

When One Door Closes, Another or Even Two Open

For many Clarence residents, this summer marks the end of an era while also reminding us that exciting new opportunities are just around the corner.

More than 38 years ago, Harris Hill Elementary mothers Elaine Diederich and Julie McCullough took on an ambitious mission. As volunteer co-chairs, they set out to replace the school's aging 1950s playground with something that was safer, more creative, and designed around the way children actually play.

It was no small task.

Together with hundreds of volunteers, they raised more than \$50,000, a tremendous amount of money at the time. Then, during a rainy week in September, neighbors, parents, teachers, and community members worked shoulder to shoulder to build one of Western New York's first community built wooden playgrounds.

The playground was designed by renowned playground architect Robert Leathers, often called the Frank Lloyd Wright of playground design. Rather than using a standard blueprint, Leathers believed every playground should reflect the children and community it served. He visited classrooms throughout Harris Hill, listened to students' ideas, and transformed their imaginations into a one-of-a-kind playground that quickly became a favorite destination for generations of local families.

Originally expected to last about 20 years, the Harris Hill playground has stood for nearly four decades. Built on a solid rock, it is believed to be the last remaining Robert Leathers wooden playground of its kind.

I was fortunate enough to help build that playground. The friendships formed during that week remain some of my closest today, and the experience helped inspire the community service that continues to be a big part of my life. So, if you do not like what I am doing as your Town Supervisor, you can blame Elaine and Julie.

Sadly, this summer the Clarence Central School District will replace the beloved wooden playground. New York State safety standards and accessibility requirements now encourage playgrounds that are safer, more durable, and fully inclusive for children of all abilities.

I had hoped the Town could relocate and preserve the playground at one of our parks, but current state regulations prohibit the reuse of playground equipment manufactured before 1998. While it is disappointing to see such an iconic landmark come down, we can all appreciate the importance of providing today's children with playgrounds that meet modern safety standards.

Since the announcement, hundreds of former students and families have returned for one last visit. Many of the children who first played there nearly 40 years ago have now brought their own children back to experience the playground one final time. It has been touching to see how many wonderful memories were created on those wooden bridges, towers, and slides.

While one door closes, another, and perhaps even two more, are opening.

The new Harris Hill playground will feature modern, maintenance free equipment with a fully accessible safety surface that is as large as, if not larger than, the original play area. Its natural earth tone colors will complement the surrounding woods while continuing the spirit of imaginative play that made the original playground so special.

Another exciting project is also taking shape just down the road.

Thanks to the leadership of the Clarence Lions Club, with support from the Town of Clarence, an all-inclusive playground is coming to Town Place Park.

Lions Club President Bill Weisbeck, Playground Chair Elaine Diederich, and their committee have spent well over a year planning and raising funds for what will become one of the most significant recreational projects in our community. When completed, the multi million dollar playground will become Clarence's first fully accessible playground, allowing children of all abilities to play together side by side. It will serve local families for generations while making our community even more welcoming and inclusive.

I also want to recognize Town Planner Jonathan Bleuer, whose work securing grants has been instrumental in moving this project forward. Through Jonathan's efforts and the support of Assemblyman Paul Bologna, the Town has secured more than \$1.3 million toward construction. Combined with the Lions Club's outstanding fundraising efforts, the project is expected to begin later this fall.

Speaking of community spirit, this year's Fireworks in the Park was another tremendous success.

Town Councilman Bob Altieri, who has helped organize this event for more than 40 years, and the entire committee worked tirelessly to make this year's celebration one of our best ever. Some people ask why we do not hold the event on the Fourth of July itself. The answer is simple. By holding it a few days earlier, we avoid competing with graduation parties, holiday travel, and family gatherings while allowing more people to attend. Just as importantly, it allows the more than 100 volunteers who make the event possible to spend the holiday weekend with their own families.

One of the most rewarding parts of this year's event was seeing so many local volunteer organizations participating. Collectively, those organizations raised more than \$20,000 to support their missions while helping create a memorable evening for thousands of residents. That is what makes Clarence special. Our community celebrates together while supporting the organizations that give so much back throughout the year.

There are far too many volunteers to thank individually, but please know your time, dedication, and community spirit are deeply appreciated. Parks Superintendent Jason Holden and our Parks employees as always were at their best again for the event.

I would also like to thank my pickleball friend, Mario Tarquino, for helping organize and expand the six-hour music playlist that entertained the crowd throughout the evening. A special thank you also goes to our outstanding Master of Ceremonies, Veronica Jenks, whose energy and enthusiasm kept everyone engaged until the fireworks lit up the sky.

As we enjoy the rest of the summer, I hope we all remember that change, while sometimes bittersweet, often creates opportunities for something new. We say goodbye to a playground that gave generations of children wonderful memories, while looking ahead to two new playgrounds that will create memories for generations yet to come.

I hope everyone had a wonderful Fourth of July and wish you and your family a safe, healthy, and enjoyable rest of the summer.