 and 20 thousand more dollars.

"A lot of people are gung ho because it is the only natural place for young children," Walker said.

Both Walker and Organeck said the preschool is still working with Natural Playground Company to have the new playground functional by the last quarter of 2013. "We had hoped to build in August, but this might be optimistic with the zoning process," Walker said. "It will be sometime in September or October, they think."

She added that working with the city to get the right permits and contracts is a lengthy process, but the result will be well worth it.

"If this is not a destination playground, then I don't know what is," Walker said. "There are no bells and whistles — it is all nature."

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