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The Eli's Park Project

A local mom gathers community support for universally accessible park space

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PHOTO: Eli and his brothers | Credit: Kristin Zwiers

Every mom is on the hunt for the perfect playground. But some moms have a harder time than others in finding their ideal outdoor play area. Whereas many parents would simply bemoan the lack of accessible playgrounds and inclusive community spaces, local mom Paige Reischl decided to do something about it.

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“It really started when my third son, Eli, was born, and it just highlighted how many people were missing from our community spaces. Eli really inspired me to think harder about what I’m doing in my own life to ensure people are included better.”

Eli’s Park

When Eli was 3, Reischl got the idea to convert [Burke-Gilman Playground Park](https://www.seattle.gov/parks/find/parks/burke-gilman-playground-park) (<https://www.seattle.gov/parks/find/parks/burke-gilman-playground-park>) (located at 5201 Sand Point Way N.E. in Seattle) into a universally accessible park. Many people driving by it today are unaware that the playground is a city park.

“Honestly, a little bit selfishly, I think I came to this idea because I wanted the world to be more inclusive for Eli,” says Reischl. The Reischls lost Eli before his fourth birthday, but his passing has only strengthened his mom’s commitment to make the world a more inclusive place.

Reischl says her neighborhood includes pockets of diversity where residents can feel very isolated in the relatively homogenous Laurelhurst/Sand Point area. The Burke-Gilman Playground Park is adjacent to disabled and low-income public housing, as well as the Ronald McDonald House, which hosts families (including siblings) of children hospitalized at nearby Seattle Children’s Hospital.

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Mural at the park | Courtesy of Paige of Reischl

A community project

"It's really being led by the community. I see myself as a gatherer," says Reischl. "We've been growing the number of people involved in the project. We just keep asking ourselves, 'Whose voices are we still missing?'" she says.

In the four years she's been working on the Eli's Park Project, Reischl has gathered input and assistance from more than 800 community members through direct communications, public design workshops and interest group outreach. The core team includes Eli's physical therapist, landscape architects, a teen advisory team, disability advocates and employees of the Seattle Parks and Recreation department.

"This project wouldn't be possible without the innovation and support of the current parks superintendent, Jesús Aguirre. We're doing a lot of things differently, and it's

been really cool to see that in a big institution that has a lot of policies and structures [designed] to keep things the same, that there's someone in there who's allowing space for innovation and really hearing the community out," says Reischl.

Parallel play

What Reischl and the parks department have heard from the community is that people miss out on outdoor spaces because of barriers that are both physical and emotional in nature. Public spaces can feel unsafe, unwelcoming or simply unappealing. Eli's Park is being designed to be fully accessible and entirely welcoming to everyone while maintaining the natural elements that make the current space beautiful.

A community suggestion for parallel pathways became the central concept for the park. The space will be navigable by two paths: One of them is completely accessible, and the other offers a variety of features that present different levels of challenge. The paths frequently connect so that visitors can explore only the elements that are interesting to and appropriate for them. Everything is designed with mobility support features and multiple ways for those features to be utilized. A play structure can be climbed or enjoyed at ground level; there will be a combination of simple swings, swings with safety buckles and even porch swings. A tree house will be built over a ravine to provide a sense of elevation without requiring any climbing to access it.

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"We heard from adults in families [of kids] with autism that [they] need comfortable places to watch the action in solitude," says Reischl. She said seniors also appreciate comfortable seating, and teens want places to hang out away from others. So, the design incorporates a hollow in a hill for youths to retreat to as well as lots of benches for adults.

Emphasizing both nature and art in the park's design will make the space inviting. Several local artists have been brought in to create works for the park. Just as the functional features are designed to be accessible, aesthetic features are geared

toward creating a sense of welcome. For example, in addition to providing wildlife habitat, a tree snag by the tree house will be given a rainbow makeover with colored resin. This is in response to community input indicating that rainbows are effective symbols of inclusivity.

Eli's Park is part of a growing movement to provide more inclusive public spaces. There are [more sensory playgrounds \(http://www.parentmap.com/article/best-sensory-playgrounds-kids-all-abilities\)](http://www.parentmap.com/article/best-sensory-playgrounds-kids-all-abilities) and accessible play spaces in the region now than even a few years ago, and Reischl says that each of them, such as Seattle Children's PlayGarden and the new [Forest Park Playground \(http://www.parentmap.com/article/forest-park-playground-everett-inclusive-kids-all-abilities\)](http://www.parentmap.com/article/forest-park-playground-everett-inclusive-kids-all-abilities), has its own strengths. In fact, Stacy Marshall, the founder of the barrier-free [Owen's Playground \(https://biparks.org/map-location/owens-playground/?mpfy-pin=3828\)](https://biparks.org/map-location/owens-playground/?mpfy-pin=3828) on Bainbridge Island, has been a resource for the Eli's Park crew.

The way forward

After four years of community building and volunteer work, Eli's Park has reached the design-development stage, with 80 percent of the \$5 million needed to complete the project having been raised. If the project is fully funded by the end of 2021, the team can break ground next spring and have the park ready to welcome visitors in early fall of 2022.

"Every time we've heard a new voice or brought a new person or group in, our community has been made stronger. There's a space in this project for everyone," says Reischl.

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Anyone interested in following the progress of Eli's Park can join the mailing list on the [website \(https://www.elispark.org/\)](https://www.elispark.org/) and check in on the project's status on [Instagram \(https://www.instagram.com/elisparkproject/\)](https://www.instagram.com/elisparkproject/) or [Facebook \(https://www.facebook.com/elisparkproject/\)](https://www.facebook.com/elisparkproject/). All are welcome to submit input online

and participate in a public celebration on Aug. 14, during which community feedback will also be solicited. And of course, if you wish to help support the project financially, you can [make a donation \(https://www.classy.org/give/207233/#!/donation/checkout\)](https://www.classy.org/give/207233/#!/donation/checkout) through the website.

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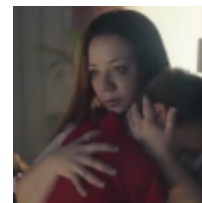
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