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Southaven baseball field designed for disabled athletes

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Southaven's Snowden Grove Baseball Complex is a dream come true for a group of kids who once could only watch as others played.

The Field of Dreams baseball park at the complex is designed to allow handicapped children the chance to play baseball.

The field, designed by local architecture firm Fisher & Arnold, Inc., was completed in fall of last year and should host its first games this season for a new league featuring handicapped athletes.

Judy Ketchum, a broker and owner of Coldwell Banker Northwest Realty, Inc., in Southaven, says she got the idea for the park during a trip to Atlanta when she saw a newscast of a similar park in Conyers, Ga. She was reminded of the idea when a close friend gave birth to a child with a disability a little over a year ago.

"I was brought up to literally not stare or even look at disabled people, but when I was in the hospital visiting my friend's child, I remembered the newscast and decided to see if we could do something like this here," she says.

Ketchum approached Southaven's mayor, Greg Davis, about donating land at the Snowden Grove Park, which is designed specifically for baseball and hosts the yearly Dizzy Dean Tournament that attracts at least 100 teams from around the area.

Ketchum says the mayor agreed to donate the land, and she believed she could raise the \$1.3 million for the field. At a Rotary club meeting, she met an architect from Fisher & Arnold, who agreed to help out in any way he could.

Russell Adsit, a principal at Fisher & Arnold, says his company donated the layout for the existing field and two other potential fields on either side. He says that land could also be used for a track or soccer field, if the city wants.

"We volunteered a master plan because we weren't sure where the money would come from, but once it started, Judy got people going, and she's infectious in that way," he says.

Ketchum was able to raise the money with donations from Homer Skelton, who donated \$500,000 to the project, and other local companies like First Tennessee, which donated \$5000.

The project began last spring with a ground breaking that was well attended, but Adsit says people were still wondering if the project would actually happen.

Adsit and Ketchum say a very enthusiastic young man, Ryan Minks, who is a huge baseball fan, was the most

enthusiastic person at the ground breaking and the happiest person at the grand opening.

"When Ryan talks about baseball, he almost jumps out of his wheelchair," Adsit says. "When you've got someone like that watching you, it makes you want to make the place as special as possible."

The field is decorated with bronze stars, bricks and other monuments donors can purchase for prices ranging from \$100-\$25,000 to benefit the field.

Ketchum purchased a bronze statue of a boy holding a baseball bat that stands in the middle of the breezeway to the park that she kept in her office until the park opened.

Adsit says the grand opening happened on a cold, wet fall day in November, but the 20-plus kids that came out with their families were ready to play.

He also says the field itself is like nothing else in the area.

The field is constructed of a rubberized surface, which is green where the grass should be and brown where the dirt should be. The lines are painted on, as well as the bases, so it won't fade over time and is easy to maintain.

Adsit says the surface is also wheelchair and walker friendly.

"The field in Conyers was laid out like carpeting, but this was poured into place like concrete and finished in the same way, which eliminates irregularities in the surface," he says. "It's the same material on a lot of indoor running tracks."

Joe Vanderpluym, the project manager for the project, says there was also the need for the concession buildings and restrooms to be larger than normal to accommodate the number of players using them at any given time.

Jordan Northcross, another project manager for Fisher Arnold, says the restrooms were the biggest the company has had to design for a single project, but it was balanced out by the size of the concession building.

"It's all handicapped accessible, and it also offers a lot of privacy and separation," he says. "If you get all the kids in the restrooms between games, you need it to be roomy so the kids can occupy it with their helpers or parents."

Vanderpluym says the concession stands elsewhere in the park are staffed by park services personnel, but the Field of Dreams will be staffed by volunteers or players and their parents.

"They can raise more money for it through concession sales," he says.

Vanderpluym says the main field in the Field of Dreams is phase one of the three-phase project, but the company also designed a handicapped accessible pier that extends into a lake near the field with railing that is suitable for wheelchair bound fishers.

Ketchum says she hopes to plan a fishing rodeo featuring a famous fisherman who has no arms or legs. As far as the new league is concerned, she says she hopes to have the equipment, uniforms and shoes donated by area businesses.

"The field in Georgia does charge the kids to play, but a lot of times with some children, most of the family's money goes towards the things they need," she says. "We want them to be able to simply show up and be able to play."

She also says the league will operate under a buddy system that enables kids that can't either hit or run to be paired with a volunteer that can do either.

Northcross says the design for the park was considered to make things as natural and welcoming to a group of kids who may not feel that way a lot of the times.

"We wanted to make it a special place so when kids arrive, they know it's a place for them and they can participate in what's going on in there," he says. "In addition, all of their needs are taken care of and they can get around easily. That's something they don't find in most places, and it makes the experience different for them."

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