

Published May 29, 2008

LOCAL NEWS

Playground Builders give peace a chance

Whistlerite Keith Reynolds recently secured a visa for Afghanistan, and over the coming weeks — as part of a journey that started yesterday (May 28), in fact — he plans to visit the war-torn country with an eye toward expanding Whistler-based Playground Builders' efforts to promote peace through play.

But first things first. Reynolds, Mike Varrin and Wendy Whelen should be landing in Tel Aviv at about the same time this newspaper hits the streets, with plans to visit parts of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, where playground building operations are ongoing. So far, two have been built in Gaza and 16 are either completed or under construction in the West Bank.

While the headlines focus on what seem like the daily troubles of living in the Middle East — specifically the Palestinian territories and Iraq — Whistler-based Playground Builders, founded in 2006, bases its charitable efforts on the simple premise that where there are children at play, there are parents who care deeply about the safety and security of their children's playgrounds.

Building a playground, Reynolds says, is not an overtly political statement, nor is it meant to be. If the parents sitting on the benches and watching their children enjoy the simple pleasures of childhood happen to be from opposite sides of some political or religious divide, and happen to strike up conversations that lead to greater understanding, that's fine by Reynolds and the remaining four Playground Builders board members.

But it's not part of some grand, pre-scripted scheme. It just comes with the territory.

“My experience is that we're always waiting for someone to make peace for us when we can do it ourselves,” Reynolds said during an interview last Friday (May 22). “Our intent is to build one playground, many childhoods.”

In its brief history, Playground Builders has raised some \$130,000 in donations from across Canada, many different U.S. states, the United Kingdom, Jordan, Mexico and Italy, to name just a few.

Reynolds last week paid a visit to Ms. Heppner's Kindergarten class at Myrtle Philip Community School, and showed them a slide show about the organization's work. The students, who have been saving the money from their own recycled juice boxes, agreed to continue their efforts and donate the money at a later date.

“I think they got the message that we're contributing to the future of kids just like them,” Reynolds said.

The first \$100,000 Playground Builders collected was used to build 20 playgrounds — the 18 in the Palestinian territories and two in Baghdad, Iraq. Over there, it costs approximately \$5,000 — a mere fraction of what it would cost for the same thing in North America — to build a playground that includes teeter

totters, swings, a climbing apparatus and merry-go-rounds as well as fencing, base material, trash cans and benches.

Reynolds said that in March, the dedication of the first such playground in Baghdad was attended by more than 100 parents, both Sunni and Shiite, and some 300 children.

He said that while the additional \$30,000 in donations won't quite cover the total cost, the group's board hopes to initiate the building of 10 more playgrounds on the current trip, including two more in Baghdad.

It's therefore important that the organization maintain a fairly high profile and keep the donations coming in.

"I want to keep the Playground Builders thing on the radar so that (locals) don't forget about it, because we really want to build this organization," said Varrin, who's also the general manager at the GLC in Whistler.

In Afghanistan, as in Palestine and Iraq, it'll be important that Playground Builders find and foster a relationship with a local non-governmental organization. In Israel/Palestine, that group is called Sharek. It fosters relationships, helps bring together neighbourhood groups and provides an on-the-ground link for those coming from overseas, Reynolds said.

"They give suggestions as to where a playground should be constructed and why, and they provide before and after pictures and receipts, just to assure us that every dollar donated is being well spent," Reynolds said.

When Varrin and Whelen return home next month, Reynolds will continue on to Kabul, Afghanistan, to look into prospects for building the first playgrounds there.

Reynolds, who has spent 20 years visiting war-torn regions of the world, said keeping an upbeat attitude is an essential part of the work.

"You just have to believe that you're going to keep coming back home," he said when asked about the inherent risks. "The places we work are not always the easiest places to go, but those are the places where these playgrounds are needed most."

For information about the group, visit www.playgroundbuilders.org or email info@playgroundbuilders.org.

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