

Naturalized playground opens

JULIE JOCSAK
STANDARD STAFF

The playground at Bethlehem Place has gone au naturel.

The new naturalized playground was officially opened on Tuesday. The playground features all natural elements for children to play on. Wooden logs to climb and sit on, sand to play in, a water feature, chalkboard and even a wooden xylophone for children to entertain themselves with has replaced the aging plastic play set.

The project took three years from beginning to end starting with a workshop run by the Early Childhood Community Development Centre on the benefits of natural playgrounds for children. In attendance was Carolyn Fish, program manager at Bethlehem Housing and Support Services.

"There's so much research that shows all of the benefits for children being exposed to nature especially for children in their healthy development," said Fish. "I thought about our early learning program that we have here and our goal is to help with healthy

child development and the children that are coming and staying here have most often experienced trauma in their lives or transiency." Bethlehem place provides transitional housing and they also offer an early learning program for children.

"I thought if anybody could benefit from this, it's our kids," said Fish. "When you are living in an apartment building you don't have a backyard to play in so I thought the benefits to add this space would be great for the children that are living here and in the early learning program."

The naturalized playground, called Bethlehem Place Family Park, is one of four pilot projects through the Early Childhood Community Development Centre and so was designed at a reduced cost. The projects are at the Brock Rosalind Blauer Centre for Child Care, St. Thomas on Ontario Street and Child's World in Welland on Woodlawn Road.

With a price tag of \$120,000, fundraising was much needed and several community clubs and organizations, including some anonymous donors, stepped forward to

make the playground happen and volunteers showed up to help where they could.

"We saved a big chunk of money by having volunteers help with the tear down," said Jennifer Sinclair, philanthropy manager, Bethlehem Housing and Support Services. "We had a lot of interlocking brick that needed to be removed as well as a three foot wall." Volunteers all lent a hand to take care of it.

"It was a really neat community build," said Sinclair.

The number of volunteers that stepped forward pleasantly surprised the staff at Bethlehem Place.

"As the momentum started going we had more people that wanted to volunteer than work we had to do," said Fish. "Lots of excitement in the community and a really positive response."



JULIE JOCSAK/STANDARD STAFF
Phoebe (top) and Eleanor (bottom) Ferguson plays on part of the new playground at Bethlehem Place that was replaced with a new, naturalized play ground and unveiled on Tuesday.

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ALLAN BENNER
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