

Playful City USA

Creating Partnerships in Atlanta

by **Mike Vietti, KaBOOM! Communications Manager**

Cynthia Gentry started a fire with a single spark in spring 2007 with one phone call. Gentry spearheads the Atlanta Taskforce on Play (ATOP), an organization founded in 2007 in order to apply for the Playful City USA recognition program from national nonprofit KaBOOM!—an organization making children healthier by creating great places to play.

Gentry fielded a call from a city official seeking assistance in formulating an application for Playful City USA—a newly created program from KaBOOM! that honors cities and towns across the country committed to taking action on behalf of play.

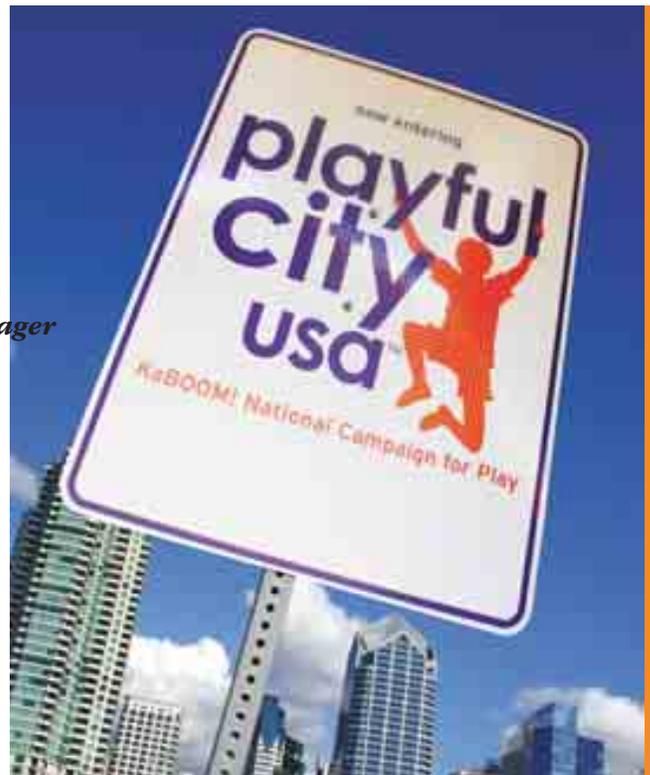
“Somebody called me and asked if I would look into it,” Gentry recalled. “We got the ball rolling, worked closely together and wound up securing a \$25,000 grant from KaBOOM! for the city.”

Since the creation of ATOP, Gentry has effectively served as Atlanta’s unofficial champion of play, working with city officials across countless departments to ensure that children across the city have great places to play.

Crucial to the partnership was Playful City USA—a free national-recognition program available to communities. Playful City USA spotlights initiatives designed to increase opportunities and awareness for play among children. Since the program’s inception, KaBOOM! has issued \$3.8 million in play-related grants to participating communities.

“Playful City USA made me focus on the city and what was needed with respect to play and playspaces,” Gentry said. “The city government didn’t have the capacity to do it alone, so Playful City USA led to the formation of ATOP, and then I became absolutely hooked.”

Gentry used the initial \$25,000 grant KaBOOM! awarded to ATOP and the city to create Atlanta’s first assessment of the state of playspaces in more than five years and launched the annual Great Atlanta Play Day. Since then, Gentry has expanded the focus of ATOP and secured a grant to provide an elementary school in



Atlanta with a set of Imagination Playground in a Box—a breakthrough playspace concept designed to encourage child-directed, unstructured free play.

Perhaps the largest undertaking for ATOP is Playable 2010—an international design competition in partnership with the Georgia Tech College of Architecture inviting international designers to design playground equipment and spaces.

Gentry received significant attention from city officials for playing a critical role in using volunteers to build a community playground in 2003. A neighbor of Gentry’s had lost his wife and two children in an accident, and the local community rallied to raise \$300,000 for a new playground in less than three months. Gentry helped lead 400 volunteers in building the playground, and city officials took notice.

“That helped establish credibility,” Gentry said. “It led to city officials having faith in the cause of play, which led to more buy in from other officials in the city. If you keep working at it over time, people coming into new positions at the city level will have heard of you and be familiar with your work. You can’t give up; you have to keep on going.”

Gentry and ATOP have continually proven the value of partnerships between community organizations and city departments as best noted by former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin.

“Every community has a next-door neighbor like Cynthia who is willing to step up,” Franklin said. “Find yours. Everyone has the power to give back and make their community better. Get started! Every community has people who can organize projects and volunteer their time. Get yours moving. Create your own task force on play to work with your City and your Parks Department and do what you can to become a Playful City USA.” ■

For more information, visit www.playatlanta.org and www.ka-boom.org/playfulcityusa.

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