

KIDS

## A Special Gift

BY Kim J. Gifford

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Paul Howe

On this warm summer's day in Newbury, shrieks of delight reverberate from the new Velie Memorial Playground located next to the Newbury Public Library on Route 103. Surprisingly, these cheerful squeals emanating from one of the playground structures are not from carefree children, but rather four board members gleeful at the completion of a long project.

### Building a playground

"It's been a journey," says board member Holly K. von Svoboda. "Sometimes I think we were like a train, like the *Little Engine that Could* saying, 'I think I can, I think I can,' only we were saying, 'We can do this, we can do this.'"

The playground equipment was designed to reflect the lakes, trains and mountains of historic Newbury. One of the playground modules for the younger children features an engine-shaped climbing structure complete with train whistle, reminiscent of the trains bringing visitors from Boston to the region's grand hotels. The climbing walls denote Newbury's mountains and the nautical blue slides are a tribute to Lake Sunapee.

"When I stand and look at the browns of the woods mixed in with the blues and greens representing the lakes and the trees, I think from an artist's perspective. The way the colors just blend into the landscape has worked out so well," says Dianalee Velie.

If the playground can be viewed as a work of art, then surely Velie is the primary artist. Although all six of the group's board members (Dexter Burley, Catherine Feeney, David "Grizz" Fanning, Rich Sharp, von Svoboda,



Velie) have all been "loyal to the cause," says Fanning, it is Dianalee Velie who has been the heart and life of the project.

The idea began when friends of her son, Joe, donated \$1,000 in memory of his pregnant wife, Currie-Hill Velie, and sons, Joseph John Velie and Jack Jasper Velie, who had been murdered in the fall of 2002. "Joe was in no position to decide what to do with the money, so I opened up a bank account with the plan to do something special," says Velie.

The playground idea came almost immediately. The summer before her death, Currie-Hill, who had circled Newbury on a map as a place for her mother-in-law to relocate, had visited her there. One day, she was in search of a playground where little Joe could play and couldn't find one. Velie remembered, and decided that building a playground was the best way to honor her daughter-



in-law and grandsons.

### Pleasing a town

The playground is also bringing a much welcome addition to the community of Newbury. "Newbury hasn't had a town center. Now it is starting to with town offices, the library, the little beach and now the playground. Families can go to the beach, visit the library and hang out at the playground. It's tying in so nicely with the other buildings and activities here. It's a perfect match," says Newbury Librarian Rosina Johnson.

Town Administrator Dennis Pavlicek agrees that the playground helps round out the community. "We're trying to give services to all of our residents," he says. In addition to the playground, the Town of Newbury dedicated its new Fisherfield Park Recreation Area on July 12, complete with a regulation soccer field, tennis courts, basketball

court, volleyball court, horseshoes, bocce ball and a snack shack with public, handicap-accessible restrooms.

The amenities couldn't come at a better time; the demographics of the community are changing. Story hour at the library, for example, has grown from five children to between 14 and 21 children. "There are a lot of new families here," says Johnson.

Aimee Ayers, a Sunapee mother with toddlers age 2 and 4, eagerly awaited the playground's completion. "The problem in this region is that there hasn't been a playground that isn't on school property, so that people who have kids under school age can take them to play during school hours," she says. "There just aren't a lot of playgrounds around, not to mention nice ones that are new and have all that good stuff."

The Velie Memorial Playground consists of 10,000 square feet and includes play areas for toddlers and older children. Although the town owns the land on which the playground sits, the Velie Memorial Fund donated all the equipment. "It is really

quite extensive. We are hoping it will be a magnet for parents throughout the region who want to bring their kids to a playground," says Pavlicek.

The Velie Memorial Fund raised \$120,000 toward the construction of the playground through memorial donations and fundraisers, including a Best Dressed Pet Contest, Guess When the Snow Will Melt Contest, an art show, concerts and two golf tournaments. Velie, who is also a poet, helped raise money when her publisher donated a \$1 from the sale of each book as well as 300 additional copies. GameTime,

the playground's designer, also secured a \$47,000 grant through the Better Fitness Through Playground Initiative. **Creating a gift**

Standing on the playground during its installation, Fanning, a longtime friend of Velie's, wells up with tears. "I don't have the words," he says.

"It's a dream come true," von Svoboda says. She recalls how in the early stages of the project the board would meet at the library and Velie would peer out the window overlooking the site where the playground now stands. "She would say, 'Holly, wouldn't this be a perfect place for a playground?' never dreaming it would become a reality."

It took a while for the town to settle



on an ideal location, but in 2007 Selectman Jim Powell came to Svoboda to inform her that a spot had been decided upon. "He said, 'Holly, I have a site for the playground right behind the library.' All I could think of was how Dianalee would envision the kids walking out the doors of the library to this grandiose play-

ground," she says.

Although making this vision a reality took a number of baby steps, says Fanning, the board kept themselves going with small "signs" — bright spots that held special meaning — along the way. For example, when the first of the playground equipment showed up over Christmas, Velie and von Svoboda decided to dress the crates up as Christmas presents using a tarp and ribbon. A week later, when the presents were unwrapped, a tiny white kitten bolted out of the crates. She had been inside seven days and nights without water. von Svoboda adopted it, naming it Ala after Alabama, home of the GameTime equipment. "She is our little white angel," von Svoboda says.

Then while going from door to door asking for donations, von Svoboda met a family that lived directly across the street from the site of the playground with a son named Joe. "His mother said, 'You don't know what this playground will mean to little Joe,' and all I could think of was Dianalee's grandson named Joe," she says.

Finally, shortly before the playground's construction, board members found a single tulip blooming on the construction site. Fanning transplanted it, and board members acknowledge it as an omen of their efforts. "Every time there was a lull something good would



*Dianalee Velie, far right, thanks everyone at the playground's July dedication.*

► A SPECIAL GIFT *continued on page 42*



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A SPECIAL GIFT *continued from page 41* happen, like that little tulip,” says von Svoboda.

While the project may seem like it was a long time coming to its supporters, Velie feels that its completion is serendipitous. On Oct. 7, 2007, her son, Joe, had a new child, Thomas.

“Thomas, like Thomas the Tank,” says von Svoboda, returning to the train motif. “There have been all these little messages.”

Time allowed Joe to come to the dedication with a wife and new son. “Enormous changes have come. There has been a lot of light. I think of seeing Thomas, my grandson, on the swings, something I never thought I’d see again after the tragedy,” says Velie. Thanks to her efforts and all those who contributed to the Velie Memorial Playground, Thomas’ and the board’s joyful howls will be the first of many ebullient sounds sure to come in the years ahead as Newbury’s children enjoy their special gift. **K**

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