

# **My Memories of the Westminster Playground Renovation**

## **Chuck Baxter**

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It hardly seems possible on reflection, as I set here listening to the councilman and other speakers at the mural dedication, that only a short three years ago this very spot was a desolate urban waste. Now, looking around, there's a pleasant safe haven for neighborhood children to play in and for adults to set and visit while watching the children. The sunny colorful mural looking down adds warmth to the scene, while the nine tiles installed in the low inside wall give interest and color at a child's eye level.

But think back to 1993 when I moved here. Westminster Street was different back then. It had the same Victorian houses although ten of them were boarded up and abandoned. There were few sidewalk trees and no tree boxes around the existing trees that seemed to poke up through the brick like sign posts. Litter and broken glass formed patterns in the gutters and children ran here and there chasing each other with sticks and throwing rocks. These children had a playground back then too. A nine-foot high pyramid made of cement steps lined with 12-inch by 12-inch timbers dominated their playground. The City built it back in the 70s during a burst of urban renewal projects. State of the art equipment and design featured the pyramid and other play equipment made of timbers and steel. The cement floor of the playground was even covered with a rubberized, poured-in-place surface to cushion falls, very advanced thinking for the day. I can imagine people setting at their playground dedication on a sunny fall day in 1974 thinking how wonderful to have this new, safe place for their children to play. But a mere 20 years later, the equipment was broken with sharp metal edges to cut tender child hands. The rubberized surface was worn through and rotted away. The drains clogged and the timbers starting to disintegrate. There were five trash receptacles in 1993. They filled up and overflowed before their monthly emptying by some city employee from an unknown city agency. It seemed the City built the playground, and then turned away thinking all was well if they only emptied the trash once in awhile. In the meantime, drug dealers took control of the playground, whiling away their days between curb side sales, with lively games of dice and cards. The backside of the pyramid became their toilet and playground corners, their trashcans. But, the children still played. Children will always play.

## December 2, 1996

The Westminster Neighborhood Association (WNA) was a little over a year old. We had been meeting monthly to plan ways to improve the neighborhood. Building tree boxes and planting 25 new trees was an exciting first success for the young organization. The neighbors back then came to realize that the City wasn't going to help. After all, look how they had let the playground down. Change needed to come from within the neighborhood itself. In fact the announcement of the first WNA meeting started with this Thoreau quote, "*The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait until that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off.*" WNA was starting alone rather than waiting for the City.

So, this was the first Playground Committee meeting, December 2, 1996. The playground had been a point of discussion at each WNA meeting. We started off with the idea that we could "partner" with the city agency that owned the playground. We would find ways to maintain the existing playground and repair its defects. And, at the same time, we would dream about and plan to build a new playground. We had no money, we had no expertise, and we had no connections. We had only a common vision of a safe, clean, shining neighborhood oasis.

Back to what seemed like DC reality, we had some trouble finding out what agency actually "owned" the playground. The Park and Recreation Department couldn't find it on their map. The Mayor's office didn't know. It was a Redevelopment Land Agency project. I don't remember how we finally discovered that the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) claimed it. It seems they had taken it over from Park and Rec only a year or so earlier. We quickly sent off a letter to DHCD asking to partner with them to restore the playground. WNA was already picking up litter in the playground daily, sweeping up the leaves in the fall, and emptying the trashcans. In 1993 there had been five trashcans. In 1996 there were only two left. The unknown city employee who emptied them each month started taking them away one at a time. Although Parks and Rec had a program for partnering with community groups, DHCD had no such program. They were, interested, but just didn't know how to approach a partnership. We kept the dialogue going and in mid-November, 1996, we received a letter from DHCD outlining a plan for partnering with us that even gave us hope that there might be funding available.

This sparked the formation of a WNA playground committee to start planning a course of action. This first committee meeting on December 2, 1996, was exciting. We were a diverse group of about eight neighbors, some who had been in the neighborhood for years, and others who were new, black and white, men and women, some with children and some single. The only ground rule of our first brainstorming session was that we recognized no limit in what the playground could become. We threw ideas up that evening. I wish I could remember them all. Basketball courts, swimming pool, trees and lawns, hedge maze, clubhouse, swings, slides, bouncing balls, to name just a few. For the next meeting, we decided to create a drawing of a new playground with space for both

children and adults. We wanted a safe space that could be used by as many people as possible. We wanted greenery. We wanted tables and benches. We wanted peace.

A later Playground Committee meeting found us with a landscape architect, a friend of committee member Ellen Kardell, and a crude drawing that I had put together using PowerPoint. We had distributed a survey to all WNA households earlier asking for their ideas about the playground. The children at Sarah House, a mentoring service group at 910 T Street right behind the playground, had made drawings of their “Dream Playground.” They wanted swings, a water slide, and a merry-go-round. They didn’t want broken glass, hard ground, and splinters. Our drawing reflected this input. We talked with the architect about our dreams for the playground. We showed him our drawing and explained that we had no money but wouldn’t let lack of money stand in our way. He in turn tried to discourage us from some of our plans. He felt we needed to pay more attention to the cost of things. We didn’t slow down. We said we would outline our vision for the playground and fill in the details without thinking about money. Then we would refine it when (and if) we found funding. Why limit ourselves when we didn’t know what our limits might be?

## **August 18, 1997**

The playground committee was working hard to develop a plan and find funding. In the meantime the playground continued to be a concern to the community at large. Our efforts to get the city to clean the drains, repair the equipment, and light the playground had been unsuccessful. On August 18 we received a letter from DHCD giving us temporary “right to enter” the property to repair the slide. WNA found a welder willing to do the repair for free. We asked DHCD for permission more because we wanted them to know the extent of our commitment than because we felt we actually needed permission. And in fact the permit came a week or two after we had actually done the work. WNA members had bandaged enough little hands cut on the slide to make waiting for the city to respond an untenable option. At the same time, our letters to various agencies asking for the lights to be turned on and for the drains to be cleaned yielded no fruit. Glenn Melchor, who owned the house next to the playground, finally put lights on his roof to shine down into the playground. WNA agreed to pay his increased electric bill. The drains, on the other hand, turned out to be a bigger problem. Even though we tried to unclog them, each rain left behind a lake in the playground. The neighborhood children loved to play in these stagnant lakes and seemed to have great fun throwing rocks in, wading, and playing their games. The mosquitoes loved the water too.

We had written a number of requests for funding to different DC and Federal agencies. We had also talked with Grandma’s House, a hospice for children at 910 Westminster, and Sarah House about their funding sources. On March 5, 1998, we received a letter from Congresswoman Norton congratulating us for being awarded a grant by the US Department of Agriculture’s Urban Environmental Resource Initiative. Two months earlier we had received a letter from the Department Agriculture expressing their regret that they hadn’t selected our proposal for funding. Congresswoman Norton’s letter gave us a chuckle, but was also a precursor.

At some point during the year, Mila Aguda, from DHCD asked us to send her our plan and a budget. She said there might be some grant money available. We already had the plan. The budget, on the other hand, didn't exist. Up to this time we had pretended that money wasn't a factor. Up to now we had only sent letters of intent to agencies asking for help. We had purposely avoided the actual budget for the project. But now we had to quickly put down some figures. We only knew that the demolition of the pyramid would be very expensive. We decided \$25,000 was a good number. Earlier we had gotten a \$14,000 estimate for an iron perimeter fence from Long Fence. The rest of the figures, we pulled out of the air. A few thousand for this and a few thousand for that and we had a budget of \$178,101 that we whisked off to Mila.

### **April 9, 1998**

I was out of town when DHCD announced the award of the grant. I ran into Glenn on my way to work the Monday I got back to town and he congratulated me on the good news. Remembering Congresswoman Norton's letter, I was a little skeptical. But on April 9, 1998, we received a 90-day conditional commitment letter from DHCD. Turns out we needed to complete a bit of paperwork. The year before, WNA had incorporated as a non-profit corporation and received non-profit recognition from the IRS. We didn't, however, realize that even though we had incorporated in the District of Columbia, we didn't have DC recognition of our non-profit status. Before DHCD could officially award the grant to us, we needed to get recognized by the DC government. So we embarked on a flurry of visits to DC agencies, and filled out all of the required forms. Interestingly enough we were even required to get a Dunn and Bradstreet number. We were in fear of missing some undeclared grant deadline, but Mila helped get the paperwork moved quickly through DHCD.

We now started a series of meetings with DHCD. We met with their legal people. We met with their finance people. We met with Mila. I even went to a training session where I was advised we would need to barcode anything we put in the playground and make sure DHCD had an inventory of the equipment and furniture. No one ever mentioned the bar coding after that meeting.

The playground committee was now thinking more about the details of the project. Where to start? We decided we first needed a landscape architect to draw up plans. The committee by this time had formed into two ideological camps. Glenn and I were the conservatives. Polly Stamatopolis, and Cerci Stumbo were our socially aware conscience. We four were the most vocal of the committee. Other members added their thoughts and helped a great deal with various tasks. But we four assured that all viewpoints were considered. In our early meeting with our architect friend we learned that typically the designer got a fee of about ten percent of the project cost, a fee of about \$17,000 in our case. So our first big job was to put together a package detailing the project and asking for proposals from interested designers. The committee started meeting weekly to develop the package. We had to work through a number of issues including:

- EEO and minority hiring issues
- Desire to hire neighborhood labor
- Composition of the designer list

Here is our first statement showing our social intent. It went out with our search package for an architect. The language is mostly due to Polly's and Cerci's lobbying.

*“WNA is committed to spending these funds as much as is feasible in the District of Columbia and in ways that support traditionally under-employed groups. WNA is developing an affirmative action plan for Phase II of the Project that will declare WNA's commitment to hiring a contractor(s) who spends funds for wages, materials, and services in ways that benefit the District of Columbia and traditionally under-represented or under-privileged communities.”*

We all, in the end or at some point along the way, realized that social aspirations were sometimes difficult to realize and still maintain project momentum. For example, DHCD had given us a check for \$178,101 and told us to put it in an escrow account that didn't pay interest and needed approval from DHCD before funds could be disbursed from the account. They also told us to use a minority owned bank. They helpfully gave us a list of five or six minority owned banks to choose from. I went to every one of the banks on the list. Most didn't know what I was talking about when I explained what DHCD required of us. One bank had been closed for a few years. One bank offered to set up the escrow account and charge us \$250 a year for the privilege of keeping the \$178,101 interest free. The check from DHCD was written on a 1<sup>st</sup> Union Account. So, in the end we went to 1<sup>st</sup> Union Bank, opened a non-interest bearing checking account, put the word “escrow” in the name of the account, and told the bank we'd be asking them to write checks for us when we presented authorizations from DHCD. I also wrote up an, “Escrow Agreement” which the bank and I signed and sent off to DHCD. I had a hard time convincing the bank that we really didn't want to earn interest on the money. I later explained to Mila why we weren't able to use a minority owned bank. But since DHCD didn't use a minority-owned bank, why should we pay for the privilege to do so?

## **June 10, 1998**

Our weekly meetings yielded what we thought was a good package to send to prospective playground designers. In contained:

- a brief description of WNA,
- a statement of our intention to be inclusive and involve the community in the design process,
- a list of elements we wanted in the playground,
- a description of the scope of the work expected of the designer, and
- a couple of playground drawings we had made, including the one we had been kicking around since our meeting with the architect in an early committee meeting.

We wanted to keep the application process simple, but at the same time we needed enough information about the bidders to allow us to evaluate not only their design ideas,

but also the stability of their businesses. So, we asked for references and background information as well as a design “concept” based on a narrative set of guidelines and sketches we included in the package. Even though we attached drawings and listed elements we wanted in the playground, we urged the designers to use their imaginations and create unusual and exciting designs for our consideration. We also, after much discussion, decided we needed to tell the prospective bidders how we planned to select the designer for the project. So, we developed a procedure for evaluating proposals based on two measures: “Technical Quality” and “Cost.” We further outlined how we would determine technical quality. We assigned

- 50 points to quality and credibility of the plan for accomplishing the work
- 30 points to quality of the design, and
- 20 points for experience of the bidder.

Each member of the playground committee would score each proposal received. We would then compile these individual scores into an average Technical Quality score. The Committee would, in the end, select the “bidder offering the highest Technical Quality for the least Cost.” The description of this selection procedure went into the bid package with a copy of the commitment letter from DHCD and an invitation to tour the site. We cautioned that “interviews” might be needed before making the selection.

At the same time we were developing the bid package, we needed to construct a list of prospective designers. Among other efforts, we contacted the American Institute of Architects (AIA) National Headquarters on New York Avenue, who referred us to the Washington DC AIA chapter, who in turned referred us to the American Society of Landscape Architects, who sent us a lengthy membership list. The Committee spent some time shaving this list down to a manageable size. We mostly eliminated addresses that were out of our area. This was the basis of our mailing list. We added a few addresses that we got from other sources and, on June 10, 1998, we sent the packages to about 150 addresses. At the same time we posted an Internet invitation on an AIA web site. We set a July 10 deadline for submission of proposals. During the rest of June and first part of July we met with representatives from eight or nine designers who came by to look at the playground and ask questions about the project. I also answered a number of e-mail inquiries.

## July 10, 1998

By July 10 we had received seven proposals of varying detail but all with intriguing design features. We had asked for the use of imagination and we weren't disappointed. All the designs featured plenty of play space for children. Most were traditional in their approaches but we also received one that used sculptural animal shapes as play equipment, and one proposed transforming the playground into a Victorian garden. The companies who sent in proposals were:

- Arbor Associates
- Coffin & Coffin Landscape Architects & Urban Planners
- Thadani Hetzel Partnership Architects
- The Fitch Studios
- John W. Taylor and Associates
- Reena Ricki & Suzane Reatig, AIA
- LaPierre & Co. Design Studio

Since we had already developed the criteria for evaluating the proposals, we felt we were well on schedule for making a good choice. In one of the weekly Playground Committee meetings we decided to interview the top three designers. In other words we had to eliminate four of the designs.

The Playground Committee had boiled down to six people by this time. Glenn Melchor, Polly Stamatopolis, Lisa King, Cerci Stumbo, Dave Brown, and me. We each evaluated the seven proposals and then met to consolidate our evaluations and decide which three designers to interview. Dave was an engineer who had bought Ellen Kardell's house and also had taken her place on the committee. (We kidded him that setting on the committee was a condition of buying the house.) He was used to working with architects and their proposals and he had been instrumental in coming up with the evaluation procedure. However, it was a bit difficult to apply the guidelines to all proposals because of their differences in approach. For example, since Arbor was a playground equipment company, they gave us a complete plan and bid for building our playground. Had we accepted their proposal, they would have stepped in and built the playground they had proposed. It had a lot of play equipment and well designated fall zones. It had most of what we wanted including a nice area for adults to set and visit. However it lacked community input, an ingredient we all agreed was absolutely essential to nurture the neighborhood's sense of ownership of the renovation process and thereby avoid the neighborhood apathy that was partly to blame for the decline of the old playground.

The most innovative design proposal came from Reena Ricki & Suzane Reatig, the two women who designed the Metropolitan Community Church on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, NW. They actually divided the playground space into three areas called, "Water," "Air," and, "Ground." They used animal shapes for play structures with a water feature, and sand box and lots of plants. We all liked this design very much, but in the end decided it was too radical for the neighborhood to accept. The Fitch Studio proposed the use of the low

wall along the side of Glenn's house as part of the play area and showed a stairway up onto the wall with swings and other play equipment accessed from the wall. Thadani/Hetzel planned to build a tower with water collection feature and remove all of the inside walls to create gentle slopes up to the trees. We liked that idea too, but were very concerned about the stability of the trees. The trees around the playground were the only saving feature of the old playground. We didn't want to risk doing anything that would endanger these trees. We felt the trees could never be replaced (at least not in our lifetimes.) One design got negative points from us for suggested removing the tree in front to make room for a garden area.

In the end we decided to interview:

- Thadani/Hetzel who's design featured a fanciful tower in the center with a means for collecting rainwater to be used for watering the plants in the tree boxes.
- Fitch Studio because of their creative use of our limited space
- Coffen & Coffen because of their sensitivity to the Victorian feel of the neighborhood

Peter Hetzel and Dehru Thadani won us over in their interview because of their experience with getting community input and consensus. They had conducted design workshops in the past and seemed very willing to work closely with people in the neighborhood until a design could be created that satisfied as many community needs and desires as possible. Their tower and water conservation ideas also intrigued us.

We agreed that any of the designers had enough experience and knowledge to do a good job for us. I surely wished we could have used them all and told them so in my letters notifying them of our final selection. Two or three of the designers called afterward to talk a little more about why we hadn't selected them. I felt bad that we couldn't have used them all in some collaborative way. At this point in the renovation project, although we had been working hard for months, we could see only the very start. There would be so many details to consider. I think it's fortunate we couldn't see ahead too far. The real work was just starting.

## **October 17, 1998**

Sometime in July or August Mila Aguda received a notice that DHCD was letting her go. We considered her our angel at DHCD and were a little unnerved by the thought that we would have to develop a relationship with someone else there. However her termination notice was withdrawn in September and she was back working with us. With Mila's help we were able to sign a contract with Thadani/Hetzel. We then plunged into the design process. We selected October 17 as the date for the Thadani/Hetzel design workshop. We also invited Dehru Thadani and Peter Hetzel to a neighborhood association meeting as a first introduction. And, we invited other people to join the playground committee. Michelle Lewis joined us. She had three small children and so had a valuable point of view. Susan McCarley from Grandma's House also joined. Grandma's House had six or seven children under age 7 at any given time. We had been

told that they would love to use the playground but in its current state it was simply unsafe for their children. The Playground Committee wanted to be sure the new playground would be inviting to young children.

The design workshop was a very coordinated effort to get community involvement in the project. Cerci took the lead on organizing. She was meticulous in her attention to detail. I took responsibility for finding a location for the workshop. We needed a fairly large space with a separate room for childcare. We wanted the children to participate in the workshop but knew they would be unsatisfied if they had to set through four hours or so of discussions. We also needed a place that was close by. The New Bethal Baptist Church on the corner of Ninth and S would be the ideal spot. And since New Bethal's pastor was Reverend Fountroy, whose family owned 928 Westminster, we felt sure they would be interested in helping us. There is a fellowship hall in the basement of the church that was the right size for our needs. There were plenty of chairs and folding tables and across the corridor was a daycare room. Initially I had trouble getting the church to return my calls. So I went over in person. The secretary I talked with said we would need to complete an application form and pay a usage fee of \$100. They couldn't commit to our use of the hall until the paperwork was completed and examined. I asked them to waive the fee which knocked us further down on the priority list. In the meantime, since we had no idea whether the church would let us use their hall, I investigated two other spaces. The first was the Manna building located on S Street on the far side of Seventh Street. It's an old Victorian turned into office and meeting space. Manna said for sure we could have the space for our workshop. Dehru, Circe, and I walked through and thought it would work, but wasn't ideal, and it was several blocks away from the neighborhood. However, it was good to have the commitment as backup in case New Bethal didn't come through. Another space I looked into was 910 T Street, a vacant City-owned property. The City had evicted Sarah House from the property and it was being used by a student arts project space. Since 910 T Street backs up to the playground, it would be a convenient location for the design workshop as well. I talked with the person in charge of the art project who asked me to write her a letter with a copy to David Gilmore, the acting head of the Department of Housing who had control of the property. I wrote and called and faxed but got no response. Once again the DC Government reinforced my opinion that the neighborhood couldn't depend of the government for much help. In the end New Bethel let us use their fellowship hall, for which we were very grateful.

The Playground Committee beat the bushes to get people committed to come to the design workshop. We sent e-mails, dropped flyers, and went door to door to let people know what was going on. On the day before the workshop we had 36 people who said they would attend. Add the Committee members, the designers, and about 16 kids and we felt we would have a good crowd. The next day we were pleased to have people, some who we hadn't expected, show up for the workshop that. The representation from the neighborhood was very diverse and insured a good discussion during the workshop.

We had given a great deal of thought to the structure of the workshop. We wanted to leave as much time as possible for people attending to express their opinions, desires, and concerns. The workshop began with a gathering in the playground itself with coffee and rolls. This gave a chance for people to see the playground before moving to the church where they met to express their ideas and thoughts about what was important to include in the design of the playground. We set the room in the church up in a horseshoe configuration with tables to the side for the designers who would be listening and drawing during the sessions. Peter and Dihru had brought two additional architects along to help. We worked for three hours brainstorming ideas while the designers drew. During the brainstorming sessions, the children were in another room drawing their ideas. At a point in the morning the children came out and presented their drawings. We had a very free and remarkably smooth flow of ideas. By the end of the morning the designers had sketched out four designs based on what they had heard from the community. They presented their designs and we broke for lunch of pizza and more discussion. We spent another hour or so after lunch continuing our discussion. At the same time the designers produced a second set of drawings further incorporating the community's desires.

I felt the workshop was a major achievement on several levels. We had an excellent discussion among a very diverse group of neighbors. For some this was the first time they had a chance to meet and talk with other people who they saw in their neighborhood every day. I think this workshop brought the neighbors closer together not only in developing ideas for a playground design, but also in their appreciation for each others' concerns and thoughts on the various aspects involving the playground, children, and the community as a whole. In addition:

- It gave the playground designers information they needed
- It gave a sizable number of children a voice in the design features they wanted
- It bestowed on WNA residents ownership of the project

Finally, it launched the Playground Committee into a concluding frenzy of design activity. This activity consisted mostly of research and meetings.

Part of the reason the estimated design cost was \$17,000 was that Peter and Dehru would put together all of the needed blueprints, one for each element such as demolition, equipment placement, electrical, plumbing, elevation drawings showing the walls and fences, etc. In addition they would write the construction specifications. This would include very detailed descriptions of every aspect of the playground project to include vendor names, part numbers, colors, sizes, materials, prices, and a host of other details. Even though they would specify play equipment, furniture, and playground features, the members of the Playground Committee did their own research. I passed around a couple of books about playgrounds and the way children play. I also bought an issue of Architectural Digest that gave us some good ideas about materials, lighting, furnishings, and so forth. I sent a dozen or so requests for catalogues to various companies with ads in the magazine. It wasn't long before material started flowing in for us to study. To this day I receive a quarterly magazine from the fencing industry.

We were meeting with Dihru every week to review the developing design and address issues he raised. The design was really coming together. We chose the following features:

- A center oval with slate paving and a water play feature
- A large piece of play equipment for children between age 5 and 12
- A swing set (one saddle swing and one bucket swing)
- A tot lot with a piece of play equipment appropriate for children age 5 and under, and a shade tree for the tot lot, and a low iron fence to separate the tot lot from the rest of the playground.
- Two tables in front with chess boards
- Benches and a seating and conversation area on the east side of the playground
- A stage at the rear of the playground with a ramp up to it from the rear entrance
- A playhouse/fort built at the end of the east planter box that would span the rear entrance
- Poured-in-place resilient surfaces under the play equipment
- An ornamental iron fence around the playground

We had many discussions about each of these elements as well as many ideas that we discarded. We tried to think of pros and cons and desired outcomes for each element in the playground.

### ***Playhouse/Fort***

Early on in our discussions with Dihru (and even before that when we talked with other architects) we discovered that we really didn't have a lot of space to work with. Safety regulations required that we have a six-foot fall zone around every "play opportunity." Further, no two pieces of equipment could share a fall zone. So, for example, the swing had to be twelve feet from the piece of equipment it was next to. However, we had two twelve feet wide strips of potentially usable area under the raised tree boxes on the north and east sides of the playground. Why not use that space for people? We considered placing benches under the trees, or putting a sandbox or other play element up there. The idea we ran with was to construct a tall structure at the end of the east tree box. This playhouse/fort would be a place for children only since it would have small, child-size doors and windows. The fort would span the back entrance to the playground and a tunnel slide would come down into the playground. The playhouse/fort itself would be totally enclosed so there could be no danger of a child climbing over a wall and falling into the alley or tree box. This design would obviate the need for a fall zone except where the slide emptied into the playground. Dihru and Peter spent a lot of time designing this structure and we were very pleased with it. Unfortunately, due to budgetary constraints, the playhouse/fort was removed from the final design. We rationalized at the time we would build it in a later phase after we found more money. The estimated cost was about \$23,000.

### ***Water Play Feature***

During some of the hot summer weather the fire hydrant in front of 921 Westminster was turned on for the children to play in. The hydrant was on so frequently that the sidewalk and street were starting to deteriorate. The curb as far away as the alley entrance had sunk as a result of the water running down the street. It didn't take rocket scientists to see that the children really enjoyed the water. So, the idea of a water play feature was born during one of the early Playground Committee meetings. The problem was to find a water feature that would be safe and assessable to all ages. Wading pools, fountains, and streams presented a drowning hazard as well as sanitary concerns. Behind the Smithsonian Castle I had seen a water feature that was part of the walkway. There is also a fountain at the east end of the National Gallery West Building that incorporates part of the walkway. This gave us the ideal of a sprinkler in the oval. Later I took pictures of a feature at Disney World with children running through water sprays that came up from the play surface. We found a vendor on the Internet and gave the information to Dihru for incorporation in the design. We even talked about who would be responsible for the water bill. I wrote a letter to the DC Water Department asking how much it would cost to have service started, and who would be responsible for the water bill. Of course we never received a reply, but we charged ahead with the idea anyway.

### ***Swing Set***

Every time we talked with children about the playground, they asked for swings. Children love motion. One book I read mentioned that motion creates endorphins in a child's brain giving them pleasure. The downside of swings is that they require a very large fall zone. So, we were limited in the size of the swing set. It would have been nice to have enough room in the tot lot for a swing, but that turned out to be impossible with the space we had, so we ultimately decided, after much discussion, to have a swing set with one bucket swing for tots and one saddle swing for the older kids.

### ***Chess Boards***

We wanted to insure the playground wouldn't go back to the drug dealers after the renovation was completed. The only way to keep that from happening was to make sure there were plenty of people in the playground using it for what it was designed for. We had children's activities covered but wanted something for adults. We decided on chess boards after thinking about other parks in the District such as Lafayette Square where people set and played chess during the day. We had also talked with members of the nearby National Checker Club (in the 800 block of S Street) and invited them to make use of the playground when finished. I think we envisioned them holding some of their meetings in the playground.

### ***A Stage***

A stage was another idea to ensure maximum use of the new playground. We came up with this idea in a Playground Committee meeting. Dihru incorporated it in his design. He designed a stage raised about a foot off the ground at the far end of the

center oval. It would be handicap accessible by a railed ramp running up from the right side of the stage. He designed poles on the corners that could be used for flags and to hang a backdrop if needed. This was another feature we had to remove for lack of money.

### ***Ornamental Iron Fence***

The fence is the one playground element that produced the strongest feelings and most dissention within the Playground Committee and the community at large. The old playground had no fence. It was defined by the tree boxes on the east side and back, the party wall of the row house on the west side, and concrete steps up to a raised cement pad in the front. The playground was easily entered anyplace along its front on Westminster Street as well as through a back, street level entrance. People could also come and go, with a little extra effort, through the tree boxes. In 1998 we were still very concerned about the drug dealers hanging out in the playground. One feature that made it an attractive place for criminals was the ease with which one could escape. So, one argument for a perimeter fence was the feeling that a fence would discourage nefarious activity in the playground. We had even, a year or two earlier, got an estimate for a fence for the old playground. However, an argument against the fence was the exclusionary nature of fences in general. We wanted the playground to be inviting. Some on the Committee felt strongly that a fence would send a message that people weren't welcome in the playground. It would create a prison-like environment. Members of the Committee and the community with small children had another reason to advocate for a fence. That reason was safety and ability to supervise their playing children.

At the design workshop a fence was high on the priority list of more people than any other single element. The issues ultimately came down to "how high" and "how many gates." One camp wanted a seven-foot high fence and only one gated entrance. The other extreme, aside from the "no-fence-at-all" option, was a two or three-foot high fence with entrances in front and back with no gates. The Playground Committee debated the fence issues for weeks. We looked at pictures and videos of various fences in the District. We went out and looked at playgrounds in person. We also brought the issue up in the regular WNA meetings. And finally, since the fence issue was starting to delay the completion of the playground design, we organized a neighborhood meeting for the sole purpose of discussing and settling the fence issue. This meeting was attended by over forty community members and lasted for more than two hours. We at last resolved the issues with a compromise. We would have a five-foot high fence with two entrances. The back entrance would be gated and the front entrance would have no gate. We passed this compromise with debate and a couple of "secret" ballot votes.

A week after the design workshop, Dihru submitted their first bill. Although we had feared it would take weeks for DHCD to authorize payment, Mila returned an authorization within a few days. I was relieved when I took the authorization to the bank

and they wrote the check out for me. This payment process worked well through the entire design phase of the project.

## **December 9, 1998**

Part of the designer's contract required them to estimate project costs. And as the cost picture started to develop, the committee had to make some hard decisions about what elements of the design could be changed or eliminated to bring the cost under budget. So, this required a whole series of meetings and discussions that seemed to wear on us all. We could save money by "self-contracting" certain elements of the project. We learned that contractors typically add a ten percent overhead to anything they bought. For example, if we bought the furniture and play equipment ourselves, we would save a few thousand dollars. We also decided to remove the fence and brick cladding from the contract. We would ask the bidders to give us separate bids on those two items. We did this for a couple of reasons, One, we thought we could have a fence installed by an independent company at less cost. Again no ten percent markup. Two, the option of not having a fence at all was still hovering in the air. As for the brick cladding, we really felt it would add a lot to the playground, but if we didn't have enough money we could forgo the brick cladding in favor of painted walls.

But, we had to go even farther and so, started removing such items as the play fort that the neighborhood children all said they wanted. We also took all benches and miscellaneous furniture out of the design. We cut back on lighting fixtures. Landscaping was completed abandoned. In addition, we abandoned or scaled back many small features to bring the estimated cost of the project down to our budget. We ended up with a basic design containing a central plaza, water feature, swing set, scaled down play structure, tot lot, and little else.

While the design process was progressing, the committee put together a list of potential contractors to whom we could send an invitation to bid on the project. Dihru suggested some companies and we found others in the phone book and through Internet research. We limited the list to about 50 companies. By December 9, 1998, we were far enough along with the design that we felt we could send a letter to potential contractors asking them for letters of interest and some background information for us to review. We told them we hoped the project could be completed by spring. We received replies from seven or eight local contractors. But, since the holidays were upon us and since the looming fence issues wasn't yet resolved, we didn't get much done until late January when we decided we had to have a public meeting and resolve the fence issue before the bid package could be finalized. That meeting didn't take place until February. By then Dihru and Peter were becoming weary of our, what I'm sure felt like to them, inability to come to consensus. It wasn't until April that we finally had the bid package together. It consisted of a thick book of specifications and a less thick, but still impressive, book of bid procedures, and the blue prints. Dihru and Peter delivered this package to us as part of their contract. On May 4, 1999, we sent out another letter to the prospective contractors with more details about the project. In this letter we again asked for a letter of interest. This time we also asked for a \$50 filing fee to help defray the cost of

reproducing the bid package that included six or seven oversize blueprints. (I guess they technically weren't blueprints since they were white, but it cost about \$50 to have a set reproduced.) Five companies sent the \$50 and asked for bid packages. We set a time for them to pick up the packages, since it would have been costly to mail them. Of course, I put the wrong date and time in the letter going out to them, and ended up faxing each of the interested contractors with the correct pickup information. We were a little concerned that we wouldn't get the three bids required by DHCD. Due to so many big projects starting up in the District at the time, we found the larger companies weren't interested in our little project. The good economy was working against us.

Since we had the architects to advise us on contractor selection, we didn't feel the need to decide on selection criteria beforehand. Upon reflection, I suspect this decision was due more to the fatigue the committee members were starting to feel after all of the toil and turmoil in working out the details of the design. We asked that contractors send their bids to us by June 2, and we eventually received four bids. The lowest of the four was a bid of \$223,954 for our, we felt, very stripped down playground plan. The highest bid was \$372,500. The bids didn't include the furniture, fence, or brick veneer. They gave us separate bids for those three items that added an addition, on the average, of \$62,000. We had \$166,468 remaining of our grant money after paying off the architects.

The bids were high, so we went to work trying to figure out why they were so high, and how to alter the playground plans further to bring the cost down. We realized we had made a mistake by not asking the contractors to itemize their bids. We therefore were unable to see what elements may have inflated the price. We interviewed each of the contractors, and talked to them at length on what could be done to bring the cost down. By this time Dihru and Peter had faded into the background, having fulfilled their contract. At this point we realized we had blundered by not having specified in the architect's contract that they had to stay with the job until they completed a playground plan that could be constructed with our \$166,000 budget. So, we were now kind of on our own. In mid-June I wrote to each of the contractors telling them we were working to alter the design and/or materials specified. I expressed hope that they would still be interested in the project when we got everything together on our end.

## **December 2, 1999**

Because we were reluctant to give up on some of our dream playground elements, the Playground Committee decided to try to find additional funding before further cutting back on the playground design. Polly wrote twelve grant requests to various foundations. I wrote a letter to DHCD asking them for an additional \$60,000. I also wrote to the Mayor asking for help. We thought maybe the District could at least do the demolition for us. At about this time, French Street had found someone to do demolition on their playground for free. We talked with them about doing ours while they were at it. We also talked with the contractor putting a new playground in at Garrison School as a public service. We talked with Clark Construction about an apprenticeship program they sponsored that could possibly do part of the playground renovation. We had people from Kaboom, a nonprofit group that helped organize community built playgrounds, out and

talked with them about constructing the playground ourselves. Glenn talked with the director of the Public Welfare Foundation about possibly helping. We waited in vain for positive replies. We never did receive a letter back from DHCD or the Mayor. Mila, however told us that our letter to the Mayor eventually made it to her desk where she was required to write some sort of reply to it. The reply didn't make it to us though. So, the summer passed while we tried to find additional resources.

Over a year had passed since we had received the grant. We were mindful of a 2-year time limit during which we were required to spend the grant or lose it. All of the contractors projected a construction time of about 2 months. So, we still had time, but we needed to bite the bullet and modify the design further. It took the Committee several meetings to deliberate. We finally agreed on the following modifications.

- Oval trench drain is replaced by two square drains
- The oval area will be constructed with colored concrete rather than slate
- No stage or ramp
- No lighting
- No tree relocation in the Westminster Sidewalk
- No new tree in the tot lot
- No grass planting or fertilizer
- No swing set
- No concrete slab
- Loose resilient play surface material will be used rather than poured in place resilient surface. This will be provided by WNA.
- The back half of the playground will require topsoil
- Salvage the "ties" from the existing structures to use as dividers between the play areas and the soil

Even though Dehru and Peter had fulfilled their contractual obligation, we begged them to make one final drawing incorporating our changes. At the same time I set down and wrote an addendum to the specifications and construction drawings, describing, item-by-item, the modifications we made. Dehru agreed to review these revisions to try to head off any problems we might be creating by altering their original design. On December 2, 1999, we sent the new drawing and addendum out to the five contractors and asked them for itemized re-bids. We asked for the contractors to send their revised bids to us by January 5. We also asked that the winning bidder to plan to have the project completed by August 1, 2000, the date our grant was set to expire.

## **April 12, 2000**

The holidays passed and we ended up with two itemized re-bids. This seemed to satisfy DHCD's requirement for three bids since we had the original five. We decided to hire a small local construction company, ITC Corporation for a couple of reasons. Although they weren't the lowest bid, they seemed the most willing to work with us on making the playground design and construction plan work. Their office was close by on 11<sup>th</sup> Street

near U Street, so they were neighbors. They seemed more interested in the project than the other companies that had bid. In fact they followed up several times and even stopped me on the street to talk about it. They had worked on DC government projects in the past, and so knew the paperwork and employment requirements. They were also a minority owned company, which was important to the Playground Committee. However, Dihru felt that ITC didn't have a good understanding of the plans, and this might cause us problems during the construction phase.

Before we could hire ITC, we needed to meet with DHCD a couple of times to go over the plans and legal technicalities of the project. A father-son team, George and Christian Gonzalez, owned ITC. George was the father and did the accounting and paperwork. Christian supervised the actual construction work. Both joined us in one or two of the meetings with DHCD and finally on April 12 we signed an agreement. It should be noted that from this point on we were pretty much on our own when it came to overseeing the construction phase of the project. Our contract with Dihru and Peter had an option that they would oversee the construction for an additional \$6,000 or \$7,000, I don't remember the exact figure. However, the Playground Committee felt that we couldn't afford the additional expense. So, we made the decision to go it alone.

I felt we had passed a milestone when we hired the contractor. We had a phased plan with the first phase financed by the grant. With its completion we would have a new playground, notwithstanding the fact that the new playground would only have a couple pieces of equipment and no furniture or lights. But it would be a nice place for kids to play even if they were only playing in the dirt where the seating area was supposed to be. And, we all on the committee agreed that children would play in an empty lot if that were what they had. So, we gave a collective sigh of relief knowing that construction would start momentarily.

Of course it was a little more complicated than just starting work. Circe and I met with Christian in late April to discuss the construction schedule and make sure all parties had the same understanding of all elements of the project. Christian said that it would take no more than 90 days to complete the project and expected to start in May. However since ITC had to order materials, rent equipment, and schedule workers; the project didn't start in May. Christian attended our May WNA meeting to introduce himself to the neighbors. He circulated a timeline showing demolition starting June 26 with completion date for the renovation of August 25.

Part of their agreement was that they had to secure the needed permits. So, that was the first step in my mind. It, however, seemed like they were delaying getting the permits while they organized the rest of the project. They kept telling us that it would only take a day or two to get permits. They knew what they were doing. They knew who to talk to in the permitting office, and would take care of it. So they waited until the week before they were ready to start demolition of the old playground to go for the permit. When they filed for the permit they discovered that we needed to get the whole project approved by the U.S. Fine Arts Commission. It turns out, unknown to ITC or WNA and apparently

DHCD, that the Fine Arts Commission must bless any project build on government land in the District of Columbia. So this sent us into another flurry of activity. We had to prepare for a presentation to the Commission that met only once a month and had a filing deadline that we had already missed delaying our project another month or so. I had several conversations with the case manager at the Commission about what needed to be in our presentation package. I can't remember too many of the details, but he made it sound like the Commission panel could be quite concerned with minor details like the color of the equipment. So of course we had to provide drawings and specifications. We made it on the agenda for the July 20 Commission hearing. I was going to be out of town the day of the hearing, but Circe and George would attend and present our project. I think it was fortunate that we were on the same agenda as the very controversial World War II Memorial, so our little project didn't get the detailed inspection we were prepared for. It passed the Commission with hardly a comment. And, once again, we were on track to start construction. Of course now we couldn't get the project finished before the grant expired. So, we talked with Mila at DHCD about the expiration of the grant and our problem getting started. She assured us that, as long as the project was underway by the end of August and could be finished by the end of the year, we would be okay. She sent us a letter extending the expiration date until January 1, 2001. George and Christian assured us that they would be finished with the project by the end of the year.

## **November 18, 2000**

The construction fence had been up for several weeks, the permits and Commission of Fine Arts having delayed the start of construction. But, the big day came. Demolition started at the very end of July. Christian foresaw a completion date of November 13. So, I ordered the playground equipment. One was the dinoclimber for the tot lot and the other was the big piece of equipment for the front of the playground. We had decided to install the equipment as a community built project so we could save the \$7,000 it would cost for the playground equipment company to install it. We planned to install the equipment on November 18.

Christian had scheduled one week for the demolition of the existing playground. Demolition consisted of removing all of the old equipment, the front steps, and the cement pad that covered the entire playground. It turned out that one week was sadly inadequate for the task. They soon discovered that the playground had been built to last. The pyramid was nearly solid cement. The steps and concrete pad were thicker than expected, and digging up the old wooden pylons was more difficult than they anticipated. I think the neighborhood residents were excited about finally seeing movement toward the renovation. They hadn't had the advantage of setting in the endless meetings and negotiations that those on the Playground Committee had. So, it must have seemed like nothing was happening for the last year or two. Nothing but talk. However, this excitement eventually turned to fatigue as the project progressed at what now seemed a snail's pace. The demolition phase took all of August. During September and October, the new playground started to emerge from the rubble of the old. Bricklayers appeared on the scene to start building the brick cladding round the inner playground walls, and to build the low brick wall in front. When we revised the plans without the help of the

architects, we neglected to specify a foundation for the brick cladding. The original plans used the cement pad as the foundation. However, since we removed the cement pad from the plans, we needed a foundation. We had set aside \$10,000 for such unexpected contingencies. So this additional work was covered. We kept reminding Christian and George that we had to have the project completed by the end of the year, or we would lose any unspent grant funds. But the project still progressed slowly.

In late October we asked George for a final estimate of any additional work that might be needed that we hadn't included in his contract. The original contract was for \$107,000. After the contract was signed we decided we had enough money to add the cement pads for the seating areas and the electrical work for the lights. This added another \$8,000 to the job. And George gave us an "allowance" for capping and salvaging the drains. I think the specifications called for use of the old drains if possible. I don't remember at this point the details. At any rate this "allowance" would run us about \$5,000. In the end, George said that he would need no more than \$116,000. This left us with about \$20,000 in unallocated funds that we needed to spend before the end of the year. Circe and I started spending money. By mid-December we had ordered:

- Furniture
- Checker Boards
- Tot Lot Tree
- Ground cover under the front tree
- Sod for the back parcel
- Lights
- A swing set

We were looking for ways to spend the money. However, turns out there was one last unexpected expense in the offing. Christian was getting ready to install the plumbing. It seems that when the city inspector came out he told Christian that we had to have the control panel for the water feature at least 170 feet away from the water. This was impossible in our playground that was less than 170 long. The architect had placed the controls in the east wall between the benches. But now they had to be as far away as was practical and the valves had to be in an underground vault. I think, had the architect been overseeing the project, he would have questioned this. But the Playground Committee focused on the extra expense and how to meet that expense. So we worked with Christian and George. The playground plan called for a cast stone cap, similar to the cap on the entrance pillars, to be installed on all the walls. We were able to save enough money for the extra plumbing work by substituting brick for the cast stone. And we removed the planned cap from the outer walls along the alleys. In retrospect, I think the brick looks better than the stone would have. So, all ended for the better in that respect.

In early November we constantly called Christian to urge him to make sure the area where the equipment was going would be ready for our November 18 community build day. This was the first time since the design phase that the community had an opportunity to show their support for the project. They had indeed turned out for the community design meetings, debated the fence issue, and showed remarkable patience

with the project's slow progress. But would they show up to install playground equipment? We didn't know for sure. Had we neglected the community in our focus on the details of the actual construction? In the end, this worry was unfounded. Over 40 volunteers showed up on the 18<sup>th</sup>. We really had more people than we knew how to keep busy. Even the children wanted to help. The playground equipment had arrived a few weeks earlier, delivered by a very large truck. A few neighbors had unloaded the hundreds of pieces and put them in my backyard. The installation instructions arrived a few days after the equipment. Fortunately the directions were very clear for the most part and had been written with community builds in mind. It even gave instructions on sorting the parts and organizing the build. I spent the week before the 18<sup>th</sup> sorting parts into buckets and piles in preparation for the big day. To take no chances, we paid the playground equipment company \$500 for a consultant to come and help with the build day. That was a very well invested \$500 since the consultant saved us many mistakes. Without him, I'm sure we would still be out in the playground trying to put the roofs on the big climber. It turns out they had sent the wrong parts for the roof even though the parts they sent looked like the right ones. Anyway, the day before the 18<sup>th</sup>, we rented a power auger and jackhammer, and six neighborhood men dug the 38 holes (24 inches wide by 38 inches deep) required for the installation. It took us the full day and I think we didn't get them all dug and had to dig a few the next day as well. The main problem was that we kept running into rubble the auger couldn't drill through. Each time we would have to stop, use the jackhammer and dig through by hand. This was a very slow process. But, as I said, the next day people came and worked hard. Polly and Lisa set up a grill and cooked hamburgers and hotdogs in the afternoon. Mila came by. The mood was jubilant in spite of the cold fall day. One team installed the dinoclimber. The other play structure grew under the supervision of the playground equipment company consultant. This community build day was another milestone on the way to our completed playground. I was very pleased the neighborhood still took so much ownership of the project.

A few weeks after November 18, I sent a billing statement to Mila for distribution of funds to ITC and WNA for some of the expenses. I enclosed a note about the outpouring of community support in the form of volunteers to put up the play equipment. This note made its way through the DHCD bureaucracy and caused some alarm to go off in their legal department. One condition of the grant was that the contractor must pay its workers a wage scale set by the government. They couldn't hire minimum wages laborers, and they certainly couldn't use volunteers. However, the installation of the play equipment was outside ITC's contract. ITC had nothing to do with the installation. So, we felt comfortable that we'd done nothing contrary to the grant agreement. In spite of this explanation, DHCD asked me to report the number of volunteer hours contributed. That was easy, we could estimate a figure. But DHCD also wanted to know the names and Social Security numbers of everyone who volunteered that day, and the number of hours each had contributed. Fortunately, we had asked each volunteer to sign in, with their Social Security numbers, at the beginning of the day. So, we had a pretty good idea who worked that day. We only needed to know the number of hours. We sent e-mails out asking for hours, but in the end I simply estimated. DHCD had also asked me to write a

description of the day and the work completed. I sent this all off to them wondering what was next. But time slipped on without another word about it from DHCD.

In December the correct roof pieces arrived and a few of us got together on a Saturday and put the roofs on the play structure. We were pleased with how well the design fit in with the architecture of the neighborhood. We had talked about this with Dihru during the design phase, so it wasn't an accident. We were pretty much ignoring DHCD's concern about volunteer effort.

At about the time we were having the community build project, we learned of a new public art initiative being piloted by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. I don't remember how we learned about this, but it seemed like excellent timing. From the start of the renovation project the Playground Committee had talked about a mural as part of the total playground picture. In the early days of planning before funding had become a serious issue, we said that the wall of the adjoining row house was made for a mural. We even had Dihru include a mural design in his early plans. We also envisioned a plan for tiles to be inset around the brick cladding. This came out of a Playground Committee meeting at which we were thinking of ways to further involve the community in the playground. Our plan was to have families in the neighborhood design ceramic tiles for the alcoves. Dihru felt this was workable, but of course we had no money to finance it. The prospect of the Art Commission providing these elements seemed too good to be true.

I was, however, a little concerned about starting a new phase (the art) as the Playground Committee seemed to be evaporating. Dave Brown married and moved out of the neighborhood and Cerci was planning to relocate to Iowa in January. Polly and Lisa were gearing up for their own huge renovation project and the others on the committee had, by this time faded into the background. But, it was too good an opportunity to let pass. We talked about it in a WNA meeting and Tania Shand stepped forward to help prepare the nomination package to send to the Art Commission. She had done a great deal of research on the neighborhood before buying and restoring her home at 1901 Vermont Avenue. She had a deep interest in the neighborhood and regularly attended WNA meetings for several years before actually buying her home. So, it was wonderful that she was willing help with this part of the project.

In November we thought we could see the end of the construction even though the playground itself was a big muddy space with a trench dug from the street into the center. Christian had assured us, though, that the construction would be completed by the end of December. We even had a bronze plaque made with the December completion date on it, and we started thinking about an opening ceremony. So with Tania's help, we charged ahead with the site nomination for the Art Commission.

In our proposal to the Art Commission we briefly described WNA and the playground project. Tania wrote a few paragraphs recounting the history of Shaw and U Street

invoking the strong tie to music and the arts. We gave the Art Commission a choice of potential opportunities for public art in the playground that included:

- Mural
- Art tiles
- Arch over front entrance
- Sculptures among the trees
- Mosaic on front wall

We included pictures of what looked like a construction site with the outline of a playground showing the newly installed dinoclimber and, still roofless, play structure. By the time we finished writing the proposal, Christian had revised his estimated completion date to March 2001. Nevertheless, this revised completion date still fit the Art Commission's timeline for its public art projects.

In the meantime, construction in the playground had once again slowed as the holidays approached. With the coming of the New Year we became increasingly concerned that ITC wouldn't be able to finish the project. Something happened between Christian and George. I never found out what. But George took on the oversight of the playground project from Christian. Since George hadn't been involved with the day-to-day construction issues, it took him time to figure out what remained to be done and develop an action plan for accomplishing the tasks.

DHCD had finally decided that they needed to have more direct control over the grant funds. I had always been a little surprised that they had given us the whole amount of the grant at once even though it was technically in an escrow account. I guess they were uncomfortable with the escrow account arrangement even though it seemed from my point of view, to be working well. All the money was accounted for and none was disbursed without DHCD approval. I suspect record keeping may have been a problem for DHCD. Mila at one point asked me for copies of all requests for payment we had submitted to date. She had also forewarned me some months earlier that we might have to close the escrow account and return the remaining funds. But she said not to worry, the funds would still be ours and earmarked for the playground project. My only concern was that it was more likely to take longer to get money dispersed. Now the disbursement checks would be made out to WNA and we would deposit them in our checking account and write checks to pay the bills. To complicate matters, 1<sup>st</sup> Union Bank insisted on putting a 3-day hold on the DC checks. I discovered this when I gave George a check one day and then went to the bank to deposit the DHCD check which would cover the check I had given George. At the bank I was told they would put a hold on the funds for three days. I argued for 15 minutes with the bank manager and finally gave up. Back at the office I called George and asked him not to cash the check for three days. He said he wouldn't, but went ahead and cashed it anyway. 1<sup>st</sup> Union covered it but charged us a \$50 "over-draft" fee. I was a little upset with George and disgusted with the bank. It seems like every time I received a bank statement there was a problem I had to deal with. Service charges were the most common. The account manager always waived them when

I complained. “We kept \$178,000 in your bank interest free for over a year and you can’t even give us free checking?” was my basic argument.

It became obvious that George was having a cash flow problem since he was now asking for reimbursement before the actual work had been completed. Although we were sympathetic to his concern that it was taking DHCD too long, sometimes several weeks, to release payment, we couldn’t pay before items were actually complete.

I had talked one day with Christian in the playground. The first of the concrete had been poured and the plumping installed. So most of the major elements were finished. He was saying that this was the part of a project he didn’t like. The finishing up. He, I guessed, was eager to move on to new projects. But in retrospect I suspect he didn’t like the tail end of a project because that was the time he knew he would make or lose money on the project. I’m sure for the playground it was becoming clear that he was losing money. I said I would look forward to the end of a project because I could see the completed building or whatever and feel pride in it.

In March I drew up a two-column “punch list” of everything that was left to do to complete the playground project. One column was items for which ITC was responsible. The second column was items for which WNA was responsible. I asked Lynn Johnson to go over the list with me to make sure it was complete. We were really, I felt, within sight of a completed project. After Lynn and I went over the list and I made a few adjustments, I met with Christian and George and we walked the playground with list in hand. Christian agreed that all of the items on the list in ITC’s column were ITC’s responsibility and would get done. After this we started seeing less of Christian and more of George. Christian was moving on to other projects.

About the last thing we ordered for the playground was the swing set. It arrived in the early part of the year and Lynn and I pulled together four or five neighborhood men to install it on a Saturday. We were very experienced in digging holes after all we dug in November for the play equipment. And the swings only needed four holes. So, we rented the power auger and went to work only to discover that the demolition crew had buried some of the 12” X 12” timbers rather than hauling them away. That was a big barrier to hole digging. We had to excavate pieces of timbers that were three or four feet long before we could dig the holes for the swing. It took us a full day of hard work to install the swing set. We left the swings off for fear children would sneak into the construction site to swing and hurt themselves on the hard dirt under the swing set. I still wonder how many more pieces of timbers are buried out there and what will happen when they rot out.

As spring approached we wanted to get the Woodcarpet, (Woodcarpet is the brand name for an engineered wood mulch used in playgrounds to cushion falls.) installed so we could open the playground for use, even if it wasn’t quite finished. We would have to organize another “community” day to spread the Woodcarpet, and we had to be sure the playground was leveled and packed, and ready for it. The bare earth during February and

March seemed so muddy with standing water forming puddles here and there. It seemed to ask for something to go between the Woodcarpet and the dirt. There was a porous “filter fabric,” that would be spread over the soil, but that didn’t seem to be enough protection for the Woodcarpet. The water needed to run toward the drains that would be covered with the filter fabric and Woodcarpet. Lynn and I talked about spreading a three or four inch layer of gravel over the soil, then put the filter fabric down, and finally the Woodcarpet. We felt this might provide more protection for the Woodcarpet and aid the drainage. We priced the gravel and Lynn sought funding. He appealed to the Public Welfare Foundation, who turned us down once again. And he wrote a grant request for \$1,000 to Freddie Mac. He spent a lot of time and effort writing the grand request and following up by phone. In the end Freddie Mac gave us the money, but too much effort was expended in producing the grant request.

In the meantime, we talked with Christian about the gravel idea. He was against it, saying it was unnecessary and that to accommodate the height of the added gravel he would have to re-grade the playground so the surfaces would be level with the center oval. In addition, the drains were at the proper height and the removal of more soil would cause the water to stand around the drains. So we abandoned the gravel idea. But we still got the \$1,000 and would need it before all was said and done.

We had ordered and cancelled the Woodcarpt delivery once or twice because the playground wasn’t ready. But finally Christian said it was packed and we could proceed. So I set a date for delivery.

Little work was being accomplished in the playground. Lynn and I were starting to think that ITC was ready to walk away from the project. We still had almost \$29,000 in the bank that would be paid to ITC when the project was completed. However about half of that money was earmarked for the fence which would be the last element installed. There was still much to be done by ITC. Most noticeably, the concrete center of the oval needed to be poured and the water feature and lights installed. ITC subcontracted both the plumbing and the electrical work.

Lynn started to become more involved in the oversight of the construction as it became clear that George wasn’t up to the task, or had other jobs on his plate that were more important to him. I’m convinced that had Lynn not stepped in at this point to work with the subcontractors and keep George focused on our project, the playground renovation would never have been completed. Lynn actually took on many of the oversight, planning, and other tasks that George should have done.

There were a number of problems discovered along the way. Here are a couple:

**Water Feature Wiring.** After the outer ring of the concrete oval had been poured, we had the electrician in to wire the water feature bollard control and lights. He discovered that a wire was supposed to have been run from the water feature bollard over to the corner vault where the water valves were located. Somehow George had missed this requirement. With the cement in place, he couldn’t just dig a trench and

lay the wire. He had to burrow under the concrete ring of the oval in two places. Due to rubble under the concrete they had a very hard time of it, and even ended up cutting a hole in the concrete at one point to advance the wire. This project took days.

**Light Pole Installation.** We discovered that Christian had set the bolts for the light poles too close together. (Each pole took four bolts set in the concrete oval to hold it up.) The poles had been in my backyard for some time. We had found a company in Tennessee that made poles but were discontinuing their line of aluminum poles in favor of clad poles. Clad poles are made with a steel pipe covered by a foam material inside a formed plastic casing. From a distance the clad poles look “real” but we didn’t think they would be as durable. Anyway, the company was selling their existing stock of aluminum poles cheap. The design we found was a reproduction of the original light pole designed for Washington DC in 1911. We thought they would be perfect for the playground even though the poles were only seven feet tall rather than the ten foot tall poles planned by the playground designers. I really think the shorter poles turned out to be more in scale with the small playground. So, I’m please that we stumbled onto them. The company had six of them left. We ordered four. (It’s interesting to me that a year and a half after we got the poles, and some time after they were installed, we discovered a crack in one of them. We got estimates of about \$600 to repair the crack by welding. So we thought it might be cheaper to buy a new one. I called the company and was told that they would have trashed any left over aluminum poles. However upon further investigation they discovered the two remaining poles still in their warehouse. They offered to sell them to us at the same price we paid for the original four. That was too much now that we had no money. We offered a third of their asking price since they were just going to “trash” them. They declined our offer. I ask them if they decide to toss them out, to give me a call. (The contractor who built the wall for the mural eventually repaired the crack for no charge.) But, back to Christian and the bolts. I told Christian several times to measure the poles before they poured the cement. Instead, he relied on a template he said the light pole manufacturer sent him. So the bolts turned out to be set too close together. This took ITC additional time to fix when it was time to install the light poles.

**Colored Cement** One day George, who was getting ready to order colored cement for the oval, called to say that the blue color in the specifications didn’t exist. What color did we want? He had some sort of deadline for ordering and so offered to come down to my office with a paint chart. When he arrived at the office with the paint chart, sure enough, there were no blue colors at all. Since the original playground plan had specified slate pavers in the center oval, I decided to get slate colored cement. I never was very satisfied with the slate color after seeing it in the playground. It looks too much like asphalt. Oh well, another mistake by an amateur construction consultant.

**Trash** ITC had got into the habit of parking their truck behind the construction fence in front of the playground on Westminster Street. They had no place to park it at their office on 11<sup>th</sup> Street since they weren’t able to negotiate a deal with Lee’s Flowers to park in their lot overnight. They would bring rubble from their other jobs and put it in

a pile to be hauled away in due course. We complained to George about the truck and trash and he seemed surprised that his men were assembling the trash there. So that stopped.

## **April 28, 2001**

A few weeks before the Woodcarpet was to be delivered I called ITC to tell George. The receptionist told me he had suffered a heart attack and was in the hospital. She also said that Christian no longer worked for ITC. I was a bit alarmed. I called each day and was told each time that George was out of the hospital and okay. Finally after a week I started only getting an answering machine. I had mentioned to Mila that I couldn't reach George. I finally had to call our DHCD legal consultant and ask for advice. He instructed me to write him a letter explaining the situation. I wrote the letter. In the meantime, the Woodcarpet was scheduled for delivery. I was still calling ITC, and Christian's cell phone each day. I had no home phone numbers. Another mistake. The ITC truck was parked in the street in front of the playground (and behind the construction fence) where the Woodcarpet needed to be dumped. Fortunately the truck was unlocked. So we were able to push it out of the Woodcarpet area. It was now vulnerable to ticketing since it was outside of the construction fence. But we needed to put the Woodcarpet in so the playground could be opened for use while we sorted out the future of the project.

On April 27 a truck delivered two huge mounds of wood chips. The next day, the community turned out to help spread the chips. It was a big job and took a whole day. We had given up on the idea of a layer of gravel, but we still had to cover the playground with a "filter fabric." George had told me he had purchased the fabric, so Lynn went to the ITC office a week or so before the 28<sup>th</sup> to look for it. The receptionist let him look through their storage shed, but he didn't find it, so we had to buy our own. Once that was laid down, it was a matter of using wheelbarrows, shovels, and rakes to spread the chips evenly to a depth of 12 inches. We spread the woodchips on the same day as the annual neighborhood spring clean up. Since we had more volunteers than could efficiently work in the playground, the rest of us spent the day with clean-up activities. Once the Woodcarpet was in place we felt we could open the playground to use. The only large elements remaining for ITC to do were:

Center concrete oval and water feature

Fence

Light fixtures

In the meantime in late February, the Art Commission had advised us that they had selected the playground for two public arts projects. They would fund a mural for \$25,000 and ceramic/mosaic work in the wall alcoves for \$5,000. They had sent a call for artists on April 27 and asked that we organize a community workshop with the semifinalists during the week of May 26.

## **June 5, 2001**

George finally dropped into sight on April 30, nearly two months after his disappearance. He had gone to Spain. He never explained why he had left without letting us know. We

had \$28,600 left unpaid on ITC's contract and would have used that money to hire someone else to finish the project if need be. However, that may have been a whole new interaction with DHCD regulations that I'm glad we didn't have to explore. George was, however, back on the job and willing to work toward finishing the playground project. George's disappearance had shaken our faith in him. Lynn's involvement, from this point forward, was crucial in getting the project completed. In addition to calling George several times a week to keep him moving on the project, Lynn did much of the work in finding and working with the subcontractors to get them to complete their parts of the project. For this part of his involvement, Lynn was actually doing George's work for him.

Since we had the chips spread, we were able to open the playground for use. We opened it "unofficially" in May. The play equipment was usable. The lawn was planted, as well as the cherry tree and plants around the tree in front. We had also at some point installed the furniture. I don't remember the time frame, but it was in before the playground opened in May. The installation of the furniture was another community project. I had ordered it from a company in Pennsylvania. We made arrangements for it to be delivered during the week before we planned to install it. Installation consisted of drilling holes in the concert pad and bolting the furniture down. We rented a drill for the job and four or five of us got together on a Saturday to complete the project. The furniture was very heavy, so we paid for a delivery truck with a lift gate. However the truck that actually arrived had no such gate. So it took several neighbors to unload and place the furniture. It was a lot of lifting. The day of the installation was fairly warm. We soon discovered that it was easy to tighten the bolts too tight resulting in twisting off the bolt head. To save time and energy, we placed only two bolts in each piece. That cut our work in half. But it still took us a full day to get everything bolted down.

Here's an interesting side concerning the furniture. We wanted chessboards for the two tables for the front of the playground. We found a really nice marble design sold by a company in Portland, Oregon. So we ordered two of them and sent off a check for them. The furniture company in Pennsylvania said they would bolt them to the tables for us if we sent the chessboards to them. So I gave the Pennsylvania company's address as the delivery address when I placed the order. A few weeks later I received a letter from the Oregon company saying they refused to sell us the chessboards since we were going to install them in a competitor's product. I had several conversations over the phone with people in the company but was unable to convince them to sell me the chessboards. So, now we had to find an alternate source. It turned out to be rather hard to find companies that made outdoor chessboards. In the end, the company that sold us the Woodcarpet found the chessboards we ended up with. I sure wish we had been able to get the nice marble ones from Oregon though.

But, we were happy that the playground was opened and the community was now able to actually use it even though there was still work to be done. We, at that point, had no estimated time for the completion of the final pieces.

However, the Art Commission project was forging ahead. We had to plan a community meeting for June 5. That involved, among other things, finding a place to hold the meeting. Our first choice was the newly opened Maya Angelou Public Charter School (the old Odd Fellows Hall) at the corner of T and Ninth Streets. Unlike my experience with getting the Church for our playground design meeting, the Maya Angelou School was eager to accommodate us. They even moved a class out of their auditorium the evening of our meeting. So, that was a big help. We tried to make sure everyone in the neighborhood knew about the meeting. We put flyers out to each house and also published the meeting agenda in our monthly newsletter in May, and sent e-mails to our list. This was an important meeting since all of the finalists the Art Commission had selected to compete for the mural and the art tiles would be there. They would hear what the community wanted the art to represent or “do” for the community. And from this input they would create model designs for an Art Commission panel to review in selecting the final artists for the projects. The meeting was planned to start at 6 PM and last for about 3 hours. We planned several exercises designed to get input from everyone in attendance plus some group discussions and “multi-voting” to narrow the themes down. Sherry Schwechten from the Art Commission was the moderator for the evening. The Arts Commission was impressed with the level of interest shown by the WNA residents. Sherry kept the meeting moving along and we got ideas from everyone and had some lively discussion. At the end of the meeting we multi-voted on what we felt to be the “essential ingredients” for our playground. The top ingredients were:

Historical  
Lots of use/Children  
Inspiring  
Urban  
Safety  
Quiet/Peaceful

There were many historical themes advanced by the attendees as well as lists of artwork uses and feelings. One list produced at the meeting said the artwork should be:

- Relevant to the neighborhood
- Light, fun
- Joyful
- Happy
- Exciting
- Illusionist
- Accessible to various age groups
- Viewable from the playground (viewer will be close to work)
- Colorful
- Tactile (niches)
- Playful
- An oasis in the neighborhood
- Uplifting

A shorter list said the art shouldn't include huge faces, graffiti, or somberness.

By the end of the evening, all of the artists had a good idea how the neighbors felt about the playground and neighborhood. It would be their challenge to interpret what they heard and express it through their art. They had already been visiting the playground to get information to help with their proposals that were due at the end of July.

Meanwhile back in the playground, the children were having a good time with the new equipment. George had assured us that he was ready to pour the cement for the center oval during the second week of June. However, we weren't confident in his ability to follow-through, so we decided, for both safety and esthetics, to cover the center area with plywood. Lynn and I and a couple other neighbors spent one Saturday cutting plywood and fitting it into the oval. We also put buckets over the bolts that were sticking up for the light poles. I painted the plywood cover with gray paint so that it looked a little more finished.

As July approached, the fence issue raised its head again. ITC and, in fact all of the contractors, had underbid the price of the fence. Lynn had been working with George to find a contractor who would build the fence specified in the playground design for the money that was remaining in the budget. They had considered a lot of alternatives, including using donated aluminum fence from the old Children's Hospital site. We talked about the fence problem at a regular WNA meeting. The residents felt very strongly that a fence was needed. They also felt we should stick to the five-foot height originally agreed to. That meant the donated fence material would have to be cut down from its six-foot height if it were to be used. After discussion with various fence companies Lynn found that the cost of altering the used fence would be prohibitive. Finally a company called, Washington Ornamental Iron that had done work for Tania, agreed to build our fence. ITC would lose its \$4,000 profit and the playground wouldn't have the low fence originally planned for the tot lot area. We would also use the \$1,000 received from Freddie Mac to subsidize the fence. The fence would not, however, be finished until the end of September. But, by this time we were used to delays.

## **August 21, 2001**

The Art Commission scheduled an eight hour-long meeting on August 21 to select the artists for our project. Along with Art Commission people, Tania Shand, Lynn Johnson, Steve Estes, and I set on the selection panel. I found the experience to be fun and interesting. Each artist had half an hour to present his or her work. This included time for the panel members to ask questions. Four artists presented for the mural. They were:

Rik Freeman  
Tom Greaves  
Anne Marchand  
Karla Rodas

Three mosaic artists present for the niches:

Jerome Meadows

Deirdre Saunder

Cheryl Foster

At the end of each set of presentations, we spent an hour discussing the designs and voting on the finalists. In the end we agreed on Anne Marchand's work that captured many of the ideas we had expressed in our community meeting. Her work is titled, "Community" and depicts rows of brightly colored townhouses set in the greater cityscape of Washington, DC. A colorful silhouette of figures across the foreground of the mural represents the diversity of the neighborhood. Anne uses many other historic references of the Shaw neighborhood in her work.

We also selected Jerome Meadows' mosaic installation title, "Play Together and Live as One." He was to make his work by incorporating handmade tiles, small toys, found objects, and metal plates etched with photos of children at play.

Installation was to take place in the spring. Little did we suspect that it would be a year before this part of the Westminster Playground renovation would be completed.

## **September 24, 2001**

The summer progressed with work getting done in the playground only due to Lynn's constant prodding and oversight of ITC. The plumbing was completed, as was the electrical work with Lynn working closely with both the plumber and electrician. The last big item for ITC to do was the pouring of the concrete for the center oval. This was accomplished on September 24. The weather was a factor in a couple of prior delays, but the big day finally arrived. Lynn worked the entire day with George and his crew to pour the concrete (which had to be carried in from the street since the concrete truck couldn't back into the playground) and smooth it out. Bill Lewis and Jessie Foster also helped with this part of the project. Although George wasn't happy with the final product, I was ecstatic that the playground project was finally almost at an end. George would come back later and put a coat of material over the concrete that would give it a smoother appearance.

While this was going on, Denise Johnson secured a \$1,000 grant from the Urban Forest Council of DC to finance landscaping under the big trees on the back and east side of the playground. Denise planned, mapped out, and coordinated the preparation of the soil, planting of 70 Azaleas, laying of soaker hoses and finishing with wood chips. The neighbors came together to provide the needed labor for this project. This landscaping truly made the playground look finished.

So, now we had only to hook up the water feature. We had to have the electrician back to help us. Between he and Lynn they got it working. I remember the first time they turned it on. It was amazing to see the stream of water shoot up into the air. Of course that, it itself was a problem. Dehru had specified in the plans that the water spray in a circle

around each spray head. Having a stream shooting straight up in the air for ten feet, although exciting, was of little use to children who wanted to play in the sprinkler. So Lynn called the spray equipment company and arranged for a new set of spray heads to be delivered. This, of course took time. When they finally arrived, the water shot out toward the center of the oval. Still not a spray, but at least accessible to the children. Of course, the summer was gone, so we closed up the water feature without figuring out how to set the timer and touch trigger the way we wanted it.

## **October 27, 2001**

The fence was finished, the concrete was in, the lights worked, the playground was seeing a lot of children. George had worked with us to the very end and took some pride in the finished playground. We were delighted that several day care centers had discovered the playground and were starting to bring their children by during the day. So, it was time to plan an opening ceremony. The fall weather was quite pleasant, so we decided on October 27 as the date for our opening. We invited the mayor, the head of DHCD, our councilman, and our ANC commissioner. The mayor declined our invitation but said he would send someone in his place. The head of DHCD said he would come. The neighbors pitched in to organize food, street closing, and some entertainment. We sent out invitations and papered the neighborhood with flyers. The 27<sup>th</sup> greeted us with a cold wind. In fact, it was the only cold day in the whole month. But we still had 40 or more people show up. It marked the finish of the project that had started back in 1996 with a few dreams. We were very proud to have seen it through. And the people who faced the cold that afternoon, I don't think minded the cold. We had accomplished something through great odds. The mayor's representative and the head of DHCD didn't show up as promised. But we had come to expect that from the City. Why should they take pride in our accomplishment anyway. Our councilman and ANC commissioner, who were more connected to us, were there. It was a short ceremony, we made a few speeches, the children sang, we cut the ribbon across the front entrance, we ate and visited. The playground was officially open for business!

## **September 7, 2002**

The story of the art projects should really be told by Anne Marchand or Lynn. My involvement was only to give encouragement. As it turned out, after Anne was selected for the mural, she took a closer look at the wall where the mural was to be painted. She and Lynn had a couple of "experts" out to look at the wall too and they all decided that it would be wise to repair the wall with a new layer of plaster. However, there wasn't any money in the budget for repair to the wall. When we wrote the proposal to the Commission we thought the wall was in good enough shape to take a mural. Lynn and Anne asked several companies and individuals for ideas on how to repair the wall. The Art Commission said they really couldn't finance repair of the wall itself. However, they could pay for a "new wall." So, it was decided to construct a new wall over the old. This would give Anne a smooth, durable surface to work on and would insure that the mural would last for at least 30 years, the durability benchmark set by the Art Commission. Lynn and Anne spent the winter and spring working to get the wall project going. There were endless permit and approval issues that had to be addressed as well as scheduling

concerns for the construction company. The wall itself wasn't finished until well into the summer. This left Anne with the hottest days of the year to do the actual painting. But she and her team of artists forged ahead and finished the mural in a little over a month.

Jerome, on the other hand, completed his tiles in comfort of his studio. He had visited me a couple of times to paw through an accumulation of "found objects" stored in my attic. We had asked that he use photos of neighborhood children in his tiles. He was a little uncomfortable with the idea fearing that it might cause hard feelings by those not selected. However, we asked for neighbors to loan us photos of children in the neighborhood. It turned out that people didn't have old photos. It was explained to me by one resident that back in the "old days" no one could afford pictures. It was not in their tradition. We did find a picture or two from the 60's and maybe one or two earlier than that. Jerome took all of the pictures loaned us, 30 or 40 in all, and selected three for use in the playground. The other tiles would have historic pictures of children that he had found from other sources. When the mural was finished, Jerome, came and installed his nine tiles.

So, here it was September 7, 2002. The sun shown on our new playground. The mural and tiles were beautiful. Lynn had learned how to set the water feature, although the water bill was a concern to DHCD (but that's another story). We were happy and very proud of our new playground. I think the project brought the neighborhood closer together. It's now up to us to see that we continue to take ownership of the playground. In twenty years, it's my hope, people will still set in the playground and watch their children play and admire the art. They will if we can continue to take responsibility, continue to listen to each other, continue to dream, and continue to take pride in our neighborhood.