



Family wins fight for wheelchair play equipment at Watsessing Park



Watsessing Park's new ADA compliant all access playground will now include equipment for children in wheelchairs after a group of parents lobbied the county. ADAM ANIK / FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

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The parents of 11-year-old Kerani, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, said their push to get wheelchair accessible play items added to newly-opened Watsessing Park all-inclusive playground is closer to being heard. Now all-access advocates, who include parents of wheelchair-bound children as well, are hoping their advocacy will help in the future planning of these playgrounds.

Montclair disabilities advocate Alma Schneider said although most of the all-access playgrounds cropping up across the U.S. are built with good intentions, they are geared more toward the needs of autistic children who have full movement. She suggests that the engineers of these playgrounds look toward making them “universally accessible.”



*Kerani Mehler's parents lobbied the county to have wheelchair accessible equipment so that she would have place to play.
COURTESY THE MEHLER FAMILY*

“I realize there was no malice intended in any way,” said Schneider, who runs a social support group for more than 300 Montclair-area parents of children with disabilities. “But, it’s very common when doing the right thing, not to ask for input from the disability community that will be using it.”

Opened in July, the \$1.4 million all-access county park, designed by Remington & Vernick Engineers and built by Picerno Giordano Construction, only contains one piece of equipment that can accommodate a wheelchair.

Kerani’s mom, Iris Mehler, was excited about the playground hoping it would give her daughter the

opportunity to play side-by-side with her friends and siblings. But at the ribbon cutting in July she was disappointed with the playground because, she said, it is “not all access” for her daughter and others who are wheelchair bound.

All equipment, the county contended, is ADA-compliant and current playground codes. And the playground does have the five main components of an all-access playground, which provides multi-sensory play experiences through touch, sound and visuals; provides a graduated range of challenge; allows greater accessibility with wider access and smooth, even transitions on and off equipment; supports children on the autism spectrum with directional pathways and quiet spaces; and creates welcoming play areas for both quiet and social play.

Watsessing Park, on Bloomfield Avenue in Bloomfield, is geared toward inclusive play with ramps for wheelchair accessibility, as well as swings and seesaws designed with bucket seats for children in wheelchairs. There is also a musical section with a large xylophone and a drum, a rainbow maker and a water-misting section.

But Mehler and a group of parents want the park to have more equipment for children who can not move from their wheelchairs.

The playground “does not represent true integration. It’s sad,” she said, noting that there is only one piece of playground equipment — a swing of sorts — that can accommodate a wheelchair. The wheelchair ramps offer access, but nothing for the wheelchair bound child to do at the end of the ramp. And the all-access swings require the parent or caregiver to lift the child out of his or her wheelchair, which can be daunting to some caregivers. And some children can’t leave their wheelchairs because they are dependent on medical equipment attached to the chair, said Mehler.

A petition started by Mehler’s friend Lesley Scammell, and directed to county executive Joseph DiVincenzo Jr., to add more equipment has 3,420 signatures. And as of last week the petition had some effect. Kerani’s parents met with county engineer Sanjeev Varghese, county executive chief of staff Phil Alagia, county parks director Dan Salvante, and deputy director Kate Hardwyk.

“We discussed specific additional improvements that can be added to the playground, including a wheelchair accessible swing, wheelchair accessible carousel, a raised sandbox, a Hoyer lift and an adult changing table in the nearby restroom,” said Mehler.

The county executive is committed to all of the additions, said Anthony Puglisi, the county’s director of public information. Officials are currently investigating the feasibility of making all of the changes and additions to the park, and Puglisi said the funding is there.

Funding was provided from the Essex County Recreation and Open Space Trust Fund and with a grant from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs.

Mehler said they weren’t given a timeline, but Puglisi said they hope to get it done as “quickly as possible.”

“Once the playground is improved, Kereni and other children who use wheelchairs will be able to play alongside with their friends out in the sunshine and fresh air,” said Scammell.

Mehler, who had attempted to give her input to the county before the playground was installed but was told the plans were already laid out, said they hope their fight will help transform the design of “all-access” playgrounds throughout New Jersey and the U.S. in the future.