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Photo by Michael Clapp

Gigi Aaron is working to get special equipment installed in a playground so disabled children, like her daughter Jessica, can more safely enjoy themselves.

A playground for disabled means 'ear-to-ear' smiles

Woman defines need

By Kim Carlson
Of the Emerald

Gigi Aaron has a dream. She wants to build an "all child playground." As the mother of a 6-year-old girl who has an orthopedic impairment, Aaron is keenly aware of the need for a playground that features slides, merry-go-rounds and teeter-totters that children with physical disabilities can use. Eugene has no such facility. But if the 27-year-old Aaron has her way, it soon will.

A University senior who is majoring in psychology and working on a graduate degree in special education, Aaron conceived the idea for the playground last summer.

One day, while working as a volunteer for the Association for Retarded Citizens Respite Program, Aaron recalls patiently strapping and buckling Libby Bowels into a swing at a local park. Libby, a child with cerebral palsy, had never been in a swing like that, says Aaron — but she loved it.

Seeing Libby's "ear-to-ear" smile was enough, recalls

Aaron now, to make her realize that the need in Eugene for playground equipment for children with physical impairments is great.

So Aaron, a Eugene resident for four years, got to work. In the past 12 months she has drawn support from many local groups and agencies who are willing to donate funds and services for the playground cause.

And the ASUO has donated their telephone line to Aaron, enabling her to make long-distance phone calls to find out more about playgrounds for disabled children in other cities. (Roseburg is one city in

of play experience, these kids won't be able to swing or slide," she says.

The proposed model playground would be built into an existing park, says Aaron. New equipment, which could be used by both disabled and non-disabled children, would be added to the existing playground. This type of integration is important, she says.

"Through integration they (disabled children) are able to socialize with their non-disabled peers," she says.

While the social benefits children with disabilities would

"Disabled kids, more than other kids, need motion, but they do need special equipment to enjoy it safely."

—Gigi Aaron

Oregon that has a model park similar to the one Aaron hopes to establish in Eugene.)

Finally, her efforts have begun to pay off: The Eugene Parks and Recreation department has agreed to submit a proposal for playground funding next spring. By conducting a survey, Aaron hopes to prove that the need for a "model playground" is enough to justify building it.

In the meantime, the parks department has agreed to purchase some playground equipment that both disabled and non-disabled children can use and install it in some of the local city parks.

The pieces to be ordered are similar to traditional playground equipment, except they're adapted for use by children with disabilities, Aaron says. "Without this kind

receive from such a playground are great, the physical benefits are just as important, Aaron says. "Disabled kids, more than other kids, need motion," she says. "But they do need special equipment to enjoy it safely."

Aaron hopes to have the survey completed by the end of the summer. The parks department is supplying the material needed to conduct the survey, and local agencies (the ARC, the United Way, Directional Services and the parks department) will distribute it.

Aaron encourages individuals or groups who are interested in donating funds, services, information and ideas pertaining to the playground project to call her at 342-1551.

Aaron is optimistic about the playground. "It's a new idea," she says. "I've never done anything like this before."

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