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Child's letter spurs playground makeover

By **Jon W. Sparks**

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Playtime was reborn Thursday.

Early in the morning volunteers gathered, transforming a forlorn spot in Yale Road Park into a shiny new playground.

At one point, a dozen orange-shirted workers stood on a small mountain of engineered wood fiber -- a kind of playground-safe mulch. They pitchforked the stuff onto plastic sheets dragged by pairs of volunteers to the playground area.

This cooperative spirit ran through the project from the start when the city had to remove old termite-infested play equipment.

The effort began in earnest in March when the nonprofit organization KaBOOM, partnering with Home Depot, made arrangements with the City of Bartlett to do, as Mayor Keith McDonald put it, "a mini extreme makeover."

Chris Romero, project manager with KaBOOM, said the group has built more than 950 playgrounds since 1996. As in those cases, it got ideas from neighborhood kids, the community and the city to work out what was needed.

The \$40,000 project is a sweet deal for the city. Home Depot put up 75 percent of the cost and supplied a large chunk of the day's 175 or so volunteers -- employees who came to help on their day off. The city supplied the rest of the funding and more volunteers from the Parks Department and some civic-minded citizens.

The savings on installation costs was a further boon. "This means we can get more equipment," said David Thompson, Bartlett's director of Parks and Recreation, pointing out a snazzy swing set that was coming to life.

The hundreds of people a day who use the park will now see brightly colored state-of-the-art attractions such as the Playdozer for the little ones, Rock Blocks for climbers, a triple slide, tube slide, seesaw, hopscotch grids, modified basketball hoops and a tire swing.

Also going up are five shade structures to give mommies and daddies respite from the sun. A bit of landscaping also came with the package.

When it came time for the finale, with cheers and speeches and a dedicatory board-cutting, Russ Householder, the Home Depot district manager, called out to McDonald: "Mayor, enjoy your new playground."

McDonald called 7-year-old Caleb Cranford to come forward. The youngster had written the mayor some time back to report that the condition of the playground was dismal.

"Let's get on the swing," said McDonald. And as he and Caleb swung on, giving a workout to Newton's second law of motion, the mayor hollered, "This is what it's all about."

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Debby Neeley (left), Mario Brittenum and Mary Katherine Snead paint a hopscotch grid on the new playground at Yale Road Park on Thursday afternoon.