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# *my* **HOMETOWN**

Your Westside Community Connection

## *For The Holidays*



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# The Imagination Playground will be inclusive of all

by Colleen Onuffer



Erin Medlar, CEO of Imagination Childcare Academy, is working to bring play to all children – regardless of ability.

“The story starts 14 or so years ago when my son was born,” said Medlar. Living in Scotia, New York, at the time, her son, Nicholas, needed a little help to reach his milestones. By four months old, Nicholas began working with a physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech pathologist in their home. A few months after adding these services, Medlar decided it was best for Nicholas to enter a classroom setting for exposure to these skills on a

daily basis. Nicholas joined a special needs preschool with before and after care that allowed Medlar to work as a special education teacher in the Schenectady City School District.

“It was an awesome place where he was able to thrive,” said Medlar. Nicholas ended up testing out of the Early Intervention Program by the age of two and a half. When Medlar and her family moved to Rochester, she looked for a similar schooling experience for her son.

“I was saddened to learn that these schools are few and far to come by on the westside of Rochester,” she explained. Noticing the need in the community, Medlar and her husband used their 401Ks to establish Imagination Childcare Academy, leasing a building from the Holy Ghost Roman Catholic Church. “We had four loving families who believed in our mission enough to register before we even officially opened our doors,” she said.

Since then, Imagination Childcare has grown, welcoming more students each year to learn about the world around them through their imaginations. “We’ve grown from 10 children in 2012 to 240 kids in 2022,” said Medlar.

In addition to offering before and after care for school-aged children, Imagination Childcare provides a Universal Pre-Kindergarten program for those in the Gates-Chili School District.

“My passion has always been to create a fully inclusive center,” explained Medlar. About 15% of their current population includes students with special needs – ranging from special education to those receiving music, speech, occupational, or physical therapy.

“About a year and a half ago, a mom toured our facility with her daughter, who was in a wheelchair,” said Medlar. “Our facility is inclusive, but the playground is not. The mom said, ‘That’s okay,



Imagination Childcare Academy students drew pictures of what they wanted to see included in the new playground. Provided photo.



no place has a playground that can accommodate her. She can sit on the side and watch while the kids play.' My heart just broke. That's not okay – not for the child and not for the mom to accept that as reality. We can do better."

That's when Medlar decided to create a fully inclusive playground space that allows children of all abilities to play together. The Imagination Playground is expected to be complete by fall 2024 and will be open to the public outside of school hours, much like the current playground that exists, built by Holy Ghost parishioners back in 1987.

"People are scared that we'll tear the current playground down," said Medlar. "I believe in history and communities, so the playground will remain. We will refurbish it and make it safe for our kids. And then add the inclusive playground as well."

The project began last year with a design day. Medlar said, "We had the kids draw pictures of what they wanted to see in the playground. The designer from Play by Design in Ithaca came and met with the students. He took the pictures home and designed a playground based on their visions."

The playground will have a stage area for kids to act, along with shelving to store dramatic play clothes and a ramp for all children to access the stage. There will be a block area to build with big blocks outside, an art easel that kids could wheel up to, a communication board for kids that are non-verbal, and a sensory tunnel for those with sensory needs. It will also have a We-Go-Swing that includes one accessible bay for a wheelchair and one bench seat, allowing two individuals to swing together.

"We've been working with other Rochester organizations to learn what being inclusive really is, and how to best accommodate everyone," said Medlar. "We don't want this playground to be ADA compliant or just accessible – we want it to be fully inclusive, where kids can play side-by-side with their peers, regardless of ability."

The project is now in the fundraising phase. Medlar has subdivided Imagination Childcare's 12 acres and applied for 501c3 status. "This makes the playground its own entity as a not-for-profit organization. And whenever I decide to sell my building, I can gift the playground to the Town of Gates, so it will always be a public playground."

The 501c3 status also allows for grant writing, larger fundraisers, and sponsorship opportunities that will help raise the million dollars it will take to refurbish the current playground, build the new, inclusive one, and cover necessary maintenance.

Medlar hopes to have the 501c3 status by January or February. But for now, the team is doing their own fundraising efforts. A Holiday Craft and Vendor Fair recently brought in \$4,000 for the project with over 50 vendors, raffles, and food and drinks.

"The event was successful thanks to Andrea Minchella, the parent of two of our students," said Medlar. "She did all of the

work to organize and promote the craft fair and did a wonderful job with it!"

The event drew so much interest, even creating a waitlist of vendors who wanted to participate, that two more craft fairs are scheduled for next April and November. Other future efforts include basket raffles, a golf tournament in June, and selling t-shirts.

"My PTA is working to find new ways to continue to raise funds ourselves, but we will need to lean on local companies and organizations," said Medlar. "This is a community playground and everybody will have to pitch in to make it work. I'm happy to do the leg work, but we need help to make this a community asset."

In addition, Medlar is looking for people to help with grant writing – specifically people who understand working with children with special needs – and advisors who can help make sure the playground equipment will be fully inclusive and meet the needs of her students.

"This playground is going to be a space for ALL people to come together," explained Medlar. "It will remove barriers for our most challenged populations. And provide a safe space for our community to enjoy and play together."

*Imagination Childcare Academy is located at 230 Coldwater Road, Rochester, NY 14624. Its current playground is open to the public on weeknights from 6 to 9 PM and on weekends. For more information and updates about the playground, visit [imaginationchildcareacademy.org](http://imaginationchildcareacademy.org) or like The Imagination Playground on Facebook.*



*The current playground was built by parishioners of Holy Ghost Roman Catholic Church in 1987. Provided photos.*

