No Hopes Barred

It looks like a University of Hartford alumni reunion. The group seated around the table graduated in different years with different degrees—from Barney School of Business, Ward College of Technology, Hartford College for Women, and the College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions. Yet they have found their way to the same nonprofit organization headquartered in Bloomfield, Conn. The National Center for Boundless Playgrounds® is a 10-year-old nonprofit that works to provide equal play opportunities for children with and without disabilities. These alumni, who bring a diverse set of skills to the center, take great pride in being associated with an organization they say is trying to make a difference in children’s lives.

The Cast of Characters

As a senior technical services specialist at Boundless Playgrounds, Monique Farias ’03 (Ward) uses her bachelor’s degree in architectural engineering technology in play environment planning, equipment configuration, and site development. Sally Knowles A’93 (HCW), a communications design manager, develops marketing materials and the group’s Web site. Julio Morales ’05 (Barney) draws on his background in business administration as an organizational intern. Baba Aina M’80 (Barney) says he was “coaxed” out of retirement from corporate life to take on the role of chief financial officer. A former teacher, Thad Terzo M’01 (ENHP) applies his keen interpersonal skills to help new clients. And grant writer Roberta Echelson M’84 (Barney) joined the team last spring just as Naomi Cohen M’97 (Barney) was retiring as director of public and private partnerships.

“We complement each other,” says senior communications specialist Glandina Morris ’04 (Barney). “Without Thad’s interpersonal qualities to respond to inquiries, Julio’s ability to multitask and coordinate special projects, Roberta’s research and support strategies, Monique’s design capabilities, Sally’s creative way of presenting the organization, and Baba’s operational skills, we would not be able to achieve our mission.”
A New Perspective on Play

“On a barrier-free Boundless Playground,” notes Terzo, “children don’t have limitations. Traditional playgrounds for children with disabilities make a fundamental mistake in design: typically the able child and the child with a disability are not able to have fun together.”

The design team configures the play equipment based on proven pediatric and child-development principles. Whether it’s a swing or sandbox, a whispering tube or climbing tower, children of all abilities can enjoy the equipment and each other without the need for a parent’s or teacher’s constant assistance.

The Boundless Playgrounds concept began with a single family in 1996, as Amy Jaffe Barzach and her husband, Peter, searched for a way to honor the 9-month-old son they lost to spinal muscular atrophy. Spearheading an army of 1,200 volunteers, the Barzachs created Jonathan’s Dream playground in West Hartford, Conn.

Amy Barzach recalls, “A tiny, two-inch article in Time magazine about the playground built in memory of our son generated hundreds of requests for help from moms, dads, and grandparents across the country who wanted to build their own barrier-free playgrounds. We were sitting in our little corner of the world and didn’t realize the impact of what we had started.”

A year later, with an initial grant of $521,000 from toymaker Hasbro Inc., Barzach joined forces with play-equipment builder Jean Schappet to found Boundless Playgrounds. The organization has since received support from corporations and foundations that include the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Christopher Reeve Foundation, the Picower Foundation, the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Hasbro’s Playskool®, and CVS/pharmacy. Boundless Playgrounds exist in 21 states as well as Ontario, Canada. This summer marks the completion of the center’s 100th playground.

“The various skills we learned from the University of Hartford motivate us every day to contribute something unique yet equally valuable to this organization,” Morris says. “We work hard to make a difference in this world—a quality instilled in all of us at the University.”

Are they successful? Just look at the face of any child, with no hopes barred, on a Boundless Playground.