



CANNON PARK PLAYGROUND IS A FAVORITE KID'S ATTRACTION

In 1994, two years before former First Lady Hillary Clinton suggested that “it takes a village to raise a child,” two Pinehurst moms decided that the Village of Pinehurst needed a public effort to provide a suitable place for kids to play. Cannon Park’s existing equipment was old, sparse and not very appealing.

They picked up broken glass at the playground. They asked for, and received, \$500 from the local Kiwanis Club for booster swings.

And armed with a serious need, a workable plan, and an eager committee, moms Susan Baer and Rebecca Lapping enlisted the help of the Pinehurst community to replace old and modest playground equipment in favor of an acre of happiness – and Camelot Playground became the cool place to play.

Camelot Playground, while ranked as the #5 attraction in Pinehurst by internet site TripAdvisor, is also the #1 ranked-activity for children in the Village.

“Susan and Rebecca would take their kids to the park, and their assessment was that it was sort of a ‘loser’ of a park, and at the time, it really was,” Wilkison recalled with a laugh. “We had a 19-acre park, which included two lighted baseball fields, but we needed to see how we could fix it up for more community use.”

Contrary to what the name ‘Camelot’ might suggest, it didn’t just happen with the snap of a finger and a wave of the wand.

After Baer saw an amazing playground in eastern North Carolina, the one-of-a-kind plan from well-known design company Leathers and Associates of Ithaca, NY, was developed, with input from students at Pinehurst Elementary and Middle schools. Their creative ideas helped formulate the final “Camelot” lay-out.

“Most everyone in the Village was so positive about the idea and the need, but we had to choose between a small \$25,000 project and the bigger one, which was about \$95,000,” said Lapping recently, “so I said, ‘let’s just go BIG.’ We raised over \$100,000. The whole community was involved in it.”

The Pinehurst community group, Friends of the Park, presented the plan to the Village Council in the fall of 1994. The group was responsible for fund-raising and gathering donated materials for the final build, which took four days in the spring of 1996.

“The group brought the plan to the Village and asked for some money. The Village Council approved \$10,000 early on, and then \$15,000 in the next budget,” said past Village Manager Andy Wilkison. “Still, there were a lot of folks around here who didn’t see the benefits of all

that. And really, prior to 1995, there wasn't even a full-time director of Parks and Recreation for the Village."

Enter Jeff Batton, who was hired as the first Parks and Rec director as the Camelot project was well under way.

For Batton, who is now Assistant Village Manager, visualizing the old Cannon Park area makes him appreciate the quality product that has only gotten better over the last decade.

"When I first got here, people drove around and parked wherever they wanted, a lot of times while kids were trying to play, which was a huge safety issue," he remembered, shaking his head. "With the investment of the community, we have a really nice neighborhood park, combined with a great playground, which is something that is gratifying to see.

"It is a reflection of the change in mentality and demographics, but I also hope that people have seen and recognized that, with a little bit of investment here and there, they began to appreciate the value in bringing that resource (the park) back to a high use."

Camelot Playground has ample room to run and play, but it has a cozy ambience that reflects the Village itself. It is serenely nestled on its acre spot under towering, shady pines. The well-worn, brown wooden structures feature mazes connected to castle towers and archways, an apple slide, a tree house, winding climbing ramps and ladders, as well as handicapped accessible activities. There is only one way to enter and exit.

Wooden cars with steering wheels, swings, walkways made out of recycled tires, and tunnels are designed for a variety of ages, and there is plenty of seating for everyone. One of the baseball diamonds shares a fence with the playground, and beyond that is another stand of pines covering the large picnic shelter.

While there is no way to know how many folks use the park, it is frequently visited by in-county and out-of-county schools, local youth sports' teams, Village Parks and Recreation adult teams, as well as groups who pay to reserve the park and the shelter, a portion of which was donated early on by the Pinehurst Lions' Club.

Said Batton, "the entire facility is usually first-come, first-served, as long as it's not being reserved, and you can just walk over and enjoy it. The only thing we don't reserve is Camelot because of its high use and popularity; it remains open at all times. It is also a nice amenity for resort guests, who can take a shuttle there.

"There is no question that it is used and well worth the effort of those ladies and their committee," observed Batton. "It is probably one of the most popular amenities from a visitation standpoint that the Village has." Camelot, located at 90 Woods Road, is open 365 days a year and stays busy in all four seasons.

The Parks and Recreation department has a certified arborist and landscape maintenance professionals on staff, leading both Batton and Wilkison to the conclusion that the shady site and

beautifully maintained landscape increases its popularity by making it aesthetically pleasing. Its natural setting in the pines and the whole of the enclosure enhances the spot as a comfortable, stay-and-play location. A large concrete pad in front is perfect for chalk art or riding big wheels, as well as encouraging a child's creativity.

"The landscape, with flowers and bushes, leading into the playground itself is overall environmentally pleasing," Batton added, "and it's one of the reasons that people like to go there with their children."

Cannon Park closes at dark unless there is an organized activity but otherwise is open to the public. According to Mark Wagner, current Director of Parks and Recreation, Cannon Park is pretty much built out, other than the community center which is in the master plan, but not in a funded status.

"The fact that it was a community-built playground put the spotlight on the Village's Parks and Recreation mentality of taking care of something positive for the kids to do," offered Batton. "We started with a little investment and effort to make that playground better, and it really was the springboard for the high visibility of that department."

Wilkison reflected on how Cannon Park and Camelot Playground has evolved along the same timeline as the Village as a whole.

"A lot of folks didn't see the benefits of having a decent park and playground, so it's been nice to see the changes in attitudes and allocation of resources for Cannon Park to be transformed from 'run-down' and un-kept to the point that it is today," said Wilkison with a smile. "As the Village has grown that way, one of the barometers that you can look at is Cannon Park and Camelot. That spot is really something to be proud of."

Rebecca Lapping had no idea seventeen years ago what an important part of the Pinehurst community that Camelot would become. But she does recall the pride and excitement that is still reflected today.

"I've never seen a community come together like it did to build Camelot. Hundreds of people donated materials and we even had a group from Ft. Bragg come and help," she reminisced. "It was truly an amazing event."

Sometimes it does take a Village to raise a child.