

Photo courtesy of GTECH



# COMMUNITY PLAY-CREATION

Outdoor play is good for children and teens, but it's even better when they and other members of their community participate in creating the spaces where healthy play happens. By Mark Kramer

# On a cold Saturday morning in January a year ago, two dozen youth looked at an overgrown, empty lot in Pittsburgh's Allentown neighborhood and envisioned the future.

Where weeds, climbing vines and piles of debris concealed the small hillside wedged between a warehouse and the Brashear Association's Allentown Learning and Engagement Center (ALEC), the children told Amber Rooke, the organization's education coordinator at the time, that they wanted to plant flowers and vegetables. They also wanted to build a tree house, pizzeria and roller coaster.

The youth presented their ideas in the form of drawings to Ian Brown of GTECH—Growth Through Technology + Community Health—an agency that transforms vacant lots (Pittsburgh has more than 27,000 of them) into useful community spaces, including play areas called Green Playces. Mr. Brown later gave the children a menu of options from their suggestions to vote on, and they decided to install a rain garden and plant vegetable garden beds, to complement another vegetable garden created the previous summer.

They also made compromises: Since the lot did not have a sizable tree for a tree house, a large, ground-level "bird's nest" made of tree branches would provide a nook for reading and quiet time. The pizzeria became a round garden bed with pizza-slice-shaped dividers and vegetables that could serve as ingredients for a healthy pizza, such as peppers, tomatoes, basil and onion. And a new slide would create the whoosh of a coaster.

A few miles away in the neighborhood of Hazelwood, residents last year discussed possible sites for a KaBOOM! playground, which would be built on a vacant lot in an area where many children

had no place to play. The national nonprofit focuses on creating environmentally safe play areas, particularly in communities with limited resources.

Hazelwood parents wanted structures that enabled 2- to 5-year-olds to take safe risks. Teenagers pointed out that playgrounds are not usually designed with them in mind. Everyone's input led to a matrix of climbing bars, a netting of taught ropes, and small pods known as Cozy Cocoons that provide young children with secret nooks where they can take a break from the noises around them, or just sit and imagine.

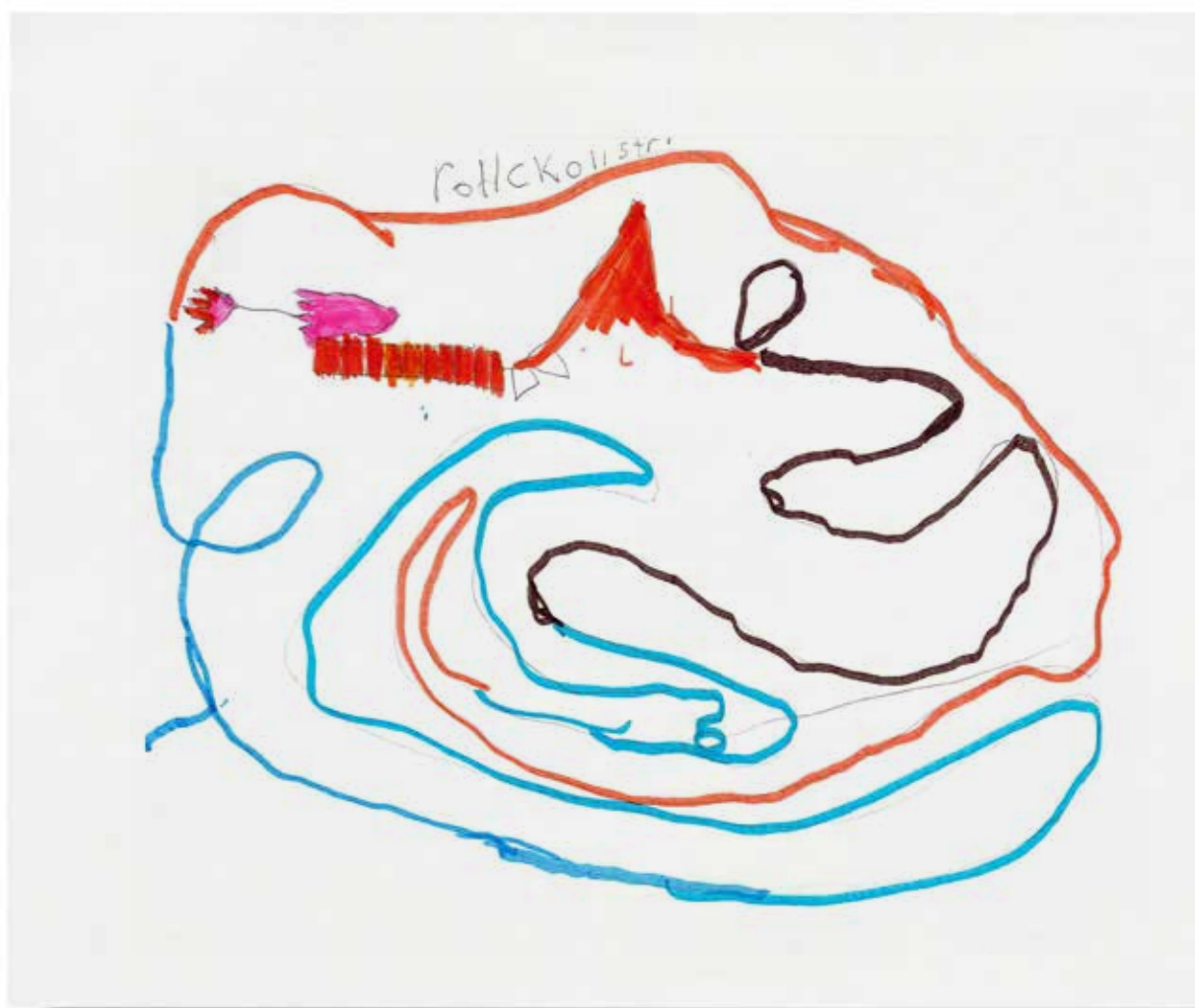
"Play is essential to building resilience to chronic stress," said Cara Ciminillo, co-founder of the Pittsburgh Play Collaborative and executive director of the Pittsburgh Association of the Education of Young Children (PAEYC). "Kids are in this environment of constant state of stress, and poverty, family challenges. Play is an outlet to take that break from stress. But we often do the opposite with children. We eliminate things that kids need to blow off the stress."

It is no secret that children today have fewer opportunities for play, and, in under-resourced neighborhoods, adequate play spaces are increasingly rare. GTECH and KaBOOM! are creating innovative, environmentally healthy play areas for youth across Pittsburgh and Allegheny County through planning processes that have led to deeper engagement with community members, including children.





When Erin Colbert pictured her dream for the vacant lot near the Allentown Learning and Engagement Center in Pittsburgh, she saw a tree house, above, where children could play. A variation of the third-grader's idea became a reality with the creation of a ground-level "bird's nest" made of tree branches, right, that became a centerpiece of the Allentown Green Playce.



Third-grader Jaymair Bundridge's imagination soared when he was asked to draw what he wanted to see in a vacant lot in Pittsburgh's Allentown neighborhood. His vision for a "rollcoolistr," or roller coaster, was reinterpreted in the property's Green Playces redesign as a slide.





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**Erica Liberman**, associate director of account management, KaBOOM!

Research has found a correlation between under-resourced communities and a deficiency in access to green space. And a 2014 Heinz Endowments-funded study by GTECH discovered a correlation between communities with high rates of vacant or blighted land and a lack of environmentally focused educational activities. This means that if you are a kid living in a blighted, low-income neighborhood, the chances of you having safe space where you can play and encounter nature are pretty slim.

KaBOOM! Senior Manager Brendan Bailes also contends that play, in general, is disappearing.

“Recess time is being cut. Kids are getting less time to be kids. Screen time is skyrocketing. Obesity has tripled. One in three kids is overweight,” he said. “These kinds of consequences are devastating when kids don’t play, especially in neighborhoods where kids don’t have access to parks and playgrounds.”

This dearth of play space is one reason the Pittsburgh Play Collaborative formed a few years ago. As a consortium of museums, civic programs, and outdoor organizations, the collaborative encourages parents and other decision-makers to make play more accessible.

The Heinz Endowments responded by awarding a two-year, \$200,000 grant to enable GTECH to establish six Green Playces, innovative green spaces for environmental education and play, in neighborhoods

such as Allentown and the North Side and municipalities such as Wilkesburg and McKeesport. The foundation also gave KaBOOM! a two-year, \$800,000 grant to build 10 playgrounds in the “play deserts” of communities such as Hazelwood and Homewood and the City of Duquesne. The current support also is designed to catalyze corporate sponsorship of an additional 10 playgrounds.

Wayne Jones, director of organizational learning and development for The Endowments, said both the local GTECH and KaBOOM! projects began with teens in the Endowments’ Summer Youth Philanthropy Program, which employs recent high school graduates to research issues and recommend grant awards. In 2010, a cohort of interns examined issues of sustainability; one group focused on playgrounds and parks in particular. They pointed out that they had grown up in neighborhoods without green spaces or where parks and play structures were in disrepair.

“They didn’t feel safe going to playgrounds,” said Mr. Jones, who oversaw the youth philanthropy initiative for more than a decade



as a program officer. “They weren’t maintained, had people hanging out doing things that you didn’t want young kids to be around. So that got our attention.”

This led to discussions with GTECH around play spaces. Meanwhile, a youth philanthropy alumnus working at KaBOOM! helped facilitate that partnership. Mr. Jones highlighted these programs as effectively holistic and innovative, “designed by members of the community, and particularly youth, whose voices are often left out when communities talk about change.”

Michelle Figlar, the Endowments’ vice president of Learning, described the projects as, in their own unique ways, leading to healthier outcomes for children and youth. They also address the Endowments’ three priority areas—Creativity, Sustainability and, maybe especially, Learning.

“We know through research that children learn through their play, and the most important thing we can give them is opportunities to move, to problem solve, to jump, to figure out how to go from point A to point B, and to be safe,” said Ms. Figlar, noting that children are learning all the time, with every activity, but particularly through play. “Being out in that green space [through these projects] and experiencing nature ... Both of these investments are about active learning.”

In Allentown, partnering agencies, including the Hilltop Alliance, YMCA and Venture Outdoors, helped the Brashear Association consider broader community use of the neighboring empty lot, keeping safety and upkeep in mind. As an established youth program with vacant land in close proximity, ALEC was a perfect match for GTECH’s Green Playces program.

GTECH created a Green Playce in Pittsburgh’s Allentown neighborhood as children in the community participated in a variety of environmental education activities. Above left, students used neighborhood models to learn about how water flows on porous and non-porous surfaces. Above right, third-grader Raymair Bundridge, standing, presented his ideas for the Allentown Green Playce to other students while Amber Rooke, former education coordinator for the Brashear Association, knelt beside him.

artwork outside and provided a projector and screen so neighbors could gather for movie nights, which included documentaries on healthy food. As at other Green Playces, Allegheny Partners for Out of School Time (APOST) provided an environmental education curriculum. ALEC staff and volunteers will now maintain the space, though GTECH is available to provide technical assistance.

“I really appreciate how GTECH made it very youth-centered, and celebrated youth voices, in all aspects of this project,” said Ms. Rooke. “This was one of those dreams that I had, and GTECH was able to make it happen for us.”

Over the last 20 years, KaBOOM! has built or improved more than 16,000 playgrounds nationwide, including several in Pittsburgh. A robust community process drives each of these playground builds. During a design day, children, parents, other residents and partnering agencies discuss their ideas. They can hand-select pieces of equipment, weigh in on customizing a park to meet specific needs, such as providing swings for children in wheelchairs, and discuss amenities such as picnic tables or rain gardens.

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Teamwork was on full display as local community members built a KaBOOM! playground in Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood. In many cases, setting up the equipment, like these climbing bars with rope netting, is as much fun for the adults as the final product will be for children.

Over a period of eight to 12 weeks, volunteer committees plan every aspect of creating the playground, from recruiting more participants to planning for t-shirts and food on the build day, during which some 200 volunteers will install the playground in a matter of hours.

“Those committees are doing work to get the word out and solicit deliverables that are needed for the project,” Ms. Liberman said. “[They’re asking,] ‘Who is going to knock on these doors? And who’s going to solicit from this restaurant? And who’s going to ask this construction company for tools?’” Residents and local partnering agencies are also responsible for raising \$8,500 toward the playground.

“They talk about it as more of a community- building exercise than a playground-building exercise,” added the Endowments’ Jones. “And I think there’s truth to that.”

In Hazelwood, Sonya Tilghman, executive director of the Hazelwood Initiative (HI), said one of her organization’s goals is to ensure that people who live in the community have opportunities to stay and engage with its development. HI worked with residents through the Greater Hazelwood Community Collaborative over a

period of more than two years to secure the lots from the city. As with other KaBOOM! builds, Hazelwood residents collaborated with local nonprofits—including PAEYC, which has offices in Hazelwood—to navigate each step in the process. HI and PAEYC have continued work on that neighborhood’s KaBOOM! site, grading and seeding soil and installing trash cans. A resident does a sweep of the park each day to clear garbage and check the play structures.

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As community members, city planners, nonprofits and others, including the Endowments, advance projects in Hazelwood, play has become a priority when considering neighborhood improvement projects.

“I think that’s innovative economic development: Children aren’t an afterthought in the plan,” said Ms. Figlar. In fact, KaBOOM! is working with cities nationwide to integrate into urban landscapes simple means for “play along the way”—engaging children while waiting at a bus stop or as parents run errands at the dry cleaners or grocery store.

In a similar vein, Tracey Armant, program associate at the Grable Foundation, both a supporter of GTECH’s Green Playces and a member of the Play Collaborative, pointed out that play can stimulate creativity in a variety of areas.

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**Michelle Figlar**, vice president of Learning, The Heinz Endowments

served as PAEYC’s executive director and also grew up in Hazelwood. “We’re here to help facilitate and be a catalyst, and provide resources. But really it’s about ‘What does the community want?’ ”

PAEYC’s Ciminillo pointed out that Hazelwood residents wanted the typical slides, swings and monkey bars, “those typical movement experiences that you have with a typical playground, but they were also really looking for something outside of the box.”

Ms. Liberman, of KaBOOM!, described the other equipment, such as the climbing bars and rope netting, as intentionally “open-ended, inclusive, and challenging to kids of all abilities and all ages, and welcoming to everyone who comes to play there. It’s a whole variety of non-prescriptive ways to play.”

Meanwhile, the playground is just one part of a developing play trail that will wind throughout Hazelwood and include opportunities for play along the way, from rocks for climbing and more green space to play opportunities at a gazebo or the local senior center. “Play should really be dispersed throughout a community, and a play trail is a way to link seemingly disparate parts of a community,” Ms. Ciminillo said.

“Having a playful mind, a playful spirit, is the way that we get to innovation. When we play with ideas, we come up with new and unique and novel ideas,” she said, adding that she appreciates how Green Playces help kids make connections between a healthier environment and personal health and success. “Somehow in this playful environment we start to rethink and reinvent. We become a little bit unconventional in the way we see the world. And that translates to other parts of our lives.”

At GTECH, that reinvention means building with reused materials, from rocks and sticks that once littered an empty lot to sourcing materials at a reuse store. At ALEC, yellow plastic piping became the slide. At other sites, utility line spools have become tables. Additionally, the process of designing and contributing to these spaces also teaches kids life skills, and about construction, landscaping and natural systems.

For GTECH’s executive director, Andrew Butcher, it’s the process that goes into creating Green Playces that forms relationships, which in turn lead to innovation and change. “We’re creating a platform to bring together some unlikely partnerships,” he said. “We see people coming together who wouldn’t otherwise be coming together, implementing projects. That’s what forges resilience in a neighborhood.” **h**