

Child's Play

Young Watts 4-H Members Redesign a Dilapidated Playground

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In their neighborhood, the kids of Compton Avenue Elementary School in Watts hear the gunfire and see the tears and understand, at too early an age, how hard life can be. They know about drive-bys and drug deals and how street gangsters can tear down anything they don't claim as their own.

But through the eyes of children, a grim world can still sparkle. And when they are given the chance, they dream of a better place.

A year ago, the 4-H Club at Compton Avenue set out to do something about the dilapidated playground not far from their school at the Hacienda Village housing complex.

Today, a new playground is to be dedicated.

The \$80,000 playground, the largest at any public housing development in Los Angeles, was drawn from the imagination and crayon designs of the 4-H students. It was paid for by the Los Angeles City Housing Authority, which operates Hacienda Village.

"The kids did a wonderful job," said Don Smith, the agency's executive director.

The new playground, like many ideas, arose almost by accident.

Compton Avenue schoolteacher John Gust was walking the 4-H students through Hacienda Village last spring to put up students' posters. But when he suggested they stop to use the playground, the students had an interesting reaction:

They didn't want to.

Its crumpled monkey bars were dangerous. Only two of its swings were intact and they were rickety, the chains having been stolen for weapons

or to tow someone's car. And the slide had no slide, just two rusting metal bars protruding from dirty brown sand.

"It was a little messed up," said Chris Wallace, 9.

"So we decided to make it safe," added Darin Brusiter, 9.

Led by Darin, a budding architect, and Chris, an aspiring scientist, the 25 or so 4-H members set out to resurrect the site with facilities that children--including those with physical disabilities--could enjoy with their parents.

With the guidance of Gust and Meghan McChesney, a Compton Unified schoolteacher with a degree in architecture, the children took photographs of the old playground and began envisioning a new one.

After meeting with Housing Authority officials, surveying the site and receiving information on the type of play equipment that would be available, each child was handed a large piece of construction paper--with 4-H's four-leaf clover logo--to develop the ideal playground.

First, they voted on the best designs. Then they broke up into four groups to refine the plans. Along the way, the children talked about common dreams for the playground--one that would be accessible not only to youngsters their age, but their younger brothers and sisters as well, even their parents.

So keen was their grasp of the project, McChesney said, that the students understood what playground equipment would be appropriate for children of different ages. "Kids who are 2 to 5 years old don't have good gripping skills," McChesney said, so the students did not include monkey bars in the toddlers' part of the playground. And because young children also have a hard time balancing themselves, the students designed the preschoolers' play area low to the ground.

"This isn't just some little project with crayons," McChesney said, noting that the students juggled the project's goals within a defined budget, worked up sophisticated aerial views of the project and considered the constraints of safety requirements and federal laws requiring access for persons with physical disabilities.

All the while, the teachers say, the students designed the project in a four-leaf clover, incorporating 4-H's creed: health, hands, head and heart.

For health, they chose overall fitness such as the monkey bars.

For hands, they decided on a garden.

For head, the choice was a place for board games and homework.

And for heart, they selected an area for running to build cardiovascular strength and something else: benches where parents could sit and watch their children.

The work of the students impressed community residents and city officials. It also drew the attention of the federal government in November, when Darin was invited to Washington to represent the 4-H Clubs of Los Angeles in receiving a \$500,000 grant.

As a driving force on the project, Darin even received a letter from the White House. The letter, which Armstrong read to the other students, thanked the group for the project and the example it sets in how young people can make a difference.

"People like you," it read, "represent the future of our nation. . . ."

"Best Wishes . . . Bill Clinton."

Schoolteacher Gust said: "The project shows kids can make a difference if they are listened to. And if they are, it gives them a sense of . . . empowerment."

That much was clear from the 4-H students as they prepared for today's ceremony.

"A lot of kids our age are dying. We don't want that to happen," Darin said.

Maybe, they said, the playground can be a refuge from a world where there are too few places where a child can feel safe.

"{It shows}," Chris said, "that we tried to do our best . . . to make a difference to {the} neighborhood."

"The gangbangers may try and take it down again," Darin said. "But if they do . . . I hope we can have the same fun to build it up again."