



The Magical Bridge Foundation

“Our journey starts with a mom, two daughters and a playground need.”

By Genevieve Laucher

It was only after the birth of her second daughter that Olenka Villarreal discovered how isolating a playground could be. A place which brought joy and community connections with her older daughter had become a dreaded outing when she realized there were no parks designed for families like her own. A family, who had two children with very different needs.

Determined to create the kind of outdoor space that both her disabled and non-disabled daughters (and all their friends!) would love, she mobilized a team of volunteers to fulfill a dream to create such a place. While she found many playgrounds designed for the disabled population, none brought visitors of every age and ability group together in the welcoming way she envisioned.

For seven years, Olenka and her team continued to dream, research and raise funds necessary to create a new kind of playground in Palo Alto, California, called Magical Bridge. The playground opened to great enthusiasm, and today, Kindness Ambassadors roam the park and welcome over 25,000 visitors monthly who come to experience a sense of belonging and fun.

With longtime friend and public relations executive Jill Asher, Olenka created Magical Bridge Foundation as a non-profit organization in 2016. Since then, the success of the playground has inspired an awareness that today's parks leave far too many behind, including our aging population and those living with visible and invisible disabilities.

Magical Bridge Playgrounds in Palo Alto and Redwood City are open to the public. The Foundation is also working to open Magical Bridge Playground in Morgan Hill (opening to the public in Fall 2021), Sunnyvale (opening to the public in early 2022), and plans to begin construction in Mountain View in 2022 with an opening in early 2023.

The need for additional support of Magical Bridge Playground coming to Santa Clara. The playground project urgently in need of support in the Bay Area is Magical Bridge Playground coming to Santa Clara's Central Park. Announced right before COVID in late 2019, and as you can imagine, fundraising came to halt. A \$4.5M project, the Foundation is looking to raise the remaining raise approximately \$600k to fully fund the playground and begin construction. The majority of the funding has come from the City of Santa Clara (\$1.8M) and Santa Clara County All Inclusive Playground Grant (\$1.7M). Over 500 individual donors have also stepped up and generously given to this community project which will bring joy, happiness, and inclusion to all who will visit. Once opened to the public, it will welcome everyone and every BODY.

What makes a Magical Bridge Playground welcome for absolutely everyone, at every stage of life? The first of its kind, Magical Bridge Playgrounds are intentionally and mindfully designed to meet the needs of **everyone**, including the 1-in-4 of us living with visible or invisible disabilities. Heralded as the nation's most innovative and inclusive playground, Magical Bridge thoughtfully considers the needs of those living with cognitive and physical disabilities, autism, sensory challenges, visual and auditory impairments, the medically fragile, and even our aging population. In short, we are NOT a special needs playground – rather, we are a playground for everyone and everybody, at every stage of life. Our intergenerational, fun, and safe playgrounds are:

▶ 100% INCLUSIVE

- Distinct play zones designed to accommodate everyone.
- Retreat spaces for those needing a break from play.
- Smooth, seamless pathways and surfacing.
- Wheelchair access to a two-story playhouse, treehouse and top of a slide mound.

▶ 100% INNOVATIVE

- Far surpasses the minimum ADA requirements.
- Designed by inclusive play experts, educators, therapists, families living with various disabilities, and leading landscape architects.
- Surprising and innovative features such as an artist-designed 24-string laser harp, whimsical artwork, seamless turf, custom wooden structures for tactile and visual impact, and many others.

▶ 100% ENRICHING

- Outdoor play is the foundation for physical development, as well as social-emotional lessons such as cooperation, sharing, problem solving and kindness. Without inclusive playgrounds, many families do not have a place to bring their children to play.
- Everyone in a community benefits from the elimination of social stigmas and prejudices, and this naturally happens when people of all abilities have the chance to play together.

▶ INVESTING IN THE HEALTH AND WELL BEING OF YOUR COMMUNITY

Play in the United States over the last century has gone from being almost exclusively an outdoor activity to one that is often situated indoors in front of televisions and computers. Research shows that children who play outdoors regularly are happier, healthier, and stronger — and this leads to happier, healthier, and stronger adults.

Magical Bridge Foundation is dedicated to designing and building inspiring, innovative, and inclusive playgrounds that improve the

physical, social, emotional and mental health of everyone in the community, including our youth, our aging population, the most vulnerable, and the disabled.

▶ ALIGNING WITH COMMUNITY HEALTH INITIATIVES

With its message of kindness and inclusion, a Magical Bridge Playground in Santa Clara will be place where everyone can experience the health benefits of outdoor play. It will also be a thriving gathering place for everyone living in, working and visiting Santa Clara.

Why is it so important that everyone can play together in Santa Clara?

Outdoor play helps maintain physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being for us all. By giving everyone with and without disabilities a chance to play together, inclusive spaces serve as joyful incubator of a more tolerant and kind society, in which everyone can participate equally and enjoy equal opportunities to flourish.

At Magical Bridge Playground, everyone can experience the benefits of outdoor play, which:

- Increases physical activity
- Improves cardiovascular and gross motor skills
- Promotes increased blood flow to the brain, leading to cognitive development
- Improves concentration
- Nurtures self-discipline
- Reduces symptoms of ADHD and ADD
- Improves and teaches vocabulary

- Increases the body’s vitamin D levels
- Enhances negotiation skills
- Reduces anxiety and improving mood
- Improves concentration and focus
- Enhances imaginative and creative play
- Promotes problem solving
- Develops stronger immune systems
- Builds self-esteem and confidence

Not just for children, regular exercise and play for the aging population helps to:

- Prevent falls and fractures
- Improve coordination and balance
- Reduce the risk of strokes, heart disease, and some cancers
- Lessen cognitive decline
- Control obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure

Inclusive play develops a true understanding of the world, encourages appreciation of the differences between people, and more importantly, recognizes the similarities that underlie them.



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