



“Every Child, regardless of disability, deserves a chance to smile and laugh as they play and have fun in an environment that provides this opportunity.” “Every Child Deserves A CHANCE to Play Baseball.”

THE ROTARY MIRACLE FIELD AND MIRACLE PLAYGROUND PROJECT

The Rotary Miracle Field located in Dothan, Alabama has truly been a cooperative community project that has “tugged” at the hearts of the citizens and brought together key players that have made a dream come true.

What began as a backyard conversation between Dothan Rotarian Joseph Johnson and neighbor Melinda McClendon would become a reality in a few short months. Melinda, who has a son with Downs Syndrome, had a dream as a result of watching a featured TV program concerning a Miracle Field that had been developed in a sister state. With a determination to turn that dream into a reality, Melinda McClendon, invited by Joseph Johnson, pitched the idea to The Dothan Rotary Club.

When Buck McClendon attended his first Rotary meeting, the one person he spotted in the crowd was John Watson. He went straight to Mr. Watson, reached out his little arms, and crawled in the lap of the man that has built much infrastructure in the Dothan community.

Not knowing the significance of his actions, this little guy touched hearts and sparked the inspiration that built the Miracle Field at Westgate Park. Buck meets no strangers and everyone knows his name. He is just like his mother, Melinda. They know no boundaries and see no obstacle too big to overcome. This amazing woman, once an executive with Macy’s, a guru in the public relations world, mother of four, wife, and cancer fighter, simply told her story of how she wanted Buck to live a normal life, playing baseball like his dad, Ted, had once played in the Minor Leagues. Nothing short of a Miracle!

Stepping up to the plate in a big way was the City of Dothan and the Leisure Services Department, spearheaded by Kim Meeker. Working closely with the design team, Meeker orchestrated services from the city in the completion of the Miracle Field.

Within the span of just a few weeks, the Dothan Rotary Board of Directors endorsed the campaign as a Rotary project and the Miracle Field planning group, chaired by Ronnie Dean, was organized. Almost immediately, an architect, and general contractor was identified, both of whom were active Rotarians. The Dothan-Houston County Rotary Club (Dothan Tuesday Rotary) was invited to participate in the project, which they wholeheartedly accepted. With a \$150,000 grant from the Wiregrass Foundation, in addition to a \$72,000 commitment from the City of Dothan, Rotarians agreed to step up to the plate and fund the remainder of the cost necessary to build what was initially to be a \$500,000 Miracle baseball field. Construction coordination efforts began, and the Miracle Field project was announced to the Dothan City Commissioners and general public on April 24, 2007. On April 30th, groundbreaking ceremonies were held. What began as a venture to construct a field where mentally and physically challenged citizens could enjoy playing America's favorite sport, soon expanded into the establishment of the Miracle Field Foundation that will fund the ongoing development and maintenance of the project.

A 501(c)3 non-profit organization was formed on June 3, 2008, as a joint effort between the Dothan Rotary Club and the Dothan-Houston County Rotary Club (Dothan Tuesday Rotary Club). The organization was formed specifically to provide assistance to children and adults with disabilities, primarily through the development and maintenance of the Miracle Field Complex. The Foundation is governed by a board of directors.

More than \$381,302 of in-kind services were contributed to the project along with \$161,378 in monetary donations. As various companies were approached to discount the cost of services and products, one by one said "No" we want to totally donate our service / product to such a worthwhile cause. This included everything from kitchen equipment to land preparation to architectural design.

The concept that just a very basic Miracle Field would be constructed soon evolved into a decision to construct a state of the art Miracle Field Complex to include two Dixie Youth fields which was supported by a \$200,000 grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Both

Rotary Clubs identified some key elements of the project that supported fund raising opportunities. A gifting campaign was organized that involved 3 levels of sponsorship. Contributions of \$5,000 and above were recognized as Miracle Partnerships with engraved granite markers located at the base of one of the 22 Flags that graced the entrance of the Miracle Field. Contributions in the amount of \$2500 - \$4999 were recognized as Miracle Fellowships with engraved medallions located in the walkway that leads directly to the Miracle Field. The third level of sponsorship, contributions of \$500 - \$2499, are recognized with the contributor's name engraved on a granite wall that is located just inside the Miracle Field gate.

Key elements of this project were identified to pay tribute to the community's mentally and physically challenged citizens. These elements were:

- 1. Design and construction of the ROTARY MIRACLE FIELD entrance gate that must be passed through as you enter the complex. This gate clearly announces the reason for its existence as it is designed with baseballs atop the fence columns and the Rotary emblem integrated into the design scheme make the field appear major league all the way.**
- 2. A bronze statue that greets everyone who enters the gate and is a clear reminder that "every child deserves a chance to play baseball".**
- 3. The Avenue of Flags gracing the entrance and is designed to make an indelible impression on those seeing it for the first time. 22 Flag poles line the entrance of the Miracle Field. Each pole proudly flies one of the major league baseball teams' flag and is graced at its foot a granite marker recognizing a major contributor of the project.**
- 4. Entrance walkway housing 19 engraved medallions that also pays recognition to contributors who are named as Miracle Fellowship.**
- 5. Specially designed concession area accessible for disabled children and adults complete with family restrooms anchor the 3 fields. The concession work area is also handicap accessible.**

With 95% of the project complete, approximately 350 Rotarians, friends of Rotary, City officials and special guests were honored with a

Sneak Preview Party on February 28, 2008. Gene Stallings, former University of Alabama football coach, was the featured speaker and had words of high commendation for the Rotary Clubs, the City of Dothan and the many community supporters for constructing such a state of the art facility. Dignitaries and former University of Alabama football players were in attendance to pay tribute to those instrumental in creating the Miracle Field.

Opening day ceremonies proved to be an inspiring and emotionally charged event as eight (8) Miracle Field Teams, named after major league teams, lined the Rotary Miracle Field amid a cheering section that rivaled any youth sporting event. University of Alabama and Auburn University football players took their place as buddies to our special athletes. Diane Alford, National Executive Director of the Miracle League, was in attendance and complimented the project as setting a “new standard for Miracle Leagues across the country”.

During the opening day ceremonies, two checks were received (\$15,000 from CB&T and \$10,000 from WDHN, ABC & Oprah’s Big Give) as seed money to expand the Miracle Field complex to include a Miracle Playground, which was to be erected within the next 12-18 months.

A dream, a vision, committed Rotary Clubs and an involved community completed a \$850,000 state of the art Miracle Field project in record time to serve the special citizens of the community.

The next phase of the Rotary Miracle Field Complex.....[The Rotary Miracle Playground](#).

Kids without special needs climb the monkey bars, whiz down the slides or reach new heights on the swings. But 300-plus Dothan Rotarians realized that is not possible for every child. That was partially due to the lack of facilities in the city at that time, and thus the opportunity.

Imagine creating a fully-inclusive playground that stimulates sight, sound, and imagination-right here in Dothan, AL. The City of Dothan partnered with both Rotary Clubs to create one of Alabama's first universally accessible playgrounds. The playground was built adjacent to the Rotary Miracle Field Complex at Westgate Park. The Rotary clubs began a fundraising drive to raise \$500,000 (The equipment alone will cost about \$300,000) to pay for this project and to make this dream come true. This funding was combined with City resources to achieve the design, build, and maintenance of the playground.

Kim Meeker of Dothan Leisure Services lead focus groups to study the components needed for such a playground and presented an overview to Dothan City Commissioners.

Because many of the children who might use it are sun-sensitive, play areas would be shaded. The playground would have 140 total play activities and many exclusive Americans with Disabilities Act features to facilitate play.

Plans called for 8,006 square feet of rubber surfacing, with 3,200 feet of shaded areas and nearly 1,000 feet of ramped play. There are special features, including musical instruments and miniature backhoes for playing in the sand.

Wheelchair bound participants can play just as freely on a wheelchair as if you don't require one. Two wheelchairs can pass on the ramps and there are large decks with crow's nests. Children can wheel out from under the main traffic flow. At Riverside Village double wide ramps and extra-large decks combine to provide exceptional elevated play space with ample room for multiple players with and without mobility devices.

In addition to traditional slides and climbers, many different sensory experiences have been purposefully included to appeal to a wide range of users. Auditory, visual, olfactory, tactile, swinging, spinning and balancing opportunities are included, to name a few. Whether exploring independently or with friends and family, there is always something new to discover.

There are special features, including musical instruments and miniature backhoes for playing in the sand. And for those sensitive to the elements, some play areas have ample shade for the comfort of the children.

The Miracle Field was completed in March 2008 and the Miracle Playground in August 2010. They have brought joy to thousands in Dothan and the Wiregrass Area.

Total cost for the Rotary Miracle Field and Rotary Miracle Park complex was \$1.5 million dollars.