

## Clemyjontri Park

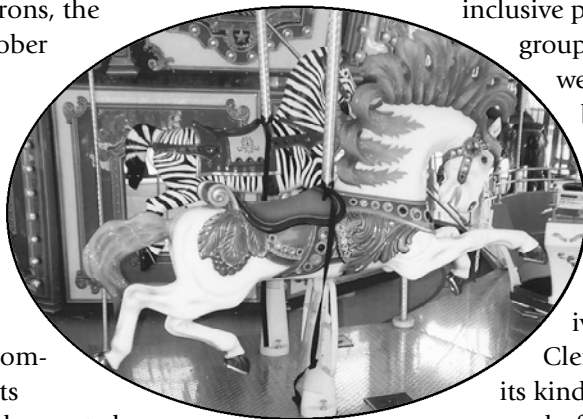
*Accessible Playgrounds: A Dream Come True for Children of All Ages and Abilities*

By Carrie Smoot

At Clemyjontri Park, in McLean, Va., I feel welcome. It doesn't matter at all that I have long since grown up and focused my attention on work and adult responsibilities. It's great to be in the fresh air, have lunch at the picnic pavilion, ride the carousel and wander through the playground.

Clean and well-maintained sidewalks lead to all four quadrants of the bright and cheerful inclusive play areas. Designed so that children who have autism, sensory disabilities, mobility challenges and other conditions can join in the fun with their friends who may or may not have disabilities, the play structures teach important developmental skills in a fun way. Parents who have disabilities can play with their children. Rubber surfaces protect in case of falls and invite wheelchair races, wheelies, spins and an opportunity to see how fast you can push your manual chair. All play structures are connected by ramps. You can push up the ramps and look out over the whole park. Accessible swings have back supports, seatbelts and other stabilizing features.

Known affectionately as Clemy by Fairfax County Park Authority staff and patrons, the 18-acre park opened in October 2006, a gift of Mrs. Adele Lebowitz, who still lives on the property. Staff members say she often looks out her window at the park to see everyone enjoying themselves. Lebowitz's husband was a prominent Washington businessman, community leader and civil rights champion who founded and operated Morton's Department Stores for more than 50 years. Morton's was one of the first integrated stores for staff and customers alike. In that spirit, Mrs. Lebowitz created a playground where all children can play together. It is named for her four children-Carolyn (CL), Emily (EMY), John (JON) and Petrina (TRI). The playground



is complete, and some preliminary design work is in progress for portions of Phase II of the park.

The menagerie carousel is Clemy's popular centerpiece harkening back to an earlier time. Made by a Kansas company, chariots, a spinning teacup and 14 prancing steeds take riders on magical journeys. The carousel deck is recessed to ground level so that it is accessible for wheelchairs, allowing children to transfer to the teacup. The chariots are designed to allow for transfer to a seated position or to remain seated in the wheelchair. As my aunt and a friend boarded with me, I marveled at how easy it was to push up the ramp, park and set my brakes. As I admired the horses and zebras near me in their finery, a little girl got on in front of me with her grandmother. As the music began and the horses bobbed up and down, she looked at me curiously. "Think she'll be able to catch us?" her grandmother asked her. She nodded, and so we went round and round in an imaginary race that was over too soon. We both won.

Judy Pedersen, spokesperson for the Fairfax County Park Authority, says that communities embarking on an inclusive playground need to start a friends' group. "We have a Friends group who were instrumental in getting the park built. We succeeded in large measure because of them. Our Friends have served us well.

"We are so grateful for Mrs. Lebowitz's unexpected gift, and many Fairfax leaders are supportive," Pedersen continues. "Right now, Clemyjontri is the only playground of its kind in the area. As an agency, we are very proud of it, and we see the impact it has every day. We always get crowds, and our picnic reservations fill quickly," she says.

I wish I had this when I was a kid, I thought. But at least it's here now, and I would definitely be coming back....

My earliest memory of being on a playground was

when I was about 2. My family and I went on a picnic. My mom helped me onto the forest green wooden see-saw. This wasn't easy for a child with cerebral palsy, but we managed. My uncle got on the other end to ride with me, and I kept my eyes on his face as I held onto the handle. It was fun and a little scary going up and down, and I remember laughing and feeling the sun on me. My aunt took turns being supporter or rider to give my mom a break. My grandmother, sitting in the shade by the picnic table, watched us having fun, and smiled and waved at me in my excitement. Of course I wanted a second or third ride before it was time to get off! I don't ever remember going down a slide in any playground, but I would have enjoyed trying it.

Years later as an adult, on a visit to Babcock State Park in West Virginia, I got on the saddle swing with help. As I hung on for dear life, I was amazed that I had enough balance to stay on without back support. "Push me higher!" I kept saying to my aunt. She did, and I felt like I could fly.

At extremely rare times in childhood, I rode mechanical horses, merry-go-rounds, amusement park rides and swings, all with assistance. Generally, these structures were very difficult for me to get on, so whenever rides could be arranged, it was a memorable treat. Whenever I go to the Mall in Washington, DC, I visit the carousel for old times' sake. I can't get on that particular one anymore, but I love the music, the animals spinning around, children enjoying the ride, parents waving, laughing and taking pictures.

My special ed elementary school playground was only partially accessible in the 1970s. The swings had backs, arms and seatbelts-blue chairs hanging from chains. It was safe, comfortable, and very conducive to pretending you were riding a rocket into space, or flying as high as you can go. We had a blacktop with activities, including tetherball, and lowered things to climb on, walk alongside or lean against. I envied kids in my class who could climb to the top of the traditional jungle gym, while I could only get on the bottom rung, imagining what the view would be like from the topmost vantage point.

The elementary school where I was mainstreamed had no accessible playground, so recess wasn't fun, although I enjoyed being with my friends. Most neighborhood playgrounds I knew lacked accessible equipment, and the terrain was not made for manual wheelchairs. Sadly, I never went to these. Even today, a playground's design can keep kids on the sidelines-not a fun place to be.

A little girl sat on the sidelines as she watched the other children play on a playground she could not get

to or on. Several months later, Amy Jaffe Barzach was looking for a way to honor the memory of her nine-month-old son Jonathan. She knew what she had to do. Remembering that little girl, Barzach created a universally accessible playground with support from her Connecticut community.

"If all you know is that your child can't have fun or can't participate, as a parent you are going to try to change things and get them involved as much as possible," says Barzach. "The good news is that interest and intentions are definitely there to create inclusive playgrounds - ones that build upon the requirements of the ADA and ADAAG. And with the obesity rate five times higher than 25 years ago, it's even more critical that children who have disabilities have a chance to play and be active," she says.

A local hospital donated land for that memorial playground, where children can pretend they are kings and queens in a magic kingdom connected by ramps and bridges. There's an accessible playhouse, swings, and a section about musical instruments. Everyone can be in the middle of the fun at the playground's highest point.

Barzach's advocacy efforts led her to found the non-profit organization Boundless Playgrounds. Her title is chief inspiration officer, and she travels the country speaking about how to create inclusive playgrounds. She says the organization is a resource for community groups, from design planning to fundraising and increasing awareness. Boundless Playgrounds also works with playground equipment companies and communities to design inclusive playground environments. In 2006, Boundless Playgrounds opened its 100th playground. By 2020, the organization wants to make inclusive playgrounds commonplace.

Because her son Ruben uses a walker and can't easily get around the grass-and-wood-chips surface at the John B. Cary Elementary School playground, Ania Swanson of Richmond, Va., took the lead two years ago to see if an accessible playground could be built alongside the existing one that would be open to everyone in the community. Working with the school PTA and several interested individuals, Swanson is seeking grants and support to build the circular structure playground, which will have rubberized surfaces, ramps that lead to all play areas, accessible swings and a firehouse pole. Throughout the whole process, she has met many people who share her vision, and she says she has learned from them. "You really need supporters who will understand your vision," Swanson says.

Ever since the 2003 success of the "Katie and Friends" playground in Chesterfield County, Jane

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Warrick has continued to spread the gospel of the need for inclusive playgrounds. "I am working with Henrico County now to make one at Dorey Park out by the airport," she says. "I just spoke with Mayor Wilder and Parks and Rec in Richmond to do one in the Byrd Park/Maymont area, which will have very large space."

Warrick encouraged people to visit and enjoy Katie and Friends so that they could get ideas for their own community playgrounds. "People are really seeing the need for them now, and they are very motivated to build them. That was part of my dream, and all I wanted," says Warrick. At Katie and Friends, she and her 15-year-old daughter, who has multiple physical and intellectual disabilities, can ride down the wider slide together and enjoy the accessible swings. Kids can transfer from one play surface to another. More adventurous kids can climb from ground level to five feet.

"One little boy, a chair user, came down the slide face first," Warrick recalls, laughing. "He was grinning from ear to ear. That day, he had no disabilities. And a local woman, 36, fell in love with Katie and Friends and keeps coming back. She also uses a wheelchair, but never grew up with anything like this," she says.

Warrick has also been touched by the community's generosity. She recalls that a five-year-old boy ran a lemonade stand, giving Warrick his earnings. Students at led the effort to create an inclusive playground. "It's amazing," Warren says. "Most people are getting the message." ■



The following is a list of inclusive and accessible playgrounds in Virginia. We invite readers to let us know about others. E-mail us at [csc7921@verizon.net](mailto:csc7921@verizon.net) and please send pictures!

• **Clemyjontri**

6317 Georgetown Pike • McLean, VA 22101  
703-388-2807

[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/clemyjontri](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/clemyjontri)

• **Donald S. Frady Park**

East Broad and Fairfax Street • Falls Church, VA 22046  
[www.fallschurchva.gov/Content/Government/Departments/CommunityServices/RecsParks/Parks.aspx?cnlid=966](http://www.fallschurchva.gov/Content/Government/Departments/CommunityServices/RecsParks/Parks.aspx?cnlid=966)

*This nine-year-old park has ramped, accessible play areas-one play component with three separate sections-and rubberized surfacing for safety.*

• **Fun Without Limits at Boundless Playground**

11532 Jefferson Avenue • Newport News, VA  
[www.boundlessplaygrounds.org/playgrounds/find/playground.php?playground\\_id=139](http://www.boundlessplaygrounds.org/playgrounds/find/playground.php?playground_id=139)

*More than 70 percent of this playground allows children to have fun without leaving behind their support equipment.*

• **Operation Hope Playground**

Mechanicsville, Virginia  
[www.operationhopeplayground.com](http://www.operationhopeplayground.com)

*This playground celebrated its grand opening on Saturday, April 5 at Pole Green Park.*

• **A Playground for Katie & Friends**

Huguenot Park • Chesterfield County on Robious Road  
[www.katieandfriends.org](http://www.katieandfriends.org)

*Opened October 25, 2003. It was the very first inclusive universal design in Central Virginia. Mary Mumford playground followed; the second was St. Edwards School on Huguenot.*

• **Children's Dream**

Jim Barnett Park • Winchester, Virginia,

• **John B. Cary Elementary School Fully Accessible Playground Project:**

[www.jbcaryplayground.com](http://www.jbcaryplayground.com)

*Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. Here she is pictured with friends, Virginia and Lilly on the equipment at Clemyjontri.*

## Tips from Boundless Playgrounds®

The biggest difference at a Boundless™ playground is that everyone can be in the middle of the fun. Boundless™ playgrounds are tailor-made for the way children are naturally drawn to play, plus they are universally accessible so everyone can play side by side at his or her own highest level of ability.

On a Boundless™ playground you'll find:

- Ramps that allow every child to reach the highest play deck
- Play structures configured to support children's development
- Universally accessible pathways and surfacing
- Equipment like swings and bouncers with back support
- Cozy spots where everyone can gather
- Elevated sand tables and activity panels where children of all abilities can play together
- Sensory-rich activities.

## The Difference Between a Boundless™ Playground and a Typical ADA-Accessible Playground

The ADA laid the foundation for accessible standards on the playground. Boundless Playgrounds builds upon those standards and goes beyond them to give children of all abilities not just access to the edge of the playground, but the ability to be in the middle of the fun by incorporating universal design principles and child development theory. Boundless™ playgrounds also address developmental, sensory and cognitive disabilities.

### To Learn More

Boundless Playgrounds®  
45 Wintonbury Avenue  
Bloomfield, CT 06002  
860-243-8315  
[www.boundlessplaygrounds.org](http://www.boundlessplaygrounds.org)

# All Kids are Special

A current Boundless Playground Project in New Kent, Virginia

Shouldn't playgrounds be for everyone? Why would we exclude children with special needs from play, when we work so hard to insure all children the same educational opportunities?

All Kids are Special is a non-profit organization in its grass-roots phase working to bring together, and organize community members, parents and special educators to create extraordinary playgrounds where children, with and without disabilities can develop essential skills for life as they learn through play.

All Kids are Special's mission is to increase inclusive opportunities by supporting and assisting in the building of "Boundless Playgrounds" in the Richmond, and surrounding areas.

## WHY "BOUNDLESS PLAYGROUNDS"?

Many grass-roots organizations have risen up to address the need for universally accessible play environments with positive results. We believe these organizations have laid the groundwork for the next step, Boundless Playgrounds.

Boundless Playgrounds performance criteria addresses a wide range of barriers that limit the use of play environments for people with disabilities. Boundless Playgrounds enable ALL children, including those with physical, developmental, cognitive and sensory disabilities to experience independent, self-

directed play, each at his or her own highest level of ability.

Playgrounds for children of all abilities are one way a community can express its commitment to the ideal that every person is valued; Boundless Playgrounds are typically viewed as a community asset.

Our philosophy is that "All kids are special" and deserve a play environment designed so that everyone can play side-by-side.

What makes "Boundless Playgrounds" different is the performance criteria. The design and construction of the playground meets the highest standards of play for all children as well providing the opportunity for parents or grandparents with disabilities to participate.

Our current project is in New Kent County; with your support and/or involvement - together, we can make extraordinary things happen.  
[www.boundlessplaygrounds.org](http://www.boundlessplaygrounds.org)

If you are interested in finding out more; participating in the organization, or making a donation; please contact us at [allkidsarespecial@comcast.net](mailto:allkidsarespecial@comcast.net)

Submitted by Co-Chairpersons,  
Melanie M. Brooke, M.Ed. and Karen Stidham

