

A playground for everyone

Opening of handicap-accessible park one of day's events.



Randy Kline and daughter Sarah, 2, of South Bend, have a blast on a playground spring rider during the grand opening celebration of the new fully accessible playground in Potawatomi Park. Tribune Photos SHAYNA BRESLIN

The grand opening of the new Potawatomi Park and Playground Saturday was the solution to many of Molly Anderson's problems.

Her 5-year-old son K.J. was born prematurely and diagnosed with cerebral palsy at 8 months old. Because of his condition, Anderson said K.J. was unable to enjoy many parks in the area that were not fully accessible to those who were handicapped until Saturday.

She said the new Potawatomi Park and Playground, which held its opening ceremony at noon on Saturday, was one of the first fully handicap-accessible parks ever. "(The park) is incredible, and it's an incredible opportunity to have a playground that's made for everyone," Anderson said.

She also said she was pleased with every aspect of the new park, including the "monumental" return slides which handicapped children can climb themselves. Anderson also enjoyed the special surface of the playground.

"(K.J.) walks in a walker, and the surface is so crucial for him to be able to walk without the barriers of sand or mulch," she said. "Things that are made to be protective for children but are barriers for him." Anderson said Potawatomi Park brought something special and unique to the community for handicapped children.



K.J. Anderson, 5, and his sister Shea, 1, play on the merry-go-round during the grand opening of the new fully accessible playground in Potawatomi Park. K.J. uses a walker and has, until now, been unable to play freely at a playground because of inaccessibility for his walker.

"There's a park in town that we had been going to for several years and it had two handicap-accessible swings," she said. "But they have been broken for two-and-a-half to three years, so this park is an awesome opportunity."

Chris Nanni, vice president of programs for the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County, spoke at the event about how the park and playground were based on the idea of a universal design.

"Universal design is listening to the most vulnerable voices of the community," Nanni said. "With universal design, it's not just for people of disability but for older adults and parents with small children," he said. "We want everyone to be able to have access."

Nanni also said the park's new walking path was designed with a special surface to accommodate about 500,000 people who visit Potawatomi

Park each year.

"We've designed the exercise path to link all of the facilities of the park," he said.



It was fun for all at the grand opening of the new fully accessible playground in Potawatomi Park.