

Many passersby do a double take while driving past West Fork Park on the west side of Cincinnati, and it's easy to see why. The new versatile playground, completed in October of 2017, is a rainbow spectacle that magnetizes community members not only for its shiny newness but also for its stimulating features that cater to all children, including those with sensory disabilities.

In 1999 the original West Fork Park (known as Holiday Playland) was built by volunteers and served the community well as a popular neighborhood park. However, nearly two decades later the playground equipment was becoming a safety hazard and park officials were looking to implement some much-needed updates and changes, says Glen Caminiti, park field supervisor.

After asking for park proposals, Green Township officials chose an innovative blueprint by University of Cincinnati professor Tina Stanton-Chapman and Eric Schmidt, owner of Playground Equipment Services. Stanton's research focuses on designing interventions (including playgrounds) that builds peer relationships of children with disabilities, and Schmidt, a certified playground safety inspector, has been designing and building playgrounds since 2003.

They partnered together and, through several in-depth studies, selected the most appropriate play equipment based on their findings.

"Eric and I are very proud of West Fork

Park because its design is based on six years of research that we conducted. We consider this playground to be universally designed in that it meets the needs of all children," says Stanton.

While some parks may address the needs of those with physical disabilities, there are few that are designed to meet the needs of those with sensory processing disorders and visual and hearing impairments. Even more so, the majority of playgrounds nationwide and globally are not based on research, adds Schmidt.

"We really studied children playing on playgrounds and surveyed and interviewed many different individuals to obtain their input... We focused on children's strengths and abilities rather than their disabilities."

The park consists of eight different play zones with intentional features to adhere to different tactile needs. The areas include an infant/toddler play area with two house structures, a zipline, a musical instrument area with vibrating chimes, a 14-foot climbing tower, a traditional swing set and an accelerator swing that allows a child with a physical disability to either sit or lie down in the center.

One of the most prominent zones is the sensory maze specially designed by Stanton and Schmidt. It consists of color reflective panels with varying textures for children to "feel" their way as they go through. Another popular zone is a turf hill complete with two metal slides

West

The West Side's West Fork Park caters to all children, including those with sensory disabilities

BY JESSICA BALTZERSEN

and two circular tunnels. The metal slides are designed for children with cochlear implants and the tunnels serve as an enclosed haven for children that need to decompress (should they feel overstimulated at any time from the sensory experiences).

The park's popularity is eminent through its daily full parking lot and well-received praise from families throughout the Tristate, who, even if they are not west siders, make the park a priority destination.

"We are so happy that the Green Township administration team took a chance on our idea and it paid off for the community," says Schmidt. ■



West Fork Park's custom design includes the sensory maze and 14-foot climbing tower.