

## **Landmark School for the Deaf unveils playspace**

**Emily Morry**

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A whole new world has opened up on the campus of Rochester School for the Deaf.

Tucked beside Denton Hall lies a unique landscape specially designed for the school's youngest attendees. There is a "messy" area, where students can make mud pies or pretend to cook. A corner with wheeled toys helps children to develop motor skills. A "building" section replete with sticks and logs allows pupils to construct campfires and makeshift dwellings. A nearby stage provides a venue for acting and dancing.

Together, these distinct spaces comprise the RSD Early Childhood Center's Natural Playground, a multipurpose site designed to promote positive learning and developmental outcomes through imaginative play.

RSD officially unveiled the playspace with a ribbon cutting ceremony Thursday morning, but the seeds for the project were planted three years ago.

### **Knowing the need**

In 2015, a number of RSD's preschool teachers came to the realization that their existing playground was lacking in safety for young children and limited their creativity. Since language acquisition and learning through play are instrumental for deaf and hard of hearing children under the age of 5, the state of the preschoolers' playground was no trifling matter.

Seeking to create an innovative recreational and educational space for their early childhood students, a number of RSD staff attended a workshop on natural playgrounds, which, as they learned, are considered especially beneficial for children in a technologydriven society.

Buoyed by grants from six local foundations and generous gifts from several individual donors, RSD consulted with Nature Explore, a company specializing in outdoor classrooms, to design the playspace.

The end result, completed by Thomas Landscape and Design in April, was carefully constructed with the needs of deaf and hard of hearing children in mind.

None of the playground's structures block the ability of the children to visually communicate with one another in ASL. The space also features a number of flags of various colors so that teachers can get students' attention for information sharing and emergency purposes.

Early Childhood Center teacher, Karen Windhorn, is unaware of any other school for the deaf that has implemented a natural playground.

### **Another innovation**

The project represents yet another innovation of the Rochester School for Deaf, which has been the site of numerous groundbreaking achievements in deaf education in its 142-year history.

The institution's first superintendent, Zenas Westervelt, invented what became known as the "Rochester Method" of communication, which flourished for some time only to be superseded by another trailblazing educational approach created in 1890 by RSD volunteer teacher, Edmund Lyon.

Lyon developed a method of symbolizing speech sounds with hand movements, which he believed would allow deaf and hard of hearing students to be able to vocalize more accurately.

Teachers at the Rochester School for the Deaf were the first to use his Lyon Phonetic System manual, which went on to become a highly respected educational text used around the world.

RSD took another leap forward in the late 19th century when it became the first institution in the United States to establish a kindergarten for deaf children, making it a pioneer in early childhood education.

Now, over a hundred years later, the school's early childhood students are reaping the benefits of innovative learning methods occurring outside the classroom.

Teacher Karen Windhorn has been immensely impressed by the effect the new natural playground has had on the children. "Students who were much more reserved in the classroom have become leaders outdoors," she said.

Retired instructor Julie Shahin has noticed that children of different ages are interacting more at the site and that it provides "a wonderful opportunity for the older children to be language models for the younger children."

Susan Searls, RSD's director of early childhood programs, believes that the playspace has ultimately helped promote social skills, cooperation and problem-solving among the students.

"Our natural playground stimulates a child's imagination and creativity more than a traditional playground," Searls said, "It has been amazing to watch our students on the new playground."

*Emily Morry is a Rochester-based freelance writer.*



**The new natural playground and outdoor classroom next to Denton Hall and the Early Childhood Center at Rochester School for the Deaf. PROVIDED**