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Re-Creating The Great Outdoors

A backyard playground uses natural elements for a fun family setting

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If you build it, they will come."

The memorable quote from the movie "Field of Dreams" has sprung to life in the backyard of Dee Smith's Midlothian home.

Mechanicsville landscape architect Mike Lemcke turned an overgrown, seldom-used outdoor space into an all-natural playground, with one end devoted to kids and the other to adults.

And do "they" ever come.

On a recent cool afternoon, at least a dozen neighborhood kids -- from elementary-school age to teens -- were swinging, climbing, jumping and running around. Outside. In the fresh air.

A few cell phones rang occasionally, but otherwise, the kids were interacting with each other and nature instead of being indoors huddled over MySpace, hooked up to an iPod or building large thumbs and small minds playing video games.

"When we used to get home from school, we'd go out in the woods and build forts or play football. If you can attract them to come outside, they're going to be physical," Lemcke said.

"The kids can come over and do something different," said Smith, a single mom to Savannah, 12, Brooke, 10, and Macesin, 8. "It's fun, safe, easy to monitor -- they think it's cool."

Lemcke specializes in environmentally friendly playscapes that incorporate trees, vegetation, ropes, stumps, rocks, grass and other natural materials. "The usefulness of those traditional manufactured [play] systems ends at about 7 or 8 years old," Lemcke said.

The new backyard was completed about a month ago. The only remnants from the old lawn are a previous owner's treehouse and a trampoline, both of which Lemcke incorporated into the new setup. On this afternoon, the trampoline had become a study hall. "I never thought I'd see three teenage girls sitting on a trampoline doing homework," Smith said, laughing.



Neighborhood children flock to Dee Smith's Midlothian backyard to play on the stumps, rocks, swings and ropes. An existing trampoline and tree fort were integrated into the new layout. An "adult" space includes a stone patio and sitting wall. Photo By: CLEMENT BRITT/TIMES-DISPATCH

The playground, its base a thick bed of soft, finely shredded mulch, sits in a grove of trees on the lower half of the backyard. Its components include:

- stumps of all heights for balancing, climbing and stepping up to tall swinging ropes. The stumps were cut from big oak logs and sunk into a gravel base.
- rope swings
- climbing ropes. Knotted ropes are tied around logs that are lashed to the trees with rope for aesthetics and steel cable underneath for added support.
- a massive boulder that serves as a "launching rock" for kids who really want to catch some air on the rope swing. Lemcke found the big hunk of granite alongside some nearby railroad tracks and used an excavator to load it onto his truck for the trip to the Smith yard.

"The area was designed for more than one person to be doing the same thing at one time, a goal to help minimize 'it's my turn!'," Lemcke said.

Smith, who teaches at Providence Middle School, loves the change she's seen in her kids' after-school endeavors. "Now we have a unique space, and when you say, 'go outside,' they say, 'OK!'"

"It's just a completely different living space. I was even out here folding laundry the other day."

A curving stone path leads from the playground through newly planted grass and up to the patio, which Lemcke designed to be a relaxation spot. To level a space for the patio, he covered the sloping lawn with 100 yards of soil.

Lemcke widened the existing small deck with stadium-style steps that lead onto the patio, a curved bed of white paving stones. The deck steps and a low, dry-stack sitting wall around the patio form seating areas for outdoor activities, which center around a portable fire pit and an alluring 6-foot-wide wood swing hung between two mature maples.

Spotlights are perched high in the trees, with motion-activated light fixtures around the playground. Kerosene torches add ambience. Landscaping is partially complete.

The project took a crew of four about four weeks to complete. The \$25,000 cost was underwritten by Pat Ano, a close family friend and the children's "adopted aunt" from South Carolina. Ano and Smith brainstormed the project and contacted Lemcke after seeing a similar play area he built at a nearby home.

Ano and Smith loved the idea of a natural, free-play area -- a vast departure from the asphalt playgrounds and standard jungle gyms that many adults remember from their childhoods.

The new landscape and all its trappings are clearly a hit with the kids. "I like having grass and a fire pit, so when we have parties we can roast marshmallows," said Savannah Smith, a student at Tomahawk Creek Middle School.

Macesin, a student at Evergreen Elementary, has set a goal of reaching the top of the lofty climbing rope.

"Every day when Macesin comes home from school, he says, 'Will you push me in the swing?'" Dee Smith said. "I stop what I'm doing and I push him in the swing. I know those days are numbered."

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