The PlayGarden Story

“The lives of families of children with special needs often consist of a mind boggling schedule of therapy, trips to the doctor, tutoring, and school. When these hardworking kids have a break to play, their neighborhood parks and recreation centers are often unaccommodating or worse, unwelcoming or uninspired. These observations by Seattle Children’s PlayGarden Executive Director Liz Bullard prompted her to form the PlayGarden in 2002. Inspired by the Rusk Children’s PlayGarden in Manhattan, The Spiral Garden in Toronto Canada and the Adventure playgrounds in Europe, Liz, a speech-language pathologist, sought outdoor play spaces that were both accommodating and nurturing for children with special needs. Her research revealed a striking lack of inclusive accessible outdoor learning environments in Seattle/King County. She approached Ken Bounds, former Seattle Parks and Recreation Department Superintendent, about this finding. Mr. Bounds agreed, and offered the Department's support for developing this program.

In 2003, the PlayGarden became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and the Seattle Parks Department offered the south end of Colman Playfield, at 24th Avenue South and South Grand Street, as the site for a public-private development. The PlayGarden eagerly accepted the offer because of the opportunity the site presented to involve the residents of the surrounding economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods and the site’s easy access for families of children with disabilities from all over King County. The PlayGarden began holding summer programs in 2006, when the Seattle City Council ratified a 10-year renewable, no-cost lease for the site.

Meanwhile, schematic designs and engineering studies were completed in 2004 for the garden and associated facilities. Construction was completed in 5 phases. Phase 1 was completed in 2005, and involved moving an existing basketball court on the site, and improving its design to accommodate wheelchair athletes. The court also includes low and high hoops so all children can shoot. Construction of Phases 2 and 3 was completed in June 2010. These phases included renovation of an existing Field House, and construction of the new Minnie Bergman Garden House and Family Play Plaza featuring a custom designed rubber play mound and river runnel, coop and hutch a beautiful kitchen, playroom and restrooms. Phase 4 brought the creation of an extensive vegetable garden, orchard, rainwater cistern, grape arbor and living fence and a hybrid bioswale- raingarden. The PlayGarden then set about building an accessible tree fort and a musical sculpture by the world-renowned artist Trimpin, called the Bongobenny Quintet.

With the buildings complete we began an inclusive outdoor preschool program, in the fall of 2010. The PlayGarden currently offers summer camp, preschool, free community play dates, art classes, a children’s choir and seasonal events. All programs integrate children with special needs with typically developing children. Programs are often multi-age, to maximize the opportunity for siblings and friends to attend together.

A volunteer board of directors along with Ms. Bullard leads the PlayGarden. Committee members have expertise in children’s health, children with special needs, gardening, and various business and social services professions.