

Scout from Harford remembers his Russian roots

Playground:

Forest Hill to Siberia

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The children of Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, will be able to enjoy a brand new playground outside of Children's Hospital 20, all because of one Harford County Boy Scout's dream to give back to his birth city.

Sixteen-year-old Alex Griffith, of Forest Hill, along with two adults and three Boy Scouts, traveled to Russia in early August to build the playground.

"It was really fun," Alex said. "It was exciting to do."

Alex, who was adopted from Siberia by Dwight and Jenny Griffith in 1994, when he was 11 months old, decided to build the playground at the children's hospital as part of his Boy Scout Eagle Project.

After two and a half years and 1,700 hours of work, the grand opening of the playground was on Aug. 12, Alex's 16th birthday.

"I got a big birthday present," Alex said, adding that the grand opening of the playground was his favorite part of the trip. "Seeing it finally done and up and completed with all of the decorations, it was really amazing."

Alex and Dwight Griffith, Alex's scoutmaster, Dave Kraft, and his son, Zach; Christian Posko and Shane Rymer began assembling the playground on Aug. 8 and completed the majority of the project by Aug. 7, with only a few loose ends that needed to be finished by Aug. 11. Rymer, 18, left for the Marines upon the group's return from Russia and was unavailable for comment.

The Griffiths estimate that 109 Russian volunteers took time out of their schedules to help assemble the playground with the group.

"We had people stop whatever they were doing to help us," Dwight Griffith said.

Although only five people joined Alex on the trip, 42 scouts and 31 adults, from Boy Scout Troop 809 in Jarrettsville worked in many different capacities to make the project a success.

The new playground was constructed for children ages 5 through 12 and is Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, accessible. The playground has 20 components, including a rock wall, slide and swing.

The playground also has two wooden totem poles, one with a bear, the unofficial symbol of Russia, and one with an eagle, the official symbol of America.

"It was pretty incredible. It was so far beyond our expectations; it's hard to put in words," Dwight Griffith said.

Between fundraisers, donations and a matching grant, Alex was able to raise a little more than \$62,000.

When the group arrived in Russia, the remaining supplies that needed to be purchased were donated by the Russian people, which allowed for \$13,000 of the money Alex raised to be donated or reallocated.

Dwight Griffith said \$5,000 was donated for the continued maintenance of the playground, another \$5,000 was donated for a playground at a tuberculosis hospital, and \$3,000 was donated for a playground at a hospital for the mentally

ill. Both of the new playgrounds are also in Russia.

The lead sponsoring club was the Bel Air Rotary Club, according to Dwight Griffith. He said Mark Welsh and Jay Van Deusen of the Rotary, spent countless hours helping make this project possible.

While building the playground, one Russian volunteer drew "Russia + US = Friends" in the sand, which Dwight Griffith said showed the power of the project to unite two countries.

"It became an international event of good will and friendship," he said.

Christian Posko, 16, agreed with Alex's father that the project strengthened international relationships between the United States and Russia.

"It's not just for the community, but something one country did for another," he said.

In addition to volunteers lending a hand, many Russians, some with tears in their eyes, stopped by the playground site to thank the group for their hard work.

Alex recalled an 80-year-old man who talked to him when they were building the playground.

"He told me, 'you didn't bring a playground, you brought a miracle,'" Alex said.

On the opening day of the playground, Alex said the children couldn't wait to test out the new playground, as the line to enter wrapped all the way around the new facility.

He said the most popular part of the playground on opening day was the eight-foot slide.

Just like most large projects, Dwight Griffith, a home builder, said the playground project had some trials and tribulations.

"We had a 100 obstacles along the way," he said, adding that when planning something halfway around the world that is expected.

Alex said there were plenty of times when he wanted to quit, but he kept on going, knowing that the project would be worthwhile.

Although the playground was part of Alex's Boy Scout Eagle Project, the Scouts who accompanied him on the trip learned a lot as well.

"It was exciting," Zach, 16, said. "We couldn't have picked a better group of six people to go."

Zach said the playground they built was much larger than the other ones around the city.

Christian said he thought the playground was one of the most modern and contemporary things the children of Russia have seen.

"It was probably the coolest thing I have ever done," Christian said. "The people were incredibly nice and the facilities for the most part were great. It just had a really different atmosphere about it than the United States or anywhere else I have ever been."

Christian said he feels personally connected to each of the children that will use the playground because he knows that he helped build it.

He said that Alex is proof that the children from Russia have not forgotten about their birth city.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DWIGHT GRIFFITH

Sixteen-year-old Alex Griffith, of Forest Hill, along with two adults and three Boy Scouts, traveled to Russia in early August to build a playground that was Alex's Eagle Scout project.



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