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Playground namesake



Local girl Brooklyn Fisher, 4, sits on her bed at home. Brooklyn was born with spina bifida and her family is trying to raise funds to build an all-access playground in Pocatello.

BELOW: The Fisher family, Leah, 14 months, Melissa, Jonny and Brooklyn, age 4.

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Local girl is inspiration for planned site

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When Jonny and Melissa Fisher found out their daughter would be born with spina bifida, Melissa was just 20 weeks pregnant and both were in the midst of college final exams.

Immediately after hearing the news, each of them got busy.

"She went straight to a final (exam) and I went straight to the computer," Jonny said.

"It was a blur," Melissa said of that exam. "I remember taking it, but I also

remember thinking that this was so not important right now. I must have done OK

because I passed the class."

The concerns over the struggles their child might face being born with spina bifida weighed on the couple for a few days. And then, suddenly, that veil of fear and worry seemed to be lifted.

It was replaced by joy.

"Suddenly, we were just excited that we were having a girl," Jonny said.

"A few days after we found out was the

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most exciting," Melissa agreed.

Now focused more on having a daughter, the couple began educating themselves about the needs Brooklyn would have.

Spina bifida is a condition in which the child is born with an incomplete closure of the embryonic neural tube. Some vertebrae overlying the spinal cord are not fully formed, remaining unfused and open. It is surgically closed after birth.

Melissa said that in most cases, those with spina bifida have such difficulty walking, or it causes such significant fatigue if great distances are required, that even those who are able to get around using crutches and braces, often choose to use a wheelchair for its comfort and ease.

They both anticipate that Brooklyn's case is significant enough that she will likely use a wheelchair the rest of her life.

But while the condition may hinder her mobility to some degree, it doesn't hinder Brooklyn's spirit.

"She is so laid back and happy," Melissa said. "She just likes to be part of what's going on."

"A lot of the challenges



A collection of photographs in Brooklyn's room.

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are really for us right now," Jonny added. "As we watch the kids run outside and play, she is left to watch them, too."

To that end, the couple is spearheading a drive to get an all-access playground built in Pocatello. They admit, it's a potentially daunting task. The cost for such a playground is about \$400,000.

"People do get a little hesitant when they hear about it, but you should see the size of these playgrounds," Jonny said.

The all-access playgrounds are typically very elaborate ones, often with one or many themes running through the play area.

And the key point to

remember, Jonny adds, is that an all-access playground is just that, something that allows access for all children. It's not exclusively for those kids with disabilities.

Portneuf Valley Pride, the nonprofit entity formed to help enhance the area and that headed up the Chief Pocatello Project, has taken on the drive to build the all-access playground appropriately dubbed Brooklyn's Playground.

The group hopes to raise the \$400,000 in time to construct the playground in September.

The catalyst for the playground came about 18 months ago, when the Fishers were at a local park,

playing with Brooklyn.

During a meeting of the Greater Pocatello Association of Realtors on Friday, as Jonny gave a presentation about the efforts to bring Brooklyn's Playground to reality, he told the story of that day.

He said when all the children Brooklyn was playing with on the playground decided they wanted to swing, Brooklyn too wanted to swing.

There were no baby swings available, and frankly, he said, Brooklyn was outgrowing them. He opted to give her a shot at a regular swing.

Making it difficult is Brooklyn's lack of muscle strength in her back. She

did well for a few minutes, but ultimately lost her concentration, Jonny said, and fell out of the swing, hitting her head and suffering a concussion.

A few days after that event, however, Melissa was reading a magazine, in which was a story about a woman who had led the drive to build an all-access playground in her town.

She showed Jonny, who began researching the idea. He even found contact information for the woman in the article and called her.

What they found out didn't deter them, it inspired them.

"Their playground cost \$425,000 and their community is about 11,000 people," Jonny said.

"If a town that size can do it, then we can do it here," Melissa added.

The couple has taken Brooklyn to similar playgrounds in Boise and Logan, Utah. Jonny said they are parks that accommodate wheelchairs.

"It was thrilling as a parent to sit back and watch Brooklyn play independently for the first time shoulder to shoulder with all the other kids," Jonny said when telling the Realtors about the Logan park. "You can see the joy that's in her face, the excitement that's there when she was able to do this."

Chief among Brooklyn's thoughts these days is her impending fifth birthday,

coming in March. She's a 4-year-old who loves singing along to Taylor Swift and playing with her younger sister, Leah, who's 14 months old.

She got a doll house for Christmas, complete with all the amenities, that she spends a lot of time playing with.

She's also looking forward to starting kindergarten next fall at Chubbuck Elementary School, especially since her grandmother teaches in the classroom just across the hall.

But when you remind her about the times she has spent at the all-access playgrounds, her face brightens, her eyes widen.

She'll tell you she last played on one in Boise, and loved being able to play on it while still in her wheelchair. She definitely loved the swing.

Jonny and Melissa aren't just looking for a place in town where they can take their child. They are looking for the town to have a place where all children, regardless of ability can interact.

It's something they feel gives some children greater freedom, but something that breaks down barriers for all children.

"As much as it's for kids like Brooklyn, it's also for Leah, so she can play alongside Brooklyn," Melissa said. "Kids don't know that it's designed to help certain kids, they just think it's cool."