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Family Fun at Fort Sill

Fort Sill Shows Its Commitment to Army Families, Wounded Warriors

PHOTOS BY MONICA WOOD AND CHRISTINA TORRENCE, FORT SILL

As Army leaders at installations around the world sign the Army Family Covenant — a pledged commitment to the continued wellbeing of Army families — Fort Sill, Okla., is putting these words into action. The Army post recently completed a series (four in total) of new playgrounds, including a fully inclusive playground, which was funded with \$125,000 in appropriated funds. In total, approximately \$300,000 in new playground equipment and amenities were purchased, adding a whole new dimension of fun for Fort Sill families.

Fort Sill is proof that the Army is transforming with a focus on family. The covenant agreement represents a \$1.4 billion commitment in 2008 to improve the quality of life for Army families, and Army leaders are looking to budget at the same levels for the coming years. According to Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Richard Cody, who is making his way to Army posts around the globe to sign the covenant, the Army has committed \$40 billion over the next six years to support family programs.

This is just the beginning in a master plan of improvements set for Fort Sill. “The idea is to have a complete recreation area for families and soldiers, including the addition of a \$600,000 Spray Park adjacent to the playgrounds, outdoor basketball courts and park-like settings,” says Fort Sill MWR Director Brenda Spencer-Ragland. The Spray Park, which is to be provided by Water Ventures, is scheduled to be open by the summer of 2008.

Fort Sill is also moving forward with a \$750,000 CPMC project to renovate and add new cabins to the lakefront at Lake Elmer Thomas Recreation Area (LETRA), a popular Fort Sill



All-Inclusive playground using the Certified Boundless Design



recreation area that offers something for everyone, from boating and fishing to camping and vacations.

In addition to creating more facilities and programs for families, Fort Sill does a lot for wounded warriors. The post had an official ribbon-cutting ceremony on Nov. 27, 2007, for a new Soldier Family Assistance Center (SFAC), which is a new Army division established to support wounded warriors. In addition to the SFAC, Fort Sill provides comprehensive support and services for wounded warriors, with the overall goal of



Co-Op Park
playground

adapting all programs and facilities to be all-inclusive, including sports, recreation and fitness.

“All of us in MWR have taken a look at how we can improve our support for our wounded warriors, and are working to adapt programs and facilities or create new ones, which is the case with the new playgrounds,” says Jenny Sullivan, Fort Sill Community Activities manager.

This past holiday season the post had a wounded warrior Christmas tree with notes that included wishes as ornaments for others to grab and fulfill. “It is very rewarding for all,” says Sullivan. The post also hosts many other holiday and year-round events and activities. Wounded warriors also get tickets to events, such as NASCAR races, and Oklahoma State University (OSU) games, for example.

All-Inclusive Playground

The all-inclusive playground is a fully accessible Certified Boundless Design playground from Playworld Systems, a design approved by and based on the criteria and guidelines set forth by Boundless Playgrounds, a not-for-profit organization committed to providing all-inclusive playgrounds. The National Center for Boundless Playgrounds, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary, specializes in providing fully accessible playgrounds for children of all abilities.

The all-inclusive playground at Fort Sill, which opened in November, allows children with physical limitations, as well as wounded warriors, to play together.

Spencer-Ragland, who spearheaded the project, says that there was a distinct need at Fort Sill for a playground that was fully accessible for both children with physical limitations and wounded warriors or parents too.

“We’re seeing an increase in children who need a playground such as this, and it is just great to see entire families coming out together to play, regardless of any individual limitations, whether it be a child or a parent,” she says.

Spencer-Ragland points out that not long after the playground opened she witnessed two brothers — one in a wheelchair and the other with hand walkers — playing together as their parents looked on proudly.

“It’s about total inclusiveness in recreation, from children to wounded warriors. We’re all about the whole family, the whole



person, the whole community — we all lean on each other and work together to create a community we can be proud of.”

In keeping with the Army Family Covenant, and the increase in funds and projects, Spencer-Ragland says families “know we are committed to them when they see the new facilities and programs.”

She points out that the playgrounds and improved park settings where they are located have created a great environment for families. Camp Cawabunga, which Fort Sill hosts every summer, has also benefited from the improvements. The post provides two weeks of camp, including recreation, play and fun for children with physical limitations. Working with the local Lawton Public Schools and local businesses, the camp has doubled in numbers since its inception in 2005.

“In 2005 we had about 25 children and in 2007 we had 112,” says Spencer-Ragland. “The quality of the program and camp — and the teachers that give up their time each summer — is just top notch. And the fully accessible playgrounds and parks create a great atmosphere not only for the camp but for our families here at Fort Sill year-round. The playground provides opportunities for the whole family — for them to get good family time together.”

Part of Fort Sill’s success is listening to the voices of the community — Fort Sill families — to hear their concerns and needs. “We work very closely with the Teen Council, and many of these kids have parents who have deployed 2-3 times already and it is tough for them. The youth center is a nice safe haven, but we asked them what else would they want. They actually asked about the possibility of a spray park. The girls liked the idea of having a water park where their hair doesn’t get wet. This project really addresses their specific needs.”

More Playgrounds

In addition to the all-inclusive playground, Fort Sill opened three new playgrounds during the summer of 2007 in an effort to

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Military Playgrounds



Quinette Park playground

improve outdoor recreation for Fort Sill children. Located at Ambrosia Springs Park, Co-Op Park and Quinette Park, respectively, the three playgrounds offer something for children of all ages and abilities, including custom-made equipment such as a military hummer truck, which children and parents love to

play in, and some interesting pieces that get children active and moving, such as the Merry-go-Round cycles and Xcent Wave from Noah's Park Playgrounds. The three playgrounds incorporate playground equipment from Noah's Park Playgrounds, and Rex Playgrounds, which represents Playworld Systems.

According to Sullivan, prior to building the new playgrounds, the post evaluated its existing playgrounds and realized that they were not meeting standards and were lacking.

"They were very old, and offered nothing new or exciting," she says. "We knew our park settings — near a nature walk, basketball courts, and picnic areas — would be perfect for building up our playgrounds."

Using nonappropriated funds earmarked for improving Fort Sill's parks, the playground/park improvement project was off the ground. The Co-Op and Quinette Park playgrounds were built first for \$50,000 each, and the Ambrosia Springs Park playground was built with FY07 end-of-the-year money (\$75,000) that became available. "We were working on the playground all the way up to Sept. 30, 2007," says Sullivan, who researched companies and decided on which playground equipment to go with for the three different playgrounds.

"We knew we wanted ADA swings, and playground equipment for the young ones — ages 2-5, as well as some new and exciting playground features to excite the older kids and parents too. The playgrounds are really

family friendly, and can be enjoyed in a beautiful park setting with covered areas for picnics or parties."

She points out that the playgrounds were so eagerly awaited that it was difficult to keep the kids off of them until they were officially open. "We knew they would be a big hit and they have been," says Sullivan. "Once the Spray Park opens up next summer we will have an incredible recreation complex for our families, soldiers, and wounded warriors."

National Center for Boundless Playgrounds

The National Center for Boundless Playgrounds is celebrating its 10th anniversary of providing fully accessible playgrounds for children of all abilities.

"Support from parents, grandparents, children, corporations, foundations, government agencies, community leaders, civic groups and countless others is making a real difference in children's lives,"

says Jaffe Barzach, co-founder and co-executive director of the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds.

Today, there are more than 100 "Boundless" playgrounds in 21 states and Canada with dozens more in development. Successful statewide initiatives in Connecticut, Florida, Maryland and Michigan are helping establish multiple



Ambrosia Springs Park playground



Boundless playgrounds, and many playground industry partners are responding to the call of “play for all” by offering Boundless Playgrounds Certified Models in their catalogs and on their Web sites, such as the one provided to Fort Sill by Playworld Systems, a Boundless partner.

On a Boundless playground you’ll find:

- Every child can reach the highest play deck.
- Play structures configured to support children’s development.
- Universally accessible pathways and surfacing.
- Cozy spots where everyone can gather.
- Equipment such as swings and bouncers with high-back support.
- Elevated sand tables and activity panels where children of all abilities can play together.
- Sensory-rich activities that let the imagination soar.
- Everyone can be in the middle of the fun!

The National Center for Boundless Playgrounds has made a concerted effort to get the industry involved in its goal to make every playground “Boundless.” Boundless Playgrounds issued

an invitation to the national playground industry to join in a groundbreaking collaboration to help communities create barrier-free playgrounds.

In 2007, the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds teamed up with seven playground industry partners, including:

- BigToys
- GameTime
- Little Tikes Commercial
- Miracle Recreation Equipment Company
- Play & Park Structures
- Playworld Systems
- Recreation Creations

These seven companies offer a selection of Boundless Playgrounds-certified models in their catalogs and on their Web sites. Each model is compliant with Boundless Playgrounds’ high standards for playgrounds that welcome children with and without disabilities and support their development of life skills.

For more information about the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds and its industry partners visit www.boundlessplaygrounds.org.

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