



Melissa Grassmick

As the mother of two children with disabilities—Julia, 10, a manual wheelchair user, and Tanner, 5, who has autism spectrum disorder—Melissa Grassmick understands firsthand the challenges and rewards of navigating life with a child with a disability. While spearheading the development of Julia’s Junction Play Space, Melissa combined her expertise in project management with her passion for health and wellness to raise the funds needed. Melissa played an active role in the design of the space and advocated for equipment that offered fun and challenging play to children with disabilities while at the same time was fun and exciting for typically developing children. Following the successful opening of Julia’s Junction, Melissa’s commitment to helping other communities create accessible play spaces grew stronger. As an inclusive play consultant, she partners with communities across North America, offering her expertise and guidance on creating play environments that embrace the unique diversity of each community and its members. Melissa supports projects from inception to opening, assisting with all of the details in between, including fundraising, building partnerships, raising awareness, hosting events, thoughtful, inclusive design, coordination with all parties involved, and execution of construction and installation, ensuring no detail is forgotten.

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Inclusive Play Case Study: Julia's Junction-Not just the "Accessible" Park, but the "AWESOME" Park

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Abstract

Julia's Junction in West Kelowna, BC, is more than just an accessible playground—it is a truly inclusive and engaging space designed for children of all abilities. Inspired by the author's experience as a parent to a child who uses a wheelchair and another with autism, the project transformed from an idea into a \$900,000 community-driven initiative. Through strategic partnerships, advocacy, and thoughtful design, the playground prioritizes safety, sensory-friendly features, and universal accessibility, ensuring that all children can play together. Now a thriving community hub, Julia's Junction serves as a model for inclusive play, demonstrating how dedication and collaboration can create spaces that welcome everyone.

Keywords:

Inclusive Playground, Julia's Junction, West Kelowna, BC

Introduction

Playgrounds should be places where all children can play, explore, and connect, yet too often, they are not designed with inclusivity in mind. As a parent of two children with vastly different abilities—one who uses a wheelchair and another with autism—I experienced firsthand the challenges of finding a genuinely accessible and engaging play space. Determined to change this, I embarked on a journey to create Julia's Junction, a fully inclusive playground in West Kelowna, BC. What began as a simple idea grew into a \$900,000 community-driven project, proving that with passion, collaboration, and advocacy, we can build play spaces that welcome everyone.

The Creation of Julia's Junction

In late 2021, I was at a local neighbourhood playground with my



MELISSA, JULIA AND MELISSA'S HUSBAND.

husband and our son Tanner while our daughter was at school.

Julia, our eldest child, is 10 years old and uses a manual wheelchair to get around due to a spinal cord injury as a toddler. Julia is unable to move her body from the waist down.

That day at the playground, Tanner was 2 years old. While at the time we were unaware, we later found out that Tanner has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as speech delay, global development delay (GDD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Tanner prefers repetitive movements, predictable

spaces, and independent play. Tanner loves playgrounds. While he tends to play independently, beside other children, rather than engaging in social play activities, Tanner likes to be a part of the action on his own terms. He likes a variety of equipment, and he runs between play pieces quickly but wants to know what is coming next.

This particular playground featured a “circuit” where the angled rope ladder cut through a pathway to the stairs from the bottom of the slide - a circuit that Tanner was enjoying or trying to enjoy. Every time he slid down and made the turn to run to the stairs to head back up to the top of the slide, he tripped and fell face-first over the rope ladder.

As my husband and I were discussing how this particular “circuit” design was not ideal, a City Parks staff member overheard us and joined our conversation. We then were able to connect with a supervisor and delve into the issue of playground accessibility and inclusive design, or in our community’s case, the lack thereof. I started thinking about how Julia would immensely enjoy the opportunity to play at a playground. Julia loves swings and slides and imaginative role-play games with friends. Wide open spaces where she could play tag and hide and seek were something we knew our community needed. What a fantastic possibility not only for her but for so many children and caregivers.

At that moment, I had made up my mind that I was going to create an inclusive playspace in our community so that the almost 45,000 residents of West Kelowna and an even more significant number of annual visitors could enjoy a safe, accessible, and fun park.

My professional background is in hospitality, specifically and most

recently in Hotel Catering and Conference Services. Prior to Julia's spinal cord injury in 2015, as a Senior Conference Services Manager, I was dedicated, organized, and passionate about excellent customer service. I realized very quickly that these skills would be a benefit to my initiative to create our inclusive play space, and I am grateful to have had those experiences.

The first order of business was to research and connect with individuals and organizations that have successfully created inclusive playgrounds of their own. Upon discussing my impending project, later named Julia's Junction, with another parent of a child with a disability who had also built a playground, I was connected with PlayWorld and our local representatives. Their guidance, support, and expertise proved invaluable as I went through the process. One particular person who was by my side in support from start to finish was Lorraine Friesen of PlayWorld. Lorraine was instrumental in the way she connected me to key individuals, attended and supported all of our events, and was always available when I needed her.

With blessings from the city, I approached a local charitable foundation that focuses on children and youth to partner with me on the project, specifically the fundraising campaign. April Martin of PURKIDS Foundation was someone that I knew from previous interactions, and together, we had a common goal of creating a space for ALL kids to play in.

We set out to raise \$900,000 as quickly as possible to make Julia's Junction a reality. Going through the process of gaining official City Council approval before we started fundraising was imperative. Once we had secured that approval and encouragement, we hit the ground running (or wheeling, depending on who was helping!).

Over the next 16 months, we had successfully raised, through community education, advocacy, collaboration, and connection, the funds we needed to begin construction. During this time, I hosted many events and opportunities for the community to engage with us and learn about Julia's Junction. These events were a fantastic way for us to build on the excitement that our community was about to (finally) have a fantastic place for EVERYONE to play.

The act of fundraising is not for the faint of heart; I knew this from the annual fundraiser our family hosts to raise money for Julia's spinal cord rehabilitation. Our Julia's Junction campaign, however, was on a much larger scale. Through our partnership with PURKIDS, whose values were so closely aligned with our project, we were able to apply for a diverse array of funding opportunities. Our fundraising strategies included a variety of charitable foundation grants (accounting for approximately 17% of total funds raised), government contributions - municipal and federal (36%), corporate and individual cash donations (37%), and fundraising/community events such as bottle drives (10%).

Throughout the fundraising campaign, a great deal of time was spent on the playground design. A key element in our design process was collaborating with Teri Cantin, Landscape Architect. Teri was kind enough to provide an in-kind donation towards Julia's Junction by offering her services, which turned out to be a crucial step in the overall design and final construction. I also worked alongside the inclusive play space designer from our supplier, PlayEnvy, to create the ideal design for Julia's Junction.



JULIA'S JUNCTION. PHOTO BY PLAYWORLD.

Details such as overall square footage, selection and layout of equipment, pathways, access to parking and washrooms, bench and table amenities, surfacing, and perimeter fencing were crucial as I went through the design process.

We chose to fully fence the perimeter of Julia's Junction, complete with self-closing gate hardware, to create a safe space for those children who may be on the Autism spectrum. Fencing is also vital for families with more than one child and for those with a tendency to run when over-stimulated. With ASD affecting 1 in 36 kids³, we believed a space that would be safe and comfortable for children with ASD and their caregivers was very important.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/index.html>

Julia's Junction features 11 benches and five picnic tables within the fenced area. We wanted to build plenty of comfortable seating for caregivers and park-goers alike so that play time at Julia's Junction would be maximized. Our benches and tables were all sponsored by local businesses and individuals with custom plaques, which is a great way to raise funds, by the way. Many of the tables are situated in the centre of the play space so that caregivers have sightlines to their kids while they are playing, an essential detail for any family.

There are so many fun pieces of equipment at Julia's Junction, offering hours of safe, accessible fun for kids of any age and ability. Our design focused on a variety of ground-based pieces of equipment, which allows children to access no matter how they get around. Whether using a wheelchair, walker, crutches, or their own legs, we created a playground layout that welcomed everyone to try out almost everything. Avoiding ramps in our design was one of the best decisions we made.



With swings being the most popular feature of any playground (we knew we needed LOTS of swinging

SWINGS AT JULIA'S JUNCTION. RENDERING BY PLAYWORLD.

opportunities. We created a whopping five swing bays as well as a separate zip line feature (8 swings altogether). In addition, we designed a custom structure that would, for example, allow a child who can transfer in and out of their wheelchair the opportunity to complete the slide circuit totally independently. We also added multiple play pieces that could be enjoyed without having to get out of one's wheelchair, a reality for many children and caregivers.

With a combination of community engagement that included parents of children with a variety of disabilities, physical therapists, inclusive sports professionals, and teachers, expertise from our supplier's designer, and my personal experience with my children at playgrounds, we came up with a rock-solid design. To this day, 18 months after Julia's Junction's grand opening, all of the equipment is used frequently, with smiling faces and enthusiasm every single day. The community has validated that Julia's Junction was the missing piece in our local City, and it brings me great joy to watch it all unfold.

I cherish the experience of bringing Julia's Junction to fruition, giving not only my children but children all over our region a safe and genuinely inclusive place to play. We are grateful to the City of West Kelowna and the PURKIDS Foundation for the treasured partnerships formed in order to bring Julia's Junction to life.

As an inclusive play consultant, now working in partnership with PlayWorld, I am excited to support other communities in building truly special play spaces that are fully inclusive to all.

Conclusion

Julia's Junction has become more than just a playground—it is a testament to the power of community, advocacy, and genuinely

inclusive design. Seeing children of all abilities playing side by side reaffirms the importance of creating spaces that go beyond accessibility to foster meaningful engagement for everyone. This project has not only changed our local community. It has also inspired me to support others in building inclusive play spaces. By prioritizing inclusion in playground design, we can ensure that every child, regardless of ability, has the opportunity to experience the joy of play.