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The Story of a Playground

by Francis Wardle

It feels like old times to me. When I consulted with local Head Start programs on building and designing playgrounds, the challenge was always the same: not enough space, not enough money — but lots of volunteer help, community resources, and enthusiasm.

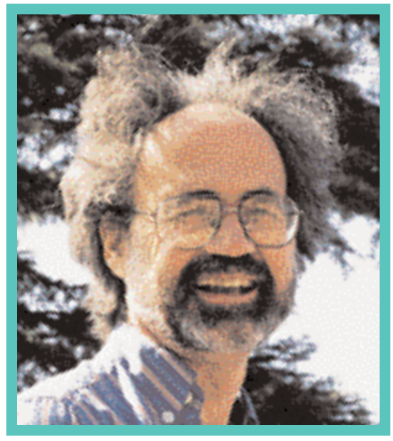
The only difference this time — as I gaze at a sun-drenched slab of concrete surrounded by an eight foot wall, site of the proposed playground — is the location. I'm in the middle of Brazil! Actually, I'm 350 miles north and inland from Rio de Janeiro.

How did I get from the cold winter of Denver, Colorado, to the heat, humidity, and color of Brazil?

I was asked to travel to the town of Sete Lagoas (seven lakes, in Portuguese) by Bryan Cooke, a professor at the University of Northern Colorado. I present a regular lecture on playground safety for one of his graduate courses, and we have worked together on several playgrounds. Dr. Cooke is a member of Partners of the Americas, who sponsored my trip. Partners of the Americas is a Kennedy-era program, now privately funded, that matches people and projects between states in the U.S. and Latin America, to provide a two-way exchange of ideas, expertise, and good will. Colorado is matched with the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais where Sete Lagoas is located.

My first task in designing and building any playground is to examine the available space, discuss with school officials their ideas and needs, and inventory fiscal resources and volunteers. This playground was for 60 three to six year olds who had no play equipment and few learning materials of any kind. After drawing out the playground area, volunteers from Sete Lagoas Rotary and Partners drove me to Belo Horizonte, the capitol of Minas Gerais, to purchase equipment.

On the trip I began to enjoy the local landscape: rolling green hills, orange, iron-rich soil exposed by dirt roads and highway construction, palm trees, ant hills, and a profusion of flowering bushes. Pink, orange, red, yellow, blue, and purple blossoms lined residential streets, accented



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neat family courtyards, and scattered the landscape. It was spring in Brazil.

I had hoped to find equipment that we could transport to the school and install. As part of my current job, I work closely with several national playground companies. I had assumed the same kind of metal and plastic equipment these companies provide would be available in Brazil. No such luck! We could not even find safe swing seats or a slide that was not metal or wood.

So we decided to construct our own equipment, using available materials and volunteer skills and labor. The next few days we toured the town to check out materials and determine what could be made by local craftsmen and what we could build ourselves.

For construction methods and community based solutions, I relied on experiences I had building playgrounds for child care centers, and directing the construction of a model Head Start playground. Funded by ACF for $10,000, we leveraged this into $30,000 of labor, materials, and expertise. We built the playground equipment of wood, using simple construction materials.

For the Brazilian playground, I also relied on the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's *Handbook for Public Safety* (1991). I was particularly careful with fall zones, entrapment, and protrusions.

We decided to build a swivel swing, traditional swing with two seats, platform with two ladders and a slide, and a tunnel made from a drainage culvert. Because of limited space and the configuration of the playground, we created a single fall zone of sand under all the equipment. The sand also provided a great material for constructive play for the children.

The frame of both swings was made from eucalyptus posts, plentiful in this part of Brazil. Hardware for the swings came from hardware stores, chain from a local car shop, attachments were made by a welder, and swing seats were cut from car tires by an auto repair man. The framework for the platform was made using a common Brazilian construction lumber. This finished wood is very hard and splits easily. We found no dowels for the ladder rungs, so a local carpenter milled us some from standard pieces of wood.

All these materials were purchased with funds provided by Rotary International and the Rotary clubs of Greeley (Colorado) and Sete Lagoas. One of the Rotary volunteers, Luiz Vieira, owns a slate factory, so he provided the sand, culvert, and trucks. He also supplied slate for the sand retainer. While not ideal, it made sense to use a local material.

The playground construction proceeded slowly. But I enjoyed working with the volunteers in the hot sun, even though we could not understand each other's language, and I was frustrated by different wood sizes and properties. In fact, one of the best things about this project was that I got to build a playground with my own hands again.

On my last day building the playground, it poured. All day. The hot, humid weather had shifted into the beginning of the rainy season. I didn't get to finish the playground, but the volunteers completed it.

The children at the Andre Luiz School are enjoying the playground, and the volunteers are proud of our accomplishment.

My visit to Sete Lagoas, Brazil — and the work I did there — was a once in a lifetime experience that I will never forget.

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