

# Best News Feature Story

## Third place, Alabama Press Association (2007)

### Daphne woman seeks playground for disabled children

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Frances Harrell is on a mission.

For Harrell, that means finding a playground for wheelchair-users like Stephen Scott, her 8-year-old grandson who is diagnosed with cerebral palsy and uses either a walker or wheelchair for mobility. But when Stephen visits his grandmother in Daphne, a trip to Centennial Park is usually out of the question, Harrell said.

"We used to go real early in the morning before anyone was there, but I haven't taken him to the park in two years," she said. "I haven't, 'cause there's nothing to do for him."

Harrell said when Stephen was younger, she would lift him onto the jungle gym for his favorite activities. But these days, she only takes Stephen to the park if his sister, Johannah, 11, or his cousin, Devin House, 13, can assist him with the playground equipment, grabbing his legs while he crosses the monkey bars, or monitoring his movements during other activities.

Harrell said after Stephen

grew too heavy for her to carry, fewer visits to Centennial Park made her realize that children with disabilities were undeserved in their playtime options. Her stance solidified after witnessing a field trip Stephen attended with his classmates at Spanish Fort Elementary School.

"We went to the hospital — they had a field trip there — then we stopped at Centennial Park and ate lunch, and I dreaded it, 'cause I knew he can't get on anything," she said, referring to the playground equipment. "We've got a young boy in a wheelchair, another who is autistic and we sit. They sit at the picnic table and that's it."

"These children already know they have a handicap, we don't got to throw it in their face that you've just got to be here in the corner," she added.

To ensure wheelchair-users can fully participate in playtime, Harrell took her concerns to Mayor Fred Small and Ken Eslava, Public Works director and parks coordinator. Last month, with Stephen by her side, Harrell spoke to the Daphne Recreation Board on the needs of children who



Thomas Boni/staff photo

Stephen Scott, 8, crosses the monkey bars with help from his cousin, Devin House, 13, at a recent family outing at Centennial Park. Stephen's grandmother, Frances Harrell, hopes that Daphne will provide additional playground equipment for wheelchair-users.

rely on artificial means for mobility, and have fewer recreation opportunities.

Harrell said, "I told them, 'If you play golf and you ain't

got no clubs, how many times are you gonna go to the golf course and just sit there and

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# PLAYGROUND

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watch? Not many, right?"

Public playgrounds, by law, must meet regulations described in the Americans with Disabilities Act, according to federal officials.

"The current ... regulations obligate state and local governments to provide program access at all programs, services, and activities, which would include playgrounds," Eric Holland, of the U.S. Justice Department said.

He added, "There must be an accessible route to and through the play space, including an accessible route to at least one of each type of playground equipment."

Holland said the federal Access Board has issued specific guidelines on what playground components should be accessible but such guidelines currently are unenforceable by the Department of Justice.

According to the department's Web site, proposed guidelines suggest that half the number of elevated play components are accessible by ramp or a "transfer station," which is a platform that accommodates wheelchair users on multilevel playground equipment. For instance, if a playground has 10 play components, such as a slide or monkey bars, at least five options must be ADA-accessible, according to the

site. Eslava said Thursday that all Daphne parks meet the current, enforceable ADA regulations.

"We're very much ADA compliant but I'm not saying we couldn't improve as years come on," he said in a phone interview. "Centennial Park has some aging equipment, which we should be looking at very closely here in the next budget, to make sure they're ADA compliant," he added.

Eslava and Daphne City Chairman August Palumbo, Recreation Board, said they're researching ways to provide more ADA equipment at city facilities. Palumbo said the board currently is fielding citizens' suggestions, including additional ADA equipment, for a 117-acre recreation facility that will stand behind the Daphne Wal-Mart.

"We're in an information gathering phase right now and we're really open to listening to anything," he said. "We're putting all the information into the top of the funnel and hopefully, what comes out will be in the best interests of all the people."

Danny Nicholas, consultant for a Mobile playground store, attended the board's May meeting and presented a catalogue with ADA compliant equipment. On Friday, Nicholas said the city had

the largest amount of kids can use it," he said.

Palumbo added, "The (Recreation) Board will have to decide, and ultimately the council, what do we wanna put in there and how do we wanna finance it."

Harrell, who plans to speak at the Recreation Board's July 12 meeting, which will be held at 6 p.m. in City Hall, said she hopes to strengthen her case for wheelchair-users by finding more children who could benefit from additional ADA equipment.

"That would be the ticket, if we could find some other mothers to go to that meeting," she said. "There can't be just my grandson who plays in the parks in Daphne."

Regardless of whether she

meets other Daphne residents with similar needs Harrell said her mission is clear:

"We just want a place where all children can play," she said.

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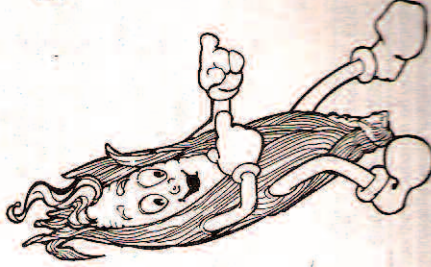
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numerous options to expand its activities for wheelchair users.

"What you're gonna see out there is a lot of panels," Nicholas said, adding that ground-level hand games such as tic tac toe provide children with disabilities the chance to participate in low-risk activities. A highback swing set that harnesses children in their wheelchairs is another inclusive piece of equipment, he said.

But play options mean nothing if narrow walkways with rough surfacing preclude children's access, Nicholas said. "The biggest challenge normally is getting to the equipment itself," he said. Rubber surface walkways probably are "the best for wheelchair users, but also the most expensive," as surfacing can cost as much as the playground equipment, he said.

Depending on size, ADA-accessible play areas can cost between \$10,000 and \$25,000, Nicholas said. Wheelchair-accessible playgrounds, which exceed ADA requirements and provide all-inclusive equipment, cost around \$50,000, he said.

Palumbo said he realizes additional ADA equipment won't be cheap.

"This equipment is expensive so we wanna make sure we get the biggest bang for our buck, in other words, that