



A Message from SNAP Project Manager, Bob Francis

August 16, 2009

I hope by now that you have heard of the project to build a Morgan County Special Needs Accessible Playground (SNAP). The playground, which will serve more than 1700 physically challenged children in Morgan County alone, is being constructed at the rear of the Sparkman Civic Center in Hartselle, Alabama, which is central to the county. The project is being accomplished in three phases. Phase 1, a special needs swing area, was completed in May 2008 at a cost of \$32,794. (Please view photos in Public Relations Archives, this web site.) Construction of Phase 2, a 1900 sq. ft. splash pad with 26 individual play stations, estimated to cost \$240,000, is scheduled for construction early next summer. The schedule for the main playground, 9400 sq. ft. with raised/ramped platforms and 35 individual play stations, estimated to cost \$365,000, is contingent on future fundraising.

It is emphasized that access to the playground and equipment and selection of equipment will meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, enabling maximum utilization by special needs children. Equally and vitally important, other children will find the playground inviting, attractive and completely usable, therefore promoting inclusion and interaction of all children.

Hartselle Civitan Club initiated a limited-scope special needs project in 2004. In late 2006, Civitan was joined by the Hartselle Kiwanis, Lions and Rotary Clubs in an unprecedented united effort, with support from the City of Hartselle and the Hartselle Area Chamber of Commerce, to accomplish the project. Shortly after formation of the coalition of clubs, research revealed overwhelming special needs throughout the county. Consequently, the scope of the project was expanded to comprehensively serve all special needs children in the county and the region with two primary goals: (1) To develop the premiere “boundless” playground in the state and (2) To motivate other communities in the region, across the state, the southeast and even the nation to recognize and serve the needs of these special children. Recognizing the worthiness of the project, Hartselle Medical Center, Morgan County Association of Volunteer Fire Departments, United Way of Morgan County, Volunteer Center of Morgan County and WalMart of Hartselle quickly united with the other six entities to complete the “Founding Partners” of the project.

Even as we continue to develop SNAP, the goal to influence other communities is being achieved as attested by requests for information and testimonies of influence resulting from the SNAP web site. Inquiries and comments have been received from throughout the West, mid-West and Southeast. Other communities in the immediate region have since initiated accommodations for special needs children.

Our implementing organization is functionally aligned: (1) Overall Project Management, (2) Marketing, (3) Fund Raising, (4) Publicity, (5) Special Events and (6) Design/Construction. Each functional element is staffed with knowledgeable, capable and dedicated volunteers. Professional marketing and concept design firms have been engaged, at no in-house costs, to enhance success of the project.

The SNAP project is driven by inspiration. During more than 30 years of project and construction management at Marshall Space Flight Center, NASA, I was exposed to many technically interesting, complex and challenging projects which were accomplished using appropriated funds and administered by a paid staff. In stark contrast, SNAP presents the daunting and unique challenge of accomplishing a \$650,000 benevolent-funded project with a volunteer staff. The compensating factor is that of inspired determination by all involved to succeed and the vision of a model facility to serve special needs and inspire others to do so.

In developing the overall strategy to market the project, we searched for an inspirational experience to provide focus for the SNAP organization as well as to gain public support. We quickly realized that one within our organization, Charles Howse, was living such an experience. Charles` four-year old twin grandsons were born with muscular dystrophy and are confined to wheel chairs. You may view a compelling video (on the home page of this web site) which was developed around these two precious children. This video is the SNAP inspirational story.

The SNAP organization received a major reinforcing inspirational boost in November 2008 when the playground was dedicated in memory of John Mark Stallings. John Mark`s entire life of 46 years which was challenged by Down Syndrome serves to exemplify the purpose of SNAP. The compelling dedication ceremony, with John Mark`s father Coach Gene Stallings as guest speaker, can be viewed in total on this web site home page. Please set aside about 30 minutes and view this video. Pay particular attention to Coach Stallings recital of "The Dash." I commented at the conclusion of the ceremony attended by 200 to 300 adults and numerous special needs children that "If any adults left that ceremony without tears in their eyes, they were beyond redemption."

An inherent goal of the project is to assure that special needs children are provided an environment not only to play but to mix with other children and, in so doing, feel accepted rather than isolated and different. The following as told by Shay`s father, Mark Griffin, former Executive Director of the Arc of Morgan County, dramatically illustrates this point.

At a fundraising dinner for a school that serves learning-disabled children, the father of one of the school`s students delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all that attended.

After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he offered a question: "Everything God does is done with perfection. Yet, my son Shay cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is God`s plan reflected in my son?"

The audience was stilled by the query. The father continued. "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like Shay into the world, an opportunity to realize the Divine Plan presents itself and it comes in the way people treat that child."

Then he told the following story:

Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shay's father knew that the boys would not want him on their team. But the father understood that if his son were allowed to play it would give him much-needed sense of belonging. Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We are losing by six runs, and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. At the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the outfield. Although no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base. Shay was scheduled to be the next at bat. Would the team actually let Shay bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball. However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least be able to make contact.

The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung and hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shay, run to first, run to first." Never in his life had Shay ever made it to first base. He scampered down the first baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, "run to second, run to second!" By the time Shay was rounding first base, the right fielder had the ball.

He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman for a tag. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions had been, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Shay ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Shay reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "run to third!" As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams were screaming, "Shay run home!" Shay ran home, stepped on home plate and was cheered as hero for hitting a "grand slam" and winning the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of the Divine Plan into this world."

It seems likely that everyone at that park won on that day, and that Shay felt needed and accepted. SNAP needs your support to enable up to 1700 special needs children in

Morgan County to experience such feeling. I sincerely believe that all who contribute to the success of SNAP will be rewarded through these children`s joy and feeling of self worth.

Please allow me to share comments with you, which, in April 2007, I made to the volunteer staff of the SNAP organization who have, since that time, continued to tirelessly dedicate time, talent and energy to make this playground a reality. These comments resulted from initial viewing on April 24, 2007, of the inspirational video and remain valid today, even after 32 months of “labor of love.”

“The Essence of SNAP”

“I believe that the preliminary video by Innovative Advertising, presented at our meeting yesterday, captures the essence of the SNAP project – my how compelling. I left that meeting, as I`m sure you did, humbled and honored to be a small part of such an overwhelmingly compassionate initiative.

As I reflect on events leading us to this point, I cherish my association with each of you and the group comradeship that has evolved. Each has played a vital role in bringing the project toward maturity. In abstract, I picture our individual faces fading and being replaced by those of smiling and happy children, made possible by sacrifice of your time, talent and energy. Surely, God also smiles and blesses these efforts.

Thank you for joining hearts and hands in this worthy venture.”

Now, I ask each of you viewing this web site to join hearts and hands with us to make this playground a reality and help to fulfill the SNAP motto, “Because Every Child Deserves a Playground.”

Please call me (256-227-3483) or e-mail me (auusmeagle@aol.com) should you have questions, desire additional information or wish to schedule a presentation to a group.