

Accessible and Inclusive Parks: Eli's Park Project and Cayton Corner Park Show What's Possible

Parenting her young son Eli, who was born with Down syndrome, was both a joy and a revelation for Paige Reischl.

“It just expanded my thinking about inclusion and what it means to be included,” says Reischl. “We met families who have kids with disabilities and parents of typically developing kids who have chosen that school because they believe in inclusion. It’s a compassionate group of people who are making sure their children have interactions with a diverse group of people.”



Eli Reischl, the inspiration behind Eli's Park Project.

Photo courtesy of Paige Reischl

A remarkably open and loving child, Eli was almost four years old when the family lost him in August 2017.

Soon after, Eli's family and the community that rallied around them launched Eli's Park Project at Burke-Gilman Playground in Seattle's Bryant neighborhood. The project aims to create an “inclusive, nature-based park space where people of all ages and abilities can find play and peace,” according to Reischl. “We thought, ‘Let's keep this spirit of inclusion alive.’”

The park is close to Seattle Children's Hospital and connected by a footpath to the Burke-Gilman Trail and Ronald McDonald House. Nearby are the PROVAIL Apartments for adults with disabilities, two other affordable housing developments, and an inclusive preschool. But the park is not accessible to many of the people who live in or frequent the area, says Reischl. The play area is covered in wood chips, the grassy field is prone to swampiness, sightlines are obscured, and there is no barrier to busy Sand Point Way.

Reischl and the Friends of Eli's Park at Burke-Gilman Playground are stepping up community outreach and recruiting people to attend planning meetings and join their leadership team.

“There are specific groups of people being excluded from the outdoors who are all situated right here, so those have to be the people who are actually planning the park,” says Reischl. “They know best, of course, what would make a park better for them.”

The project leads are applying for a grant that would allow them to hire landscape architects and enter the design planning phase. Smooth, accessible surfaces are essential—and costly—so

Reischl and friends are brainstorming about fundraising. She is adamant that Eli's Park not be just a tribute to one little boy's generous spirit.

"It's for everyone," she says. "If we can know and learn from and love people who are different from ourselves, that benefits everyone."



Volunteers at Cayton Corner Park.

Photo courtesy of Friends of Cayton Corner Park

to get yelled at because we'd been out there being rogue. Instead, they said, 'Hey, we've been trying to figure out a great way to reengage the community. How do we do that?'"

Located on densely populated Capitol Hill, Cayton Corner Park is within a few blocks of more than a dozen nonprofit organizations, the Aegis Living senior assisted living facility, three grocery stores, 96 units of affordable or transitional housing, and Mount Zion Baptist Church. The park will be modest in size, but the plan is to create a powerful model of accessibility, with a sensory garden, ADA-accessible tables, and artistically designed safety fencing.

"We want to create a space to have our community join together at various times of the day and for various activities," says Klarman. "Children who are deaf or hard of hearing should be able to come out and play with their peers and sign to each other, with an open space that is visually accessible. A place where seniors from Aegis can have a sandwich with a friend or interact with some of the kiddos who are in the park."

All that for a target budget of \$300,000—a third of which HSDC and the community aim to raise themselves.

Eli Reischl was a client of HSDC, and Klarman has been working with Paige Reischl to build a network of people dedicated to making Seattle's open spaces more accessible and inclusive. As the fiscal sponsor for both Cayton Corner Park and Eli's Park Project, Seattle Parks Foundation is working with Klarman and Reischl to ensure that they have the administrative, financial, fundraising, communications, and advocacy support they need for their efforts to succeed.

"Build it and they will come," says Klarman. "You don't necessarily know that people with a need for accessibility are in your community when there's nowhere for them to go."

After Seattle Parks and Recreation purchased a vacant triangular lot at 19th and East Madison in 2011, the space remained underdeveloped and underused. Then a group of parents from the nearby Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center (HSDC) and Seattle Amistad School decided to plant trees, mow grass, and install play equipment.

"We got a call from Parks and Rec saying, 'Hey, we notice there's been some activity on that land. Who's been working on that?'" says Lindsay Klarman, executive director of HSDC. "And I said, 'Um, well, it's us.' I thought we were going