

Class Projects and Programs—continued

Community Service Project—continued

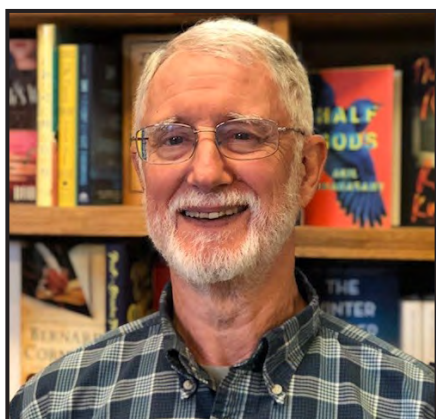
- * Are you involved in a “start-up” community service effort? You’re not alone – several CSP participants are in a wide range of areas from chamber music and college savings to accessible playgrounds, and more.
- * Are you interested in international service? Several CSPers have extensive experience “round the girdled earth,” in areas ranging from health care and education to poverty abatement, food security, housing, the environment, and more. We could go on, but hope you get the point. The CSP offers classmates and in some cases family members who not only have engaged in community service, but also are willing to share what they’ve learned.

More great examples coming in future issues. We hope the next phase of the CSP will engage more classmates and their families in ways that expand and enhance community service. We also hope the value of the CSP will be more readily apparent and prompt more people to share their stories in the Catalog, growing the knowledge base and making it more useful.

Lastly, we want you to know that **Peter Wonson** recently retired from the CSP to have more balance between his multiple service activities and his family. The CSP wouldn't be what it is without Peter's silver-tongued efforts, persistence, and persuasiveness – he was the primary recruiter for catalog content.

The two of us remain dedicated to the long-term success of the CSP - to the expansion and enhancement of community service. We're ready, willing, and able to support any interested classmate and/or family members who want to do more for their communities.

A Story from John Hamer that Exemplifies the CSP Catalogue Content



Six years ago, I had a grandson who completely changed my life and the lives of my entire family. His name is Ford. He is the reason I began a community service project. Here's the background:

When he was first born he seemed fine, although there were

some unusual signs that caused us all concern. One of his toes

was extremely thin. He was unable to eat much. He was fussy and cried a lot. The term “failure to thrive” was heard a lot. We all hoped he would get better.

As the early months passed, his parents became increasingly worried. They took him to several different doctors. Most said he would improve as he grew older. But he didn't improve—he got worse. His mother and father tried to conceal their deepest fears but grew more upset every day. They sought out various doctors and specialists. Some said he might have cerebral palsy, but no one could say for sure.

For about 18 months, no one knew what was wrong with him. Finally, his parents found a doctor who accurately diagnosed the problem: Ford has CTNNB1 Syndrome, an extremely rare and random genetic disorder that severely limits his ability to speak, walk, eat and perform other natural bodily functions. When first diagnosed, he was one of only 30 known cases in the world. Now there are at least 300, and the number is growing as the disorder becomes more widely known.

The past several years have been a roller coaster ride for me, my wife and our whole family. We have all tried to step up and help to the greatest extent possible. As time has passed, Ford has shown some signs of improvement. But he is still nonverbal, cannot walk, has limited control of his motor movements, must be fed with a feeding tube into his stomach, and needs to wear diapers.



John and Ford

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And yet, despite his disabilities, he smiles a lot and has a laugh that is pure joy. He recognizes his parents, grandparents and other individuals. He loves to speed around in his wheelchair and can control his movements. He has learned some sign language, including “Love” and “Thank You.” He even has begun to speak a few words. He watches his iPad computer and can find videos he likes best. He loves to open and close doors, and will do that for hours. He has a special fascination with watching automatic garage doors go up and down. (Who knew that there are entire YouTube channels that show those? Strange, but true.) We play “catch” with big rubber balls, and he can throw them back in our general direction.

I have a special ritual that began early: I often wear a baseball cap, which he loves to pull off my head and fling across the room. Then he points and wants me to go retrieve it so he can repeat the game. A favorite hat of mine has a “No Whining” logo and it’s torn and battered from years of being thrown around. But I still wear it whenever I see him.

So, how has Ford inspired me to undertake a community service project?

A few blocks from his home is a city park with a children’s playground. A couple of years ago, the playground was closed down because it needed maintenance. The bark dust that covered the surface had clogged the main drain and some of the playground equipment needed replacement. It was called “Train Park” because it featured a large wooden railroad engine that kids could climb on, but the wood was splintering. The city announced that it would be replacing the playground, but their plan called for simply installing similar equipment and a bark dust surface – which my grandson Ford could not use. Bark dust doesn’t work for wheelchairs.

We decided to urge the city to build a new playground that was accessible and inclusive for disabled children like Ford. My wife and I held a meeting at our home and invited a few others, including my daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and another mother of two disabled kids. We first focused on Rare Disease Day, which is held annually on February 28 nationwide. We organized a gathering in another park and spread the word to friends and neighbors. The zebra – a relatively rare animal – is

the symbol of Rare Disease Day, so we encouraged people to come in striped clothing.

Covid masks were still being required, so we ordered 500 zebra-striped masks to distribute to attendees and asked local businesses to promote the event. On the scheduled day more than 100 people showed up, including many kids in wheelchairs and other disabled people. Our local newspaper ran some photos and a brief story about the event, as we had hoped. Our goal was to raise awareness of rare diseases like that of my grandson, but also to lay the groundwork for our effort to restore the playground to make it more accessible and inclusive.

I met with one of our city council members to urge city approval of a playground renovation. As a former builder and developer, he fully supported the idea but knew it would increase the cost of the facility. He urged me to contact other council members to encourage the effort. My wife went online and found one of the nation’s leading landscape architects who specialized in accessible playgrounds. His name is Chad Kennedy and he lives in Sacramento, CA. We called him and he generously offered to give us advice on how to design the new playground. He did a Zoom call with several of us and we watched a TED talk he did on the subject, which opened our eyes to what was possible. He also offered to talk to our council members. He showed us examples of other playgrounds that had been renovated for maximum accessibility and inclusivity. He truly opened our minds to what was possible.

We began lobbying our local elected officials and staff. Our city manager became a strong ally, since she had a background in parks and recreation management and had young children of her own. She connected us with city staffers who would oversee the project and we met with them online or in person. We talked with the parks-equipment consultant whose company the city had hired to do the work. As the father of young children himself, he was enthusiastic about our effort.

I recall one exchange with a city council member who told me he had never thought of the need to make playgrounds work better for disabled children. “It just wasn’t on my radar” he said. But he became one of our strongest supporters and urged his colleagues to endorse the effort. As the city considered various options for state-of-the-art playground equipment and features, they consulted our small group for feedback and suggestions. We acted as a kind of outside citizens’ advisory board. We found allies on the parks commission and made sure they supported our effort.

In the end, the city exceeded all our hopes and expectations. They increased the budget for the project by more than 50 percent. They listened to our concerns and worked hard to meet our requests. Since the playground was a relatively small one,



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they could not expand its footprint but they packed in a great number of new structures. They ordered a new train to be built that my grandson can roll his wheelchair through, ramps to higher levels, a soft rubberized concrete surface and artificial grass that works well for his wheelchair. They removed some concrete curbs that were dangerous not only for disabled kids but also for aging grandparents like me. They also included sensory elements such as a vertical xylophone and a plastic drum set, plus hideaway places for shy or introverted children. New swing sets with safety restraints for kids with special needs were added.

I also persuaded my Rotary Club to give a \$5,000 grant to help fund the new playground. Another organization, the Mercer Island Preschool Association, also gave a \$25,000 grant. One of their leaders had been in our original group that met in my living room. I wrote an op-ed piece for our local weekly newspaper that said citizens can definitely influence city staff and elected officials if they decide to get involved and remain civil but persistent.

On July 9, 2022, the city held a Grand Opening of the new Mercerdale Park Playground and invited all citizens to attend.



Photo Source: Ashkan Zamani

On a beautiful Saturday morning that was part of a “Summer Celebration” with live music and food booths, several hundred people showed up. The city council and mayor gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony. My grandson and his parents were recognized by the mayor and city manager. The Rotary president and some of our club members were there, along with many MIPA members and their children and grandchildren.

The playground has become one of the most popular and well-used places in our community. It is almost always full of happy children, parents, grandparents, nannies and families. We all love it.

One day I was there and ran into the city council member with whom I had originally met. He asked if I would be willing to

serve on a volunteer citizens’ committee to help support a new parks levy that the council had proposed for the November 2022 ballot. It would provide more money for maintenance and operations, preservation of forested areas and open space – and the renovation of a dozen or so aging playgrounds with an emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity. I immediately agreed.

Our small committee helped write the “pro” statement for our voters’ pamphlet. We designed yard signs and distributed them all over our community. We printed 2,500 flyers explaining what the levy would accomplish and why a “yes” vote was needed. We stood in front of local supermarkets to hand out the flyers, talk with voters and answer their questions. We engaged on social-media sites to address concerns and counter arguments from anyone who opposed the levy. We attended some volunteer park cleanup sessions and talked to other citizen volunteers. We raised a modest amount of donations to pay for the yard signs, flyers and stickers to hand out to kids and parents.

The result? Our city voted overwhelmingly on Nov. 8, 2022, to approve an increased levy to bring all of the parks to the highest possible level. It passed with more than 65% of the vote.

Our next goal is to make sure the new funds are spent in the best possible way to make all our parks and playgrounds fully accessible and truly inclusive.

Parks are vital to our minds, bodies and souls. People of all ages and abilities must be able to enjoy parks, where they find comfort, relaxation and just plain fun.

In my opinion, this is the next major step in the nation’s civil-rights movement. The Americans for Disabilities Act did a lot to help the disabled join the mainstream of society—with curb cuts, ramps and elevators required nationwide—but it is not universally adopted or enforced.

Citizens who engage with their communities clearly can – and should – step up to make a difference. I urge all my fellow classmates to get involved in any way they can. Let me know if you want any advice or suggestions. My family, friends and I would be glad to help. Ford is our inspiration.

Editor’s Note

If that doesn’t make you want to do something, have someone check for a pulse.