

# THE



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## Loss of child inspires drive for playground all children can use

BY DAVID STURM  
Baltimore Sun Media Group

A shielded swing for autistic children. A zip line for wheelchair-bound youngsters. A climber for the visually impaired.

These are some of the features on the drawing board for Angel Park, an "all access" playground and amphitheater envisioned on a 2.5-acre field next to the Perry Hall branch of the Baltimore County Public Library.

The campaign to construct Angel Park is a grass-roots effort, from the team of volunteers raising money to the Perry Hall youngsters whose crayon drawings inspired the equipment to be installed.

And, at the center of this effort is Kelli Szczybor, who conceived of the project as a memorial to her 15-month-old son, Ryan, who died of leukemia in 1998.

She said his death made her want to do something special in Perry Hall.

"Everybody needs to be part of something," she said. "A playground can be for everyone."

County Councilman David Marks, who takes a citizen role on the Angel Park Team, called the effort extraordinary.

"In all my years as a volunteer, I have rarely seen a project embraced so strongly by the Perry Hall community," he said. "Kelli Szczybor and her family have been a driving force behind Angel Park, which has now brought in dozens of people to plan and raise money for the project. These people are meeting every week and hosting three or four events every month."

Marks arranged for the donation of the land, which was secured by the county in a land swap with a developer, and for an \$80,000 contribution from the Baltimore County Savings Bank Foundation.

Bill Paulshock, Angel Park Team member and Perry Hall Recreation Council volunteer, said a Spring 2015 opening is envisioned for the playground, which means raising about \$1 million over the next several months. The campaign has already banked about \$100,000 and has commitments for \$175,000 more, he said, and the fundraising momentum is growing.

"We have to raise the money ourselves to make this work," Paulshock said. "It's just us."

Judi Garitty, fundraising chairwoman, said she is working with 150 volunteers to round up the cash. She said various Angel Park committees meet weekly.

Szczybor (pronounced SEE-bor), recalled that she was the young mother of a 5-year-old girl, Jenna, now 22, when Ryan was born. She said within six months of his birth it was clear that Ryan's lethargy and fevers indicated something serious. At St. Joseph Medical Center, it was diagnosed as acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer of the bone marrow and blood cells.

That launched nine months of treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital that involved chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgeries and a bone marrow transplant. Szczybor said the treatments extended Ryan's life, but could not save it.

"He was never without a tube in his body," she said.



STEVE RUARK/PHOTO FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN MEDIA GROUP  
Kelli Szczybor, center, thought of Angel Park after her son Ryan died at 15 months in 1988. With her are fundraising chair Judi Garitty, left, and Bill Paulshock, a team member.

Ryan died June 14, 1998.

"It still feels like it was yesterday," she said.

Szczybor, who went on to have two more children, Kayla and Zach, launched into charitable work, including the founding, with her mother, Jackie Hacke, of the Ryan Foundation, which raises about \$30,000 a year to provide amenities to hospitalized children.

Then she heard about Annie's Playground in Fallston, named for Annie Cumpston, a 6-year-old killed by a hit-and-run driver in downtown Baltimore. She learned that it was a community endeavor in Harford County and that children helped design the playground equipment. Something clicked.

"I thought, 'If we could just do that in Perry Hall,'" she said.

It's getting done. The Angel Park Team has just published a pamphlet explaining dona-

tion opportunities, including chances to sponsor individual components in the playground. The pamphlet includes a schematic of the park's layout by the designer Leathers and Associates.

The organizers stressed that Angel Park will welcome children without disabilities as well as disabled children. It will include an amphitheater with seating for about 200 for concerts and other daytime events (no lighting is planned).

Szczybor said, "When you lose somebody, you want to talk about him all the time."

With that in mind, donors who go to [www.angel-park.org](http://www.angel-park.org), the website for the campaign, will find an opportunity to leave a comment about their personal angel, whether living or deceased.

"Angels are not just the people who you've lost," she said.