



News



The Joy Envoy Keith Richards ensconced in a quilt of kids in Afghanistan.

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Reynolds establishes playground in Afghanistan

Playground Builders offers hope, opportunity to children in Middle East conflict zones

By Jesse Ferreras

The world's most dangerous places present nothing but opportunity for Keith Reynolds, a Whistler resident who has just established a playground in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Reynolds, a former forestry worker, is the founder of Playground Builders, a Whistler-based organization established in 2006 that has built play areas and gathering places in countries such as Iraq and areas under control of the Palestinian Authority.

His most recent trip to the Middle East started in May, where he and two volunteers including Mike Varrin, the general manager of bars for Whistler-Blackcomb, toured the West Bank before Reynolds went on his own to Kabul, where he helped touch up a playground at a Kabul orphanage and started a new one at a girls' school.

It was an emotional trip for Reynolds, who said in an interview that Playground Builders is gaining support and making new friends around the world.

“The best way to make a friend with somebody is to look after their children,” he said.

The first leg of the trip took Reynolds and his volunteers to Ramallah, the unofficial capital of the Palestinian Authority. From there, they went to check out some completed and prospective playground sites throughout the West Bank.

While the playgrounds were still standing, a number of them had sustained some damage from aggressive young children, while the more extreme damage was caused by theft.

“There is definitely some damage that is being repaired now,” Reynolds said. “The extreme damage was possibly some theft that was taken, some chain, but most of it is now being covered.”

In order to establish playgrounds in the Middle East, Reynolds links up with organizations already stationed in the countries where he hopes to build them.

His partner in the Palestinian Authority is Sharek, an organization that promotes the development of youth by creating spaces for young people to engage as “active participants” in all areas of their society. Their initiatives include cleaning and painting activities in Ramallah and Hebron.

Sharek covers the cost of maintaining Reynolds' playgrounds and helps link Playground Builders up with workers and manufacturers.

Reynolds has also established playgrounds in the volatile Gaza Strip, which has been marked by sectarian violence between groups loyal to the Fatah party, which is headed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and those loyal to Hamas, a terrorist group that was elected to government in 2006.

Since then, the Canadian government has withdrawn all its humanitarian aid from the Palestinian Authority, worrying that it could end up in Hamas' hands. The embargo on humanitarian aid also means that Reynolds wasn't able to check up on his playgrounds in the region.

“It's too difficult to get into Gaza so we didn't even try, it's basically closed,” he said. “For playground guilders we are currently working with CIDA on a possible grant through another partner, and they have been very explicit that there will be nothing to go into Gaza.

“None of our playground equipment will go to anything that has any association with Hamas.”

Though he wasn't able to see the playgrounds himself, Reynolds said he has seen pictures and they seem to be fine.

“They've not been bombed by Israelis, they've not been taken apart by sectarian violence,” he said. “By the pictures, they're fine.”

Once the West Bank leg of the trip was finished, Reynolds went on his own to Afghanistan, where he encountered two places that touched his heart.

It wasn't a smooth trip.

“When I arrived in Kabul at the airport the first person that greeted me was a man thinking I was from Blackwater,” Reynolds said. Blackwater is the American private security firm that has been accused of killing civilians.

The first place he came to was the House of Flowers Orphanage, where 20 boys and 10 girls had won the “lottery of life” simply by being at such a good orphanage, according to Reynolds.

“They prepared a room for me, so that I could stay there, no charge, no accommodation, just to stay with them,” he said. “But when I started to learn about the stories about the little people that were in there, it was a little emotional, I found that I couldn’t stay there.”

The orphanage was started in 2002 — a hostile time, according to Reynolds, given that it was the year after the notorious Taliban were routed from power by a joint operation by the U.S. military and mujahedeen forces.

The stories of the children at the orphanage brought him to tears.

“This American couple had gone by and seen these kids,” he said. “They were crying, huddled up. (They) saw them again, crying and huddled up. (They) talked to somebody and learned that, yeah, their mother’s gone missing, so they were just out in the open ruins.”

Another boy saw his father executed in front of him.

“You look at these innocent people and it was just difficult for me at the time to stay,” he said. “I’ve seen very bad stuff, but when you put real people to it, it’s very touching.”

Reynolds noticed that the orphanage already had a playground in place, but it stood on a foundation of dirt and hard rock — a little dangerous, according to him. Wanting to do something for the orphanage, he sent an e-mail to the directors of Playground Builders and decided to bring in some top soil and sod for grass.

“We had to bring in top soil, sod, rough up the grass, remove all the dangerous debris,” Reynolds said.

The whole thing was done in a single day at a cost of \$155.

From there, Reynolds wanted to tour possible sites for a new playground. That tour brought him to the Tajwar Sultan Girls’ School, a school with 4,632 students and no playground.

“We know that play is an integral part of growing,” he said. “There was one broken basketball hoop that is in place. And while I was there, I witnessed 15 girls trying to play with what appeared to be some kind of a ball to throw through a broken hoop.”

On the way into Kabul from the airport he had seen a manufacturer with a slide parked outside in “UN blue.” After some negotiating, he and the manufacturer, along with representatives from Hewad, the organization that helped him establish the playground in Afghanistan, came to an agreement to build five benches, five swing sets, five slides and a soccer pitch goal. The total cost was \$4,540 US, including transportation and installation.

The next step for Playground Builders is to look into another project in Baghdad, where Reynolds has already established a playground in the Northeast section of the city, in one of the poorer neighbourhoods.

For him, a man who has lived and worked in a giant playground like Whistler, play is clearly one of the most important things in life.

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