



Testing the bars: Ernie Anderberg takes a break from construction Saturday afternoon to see if the equipment works.



Securing the project: Leathers Associates construction consultant Jill Ann Schwartz — known affectionately as Schwarzkopf — goes over blueprint plans with parents Earl Baxtresser (left) and Roger Wantin.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SHARON LA MIRA

## Gill School Playground is built pioneer style

We'll take lumber and tires and hammers and nails. Chain saws and wrenches and shovels and picks. And what do you suppose we can do with all of those?

BY TOM BAER  
STAFF WRITER

HERE WERE our backs in South Farmington last week, and sunburned legs and faces.

But there was also pride aplenty showing on the faces of hundreds of ordinary people who worked almost non-stop — in old-fashioned, pioneer barn-raising style — to construct a state-of-the-art playground at Gill Elementary School in the southern end of the Farmington District.

Their labor was donated, as were most of the materials that went into the making of the 14,000-square-foot playground that was opened officially last Monday before students, parents, city and school officials and politicians.

So many people of diverse backgrounds in the Gill School community and surrounding areas came together to help build a playground. Why?

"You've got to give back more than you take," said Rick Lockman, an electrician and 17-year resident of the area. He served as site foreman over the volunteer workers. Added Catherine White, a Farmington school trustee who helped on the project, "We worked on this five days and you never heard a cross word. If we can do this, we can do anything. Maybe next we'll do something for the senior citizens."

The playground, in the planning stages for almost a year, was "raised" in just five hectic days last

week. It is to be known forever after as the Kids' Kingdom. The school district and city helped a bit, but mostly the people built the playground.

The facility cost \$60,000 to build — about one quarter of its true worth, backers said. It includes the playground "version" of a pirate ship, a limbo machine, a car, a trolley, a swing, a mirror maze and more. There's also a section designed for handicapped children.

We're gonna build a playground. The greatest one you ever saw. And if we work together, we can build it strong and tall.

The Gill parents enlisted the help of Robert Leathers & Associates, a playground architect based in Ithaca, N.Y. Leathers designs such "sweat-equity" do-it-yourself projects.

So the specially-treated wood was purchased — Leathers insisted on that — and the work began. Of course, it took more than a few dozen people with hammers and power saws. There was an entire organization to consider.

Parents Bunny Justman and Ann Hoffman were general coordinators. Food had to be provided for hungry workers, and a day care center set up for their kids. A security system had to be instituted — Leathers insisted on that, too. All told, close to 1,000 worked on the project.

"It was sexist in no way," said parent Connie Dickey. "Sometimes the men did the food and the women did the routing. Other times it was reversed."

Safety was a concern from the start, and lectures were given before the start of each shift. There were only two minor injuries.

There were 17 foremen — all nicknamed Darrell, after the brothers in "The Bob Newhart Show" — to "ease the tension," said foreman Jerry Zyren.

There was even a Gill Kids Committee that helped with fund-raising and designed T-shirts. The youngsters also wrote the song "We're Gonna Build A Playground." Some of its verses appear in this article.

On the final Saturday and Sunday, a cacophony of sounds filled the work site: Hammers pounding, power equipment whirring, people yelling instructions, heavy machinery growling. Sawdust filled the air and many workers wore surgical masks.

Men and women learned to use power tools they'd never seen or touched before. "You see it, you do it, you teach it," said a registered nurse from Livonia who handled a natter.

In all, about 25 miles of routing (smoothing the rough edges of the wood) was done on the playground, lumber, said foreman Lockman.

And then, in the twilight of a Sunday evening, it was done. The Kids' Kingdom was finished.

"We looked at the playground and we felt like crying, even the men," said Linda Wantin, a parent who handled publicity for the project. "Everybody was so happy. It was wonderful."

All of our kids and families. And our friends and neighbors, too. They're gonna come and help us. Make our playground dream come true!

And then the playground was stormed by 400 youngsters, just about the entire Gill student population. Young hands and feet put the new equipment to the test.

The next day was speech making and ribbon-cutting time.

Said Gill principal Mike Duff, who some said was the guiding force behind the playground, "We are blessed in the Farmington community with people who care about education."

There were more speeches. The Gill band played. The children sang "We're Gonna Build A Playground" to the tune of "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer."

"It shows what can happen when a community stands together," Principal Duff added. "Just think what could be accomplished if something like this could happen

all over the country."

What could happen in Allen Park and Grand Blanc are playgrounds like the one at Gill. Officials have looked at the local playground and Leathers has been called.

Mentally, rules are coming for the Gill facility. A Friends of the Playground group has been formed and fund-raising planned for playground maintenance.

And what about the tired and sunburned workers of South Farmington?

"Well, I'm going to teach vacation Bible school at Ward Presbyterian in Livonia and then I'm going on vacation," said Linda Wantin.



Hammer, nails and sweat: Kindergarten teacher Gail Sielski pounds in some nails with the help of her husband, Bill Schwanki (right), and parent Jim Wantin.

A PERSONAL

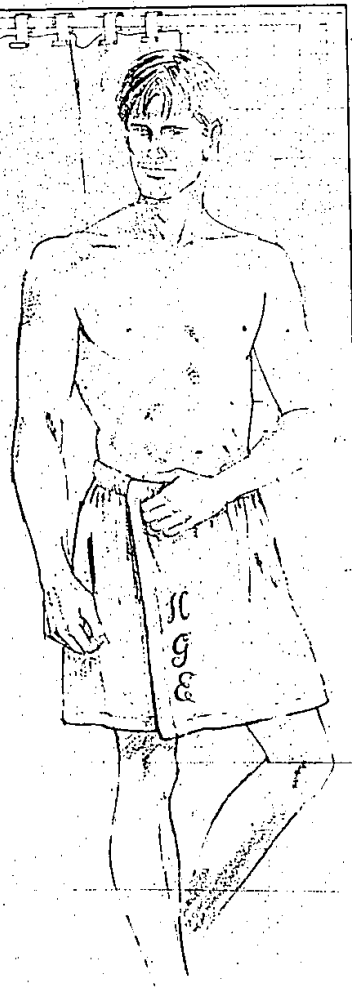
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## Kids reaction: 'awesome'

Playgrounds are for kids. Here's what a few youngsters are saying about the new one at Gill Elementary in Farmington Hills:

• Nick Pett, 3rd-grader at Our Lady of Sorrows: "It's awesome — really nice. I'm glad they did it."

• Danny Carlson, 3rd-grader at Our Lady of Sorrows: "Awesome asch they had one like it at my school."

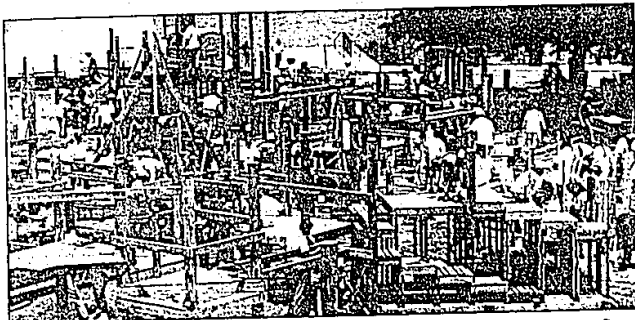
• Mary Ling, 7th-grader at Power Middle School: "It's entertaining

for the younger children. But, since it's for the entire community, they should have had stuff for older kids."

• Missy Orow, 7th-grader at Power: "A good job done, a lot of work and effort put into it."

• Chris Patterson, 8th-grader at Power: "It's a great improvement for the school."

• Paul Hoffman, 3rd-grader at Gill: "I especially like the swings, the tree fort and the trolley ride."



Community efforts: Hundreds of volunteers descend upon Gill School to complete a playground that was built at about a quarter of the cost of a privately built facility.