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Brooklyn's Playground wins \$15K in contest

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Pocatello has beaten out the likes of Portland, Ore., Columbus, Ohio, and Chicago to win an online voting contest with a \$15,000 prize, which will be used to help build an accessible play area called Brooklyn's Playground.

The project, to be centrally located in OK Ward Park, will cost about \$400,000 and will provide the area's first inclusive playground. The sponsor of the playground fund drive, Valley Pride, announced Wednesday the prize money brings the fundraising total to about \$141,000.

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The contest was sponsored by KaBOOM!, a Washington, D.C.-based organization dedicated to saving opportunities for children to play, and the public could vote on videos for the top 10 of 118 community playground projects from April 21 through Tuesday night.

The project is named after Brooklyn Fisher, a 5-year-old local girl with spina bifida. It was proposed by her parents, Jonny and Melissa Fisher, who used to take her to an accessible playground when they lived in the Salt Lake City area. They decided to spearhead the effort to build one in Pocatello after Brooklyn fell from a swing and hurt herself at a standard, local playground.

Jonny Fisher believes the voting process has

provided the entire community a sense of ownership in Brooklyn's Playground.

"It was amazing how quickly it spread and how wide it spread. We had people from all across the country (voting)," he said. "Wherever I went, people would stop us and say, 'Hey, we're voting on the project. We voted today.'"

Upon learning that Pocatello had won, Brooklyn asked her father, "Do we have enough money to put the playground together now?"

Valley Pride's goal is to start work on the project in September, utilizing donated labor from a host of local contractors and workers.

"Little pesky Pocatello was able to beat out these huge metropolitan cities," Jonny Fisher said. "I thought that was pretty cool that our community supports things like this to that degree."

Arlo Luke, a past president of Valley Pride and a member of the Brooklyn's

Playground Committee, noted that children have been involved with art contests, an Inkom pianist has written a song about the playground and a host of businesses and residents have contributed.

"The big prize was the elevating of the community spirit," Luke said. "We need this kind of success in our lives and to feel good about what we accomplish together."

He noted there's a lot more money yet to be raised, and the fundraising work is only getting started, but he's confident the goal will be met. The finished playground will serve as a monument to the community's teamwork, Luke believes.

Brooklyn's Playground will include cooperative games, accessible music areas, sensory panels and handrails designed to include children who may have a disability but aren't confined to a wheelchair. Advocates for the

project point out that 11 percent of the 22,285 children in Pocatello and Chubbuck have an ADA-recognized disability.

Alison Risso, director of communications for KaBOOM!, said Pocatello's entry was unique among the finalists. First, it was the only playground among the group specifically designed to be accessible. As Risso points out, all children should have the right to play, whether they be able-bodied or have disabilities.

"It's wonderful to see a community rally around a cause like this," Risso said. "While we don't focus on accessibility, we do make sure all the playgrounds we build meet all the ADA requirements."

The grant is funded by the Dr Pepper Snapple Let's Play initiative, which represents a \$15 million, three-year commitment to KaBOOM! to offer playground equipment grants.

Risso recalled how during her own childhood, her mother would ring a bell that could be heard up to a quarter-mile away when it was time to come home from playing. Some of her friends ran home when the street lights went on.

Nowadays, however, children face a growing "play deficit," she explained.

"Children are playing less than they ever did before and there are really dire consequences," Risso said. "Children are spending more time inside watching TV and less time outside."

She cited statistics from the Centers for Disease Control that show one in five children in the U.S. have access to a park or playground, and children who live within a half mile of a playground are more than five times more likely to have a fit weight.

"Clearly the folks in Pocatello care about the cause of play," Risso said, adding she's seen in her organization's past

voting competitions where smaller cities managed to get organized and prevailed over larger cities.

Risso suggests that Pocatello apply for status through KaBOOM! as a Playful City USA. There are 118 cities currently on the list, and communities with the status can apply for special grants that aren't available to other communities and rely on recognition in national media outlets and the KaBOOM! website.

The organization is currently taking applications which must include: a plan for improving play, reports on annual spending for parks and recreation, a proclamation and celebration of an annual play day, a public-private task force to look for ways to improve play and an audit to map available play opportunities using online tools.

"It's a good bit of paperwork, but it's worth it," Risso said.