

before you go...

Worldwide Play

BY EMILY TIPPING

Have you ever seen a kid's eyes light up as they contemplate a new-to-them playground? Can you imagine what it would be like to watch children at play for the first time ever?

Kids Around the World, a nonprofit organization based in Rockford, Ill., has gotten the chance to bear witness to that event after building more than 130 playgrounds in 35 countries around the globe. This faith-based organization is doing ministry in places where few children get the chance to be carefree. They bring food to the hungry. And they bring play to those children.

"We build playgrounds all over the world," said Tim Clauson of Kids Around the World, "usually at places that if we weren't there, they wouldn't get a playground."

Volunteers come from all over the world, donating their own time and resources—and ultimately their hands-on hard work—to build these playgrounds. They've been to places as diverse as Mexico, Zambia and Vietnam.

So how does it work?

"Usually people contact us," Clauson said. "They see our Web site and if they Google-search 'playground,' we'll pop up."

He added that a lot of their projects get started by word-of-mouth. For example, this past summer, Kids Around the World built a playground in Haiti. When someone at another orphanage in Haiti saw the project, he decided to enlist the organization as well, Clauson explained. "So we're going back to do another one in Haiti this April."

Many of the playgrounds are built, like these in Haiti, at orphanages. Others are built at feeding centers or at schools.

And while the organization has done so much good work internationally, the volunteers and staff of Kids Around the World are not strangers to projects on American shores. They do a lot of their work for children who live in areas negatively impacted by the economy, warfare, natural disasters and severe illness.

"We did 26 playgrounds down in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina," Clauson said. "Usually there's a lot of poverty where we go, and we find a lot of orphans."

For example, one of Clauson's favorite projects was built at an AIDS orphanage in Zambia in Southern Africa.

"The orphanage brings them in and gets them the medicine they need to live a normal life," Clauson said. "When we were building the playground, the kids watched and they didn't even know what it was."

Kids Around the World gets four or five requests each week



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIDS AROUND THE WORLD

from people looking to bring play to children in need. When the money can be raised, the organization shows up with volunteers and brand-new playgrounds. But in the past year, they've come up with a lower-cost alternative: recycling.

"Just this past year with the downturn in the economy, it was hard for some organizations to raise money, so we've come up with a plan for recycling used playgrounds from the United States," Clauson said.

The biggest project of this kind so far took place in October 2009 in Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked former Soviet republic in Central Asia, bordered by China to the east. The playground traveled nearly 6,500 miles from its original location in Washington Park in Downers Grove, Ill.

"It was our first major recycled playground," Clauson said. "To see the finished project meant a lot."

The demand for recycled playgrounds has been on the upswing, and Kids Around the World can use all the help it can get to find playgrounds that it can refurbish.

"We look for a playground that has plenty of life available to it," Clauson said. "We won't put anything in that's not safe. If we have to, we get new parts and fittings."

Whether new or recycled, there's no denying that Kids Around the World has brought play to many children who would never have had the opportunity to experience a playground. In the coming year, Clauson said, they'll be heading to Bangladesh, Jamaica, Ecuador, Albania and Iraq, among other locations.

If you're aware of a playground in your community that is being replaced, removed or demolished, or if you'd like to get involved in any other way, contact Tim Clauson or Mike Young at Kids Around the World. Learn more at www.kidsaroundtheworld.org.

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