



Children's Grove: A Full History

How do qualities of Kindness, respect, inclusivity, and compassion connect to an organization called The Children's Grove?

The answer and back-story begin in another time of national crisis. Like most communities and individuals across the country, Columbians shared the grief of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in December, 2012. A small group of Columbians responded to a charge by Anne Deaton to turn grief into action. Anne brought their message to the attention of Mayor Bob McDavid, Christine Corcoran, President of Putting Kids First, and Tara Collier, Coordinator of Columbia Public Schools' home-school coordinators and Suzanne McDavid. All quickly supported the idea.

Anne and Suzanne McDavid co-chaired a planning committee whose members included Julie Middleton, Sharon Thomas Parks, Georgalu Swoboda, and Tara Collier. Their first initiative was to explore the creation of a grove of trees that would honor the memory of children who have met harm's way anywhere and at any time and to use the trees to symbolize the entire community's strong stand to promote children's mental, emotional and physical health, happiness and safety. The grove would be a place of beauty and peacefulness, a place for joyful activity and commemoration, and a place to celebrate the love of family and friends – and always acts of Kindness. From there, the passion for promoting acts of Kindness took flight and, like a butterfly (which is the symbol of Kindness), moved quickly in different directions.

Mike Snyder, Columbia's Parks and Rec Development Superintendent, identified a potential site at Stephens Lake Park. Mike and park planner Matt Boehner soon developed a landscape plan that was approved by the Putting Kids First Coalition, of which the Children's Grove was a member, and then by the Columbia City Council. Karen Chandler, Superintendent of Recreation and Community programs, and her staff later ensured extensive program and publicity support for the recreational activities associated with the dedication ceremony. With the endorsement of Putting Kids First and through the generous donations of citizens, mental health service providers, local banks, businesses and the Missouri Mental Health Foundation, the almost \$24,000 in funds was raised in four short months to landscape the

site and purchase more than 40 Yellow Butterfly Magnolia and crab apple trees, the signature trees of the Children's Grove. To plan for the Children's Grove dedication ceremony, the original planning committee expanded to include Robin Wenneker, Vinita Khanna, Joyce Smith, Judith LeFevre, James Melton, Jim Wallace, Darlene Johnson, Barbara Williamson, Chris Campbell, David Thomas, and Jolene Schultz. Many other community members also lent their support.

Given the national statistic that one in 10 children will experience a diagnosable mental health problem, Children's Grove volunteers, from the outset, envisioned the Children's Grove would serve as a springboard to raise awareness of the needs of youths in Boone County and promote public education on behavioral health. Because this was always one of the foremost missions of the Putting Kids First Coalition (PKF) embraced Children's Grove as it began its mission. Indeed, PKF had worked tirelessly for two years to pass an important mental health tax for Boone County citizens to increase mental health service to children and youth. So receiving PKA's support was a critically important endorsement for the Children's Grove. Both are dedicated to greatly expanding access to community mental health services and education and several PKA members became active within the Children's Grove.

Children's Grove, from the outset, began collaborating with MU Extension, to co-sponsor an internationally recognized program, Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA). This program is designed for the general public (school personnel, health professionals, parents, faith leaders, congregations, and community service groups), is among the community education programs that Children's Grove has offered at least twice a year to the residents of Boone County. YMHFA enables citizens to better observe the signs of mental and emotional stress a young person might be experience, helps them to more effectively and sensitively respond, and informs them of professional mental health resources available in Boone County to support a young person, especially one in crisis.

Following the May 3, 2014 dedication of the Children's Grove in Stephen's Park, new programs, especially ones that inspire a culture of Kindness in Boone County schools and communities, continued to emerge because of the imagination and efforts of Children's Grove volunteers and Columbia citizens.

One Children's Grove project invites schools, hospitals, businesses and faith-based communities to plant Kindness Trees and install Butterfly Benches on their own property. Kindness Trees and Butterfly Benches have begun to dot Columbia and Boone County. Signs accompany the trees bearing a symbol that reflects partnership with the Children's Grove to create a nurturing and Kind environment in which young people can thrive. Pete Millier, Director of the University of Landscape Services and Botanical Gardens, has worked with this

program from its inception and continues to this day to create a single or group planting that is a peaceful sanctuary to contemplate acts of kindness.

The Children's Grove continued to expand beyond its core Kindness Tree program and YMHFA training. Today, as a 501c3 non-profit, it includes the Kindness Library Program bringing books on Kindness to pre-K and elementary school children, sponsoring the Youth Kindness Ambassador program in local high schools, planning the activities for Columbia's Annual Acts of Kindness Week, and sponsoring a wide range of educational, community and school arts programs that raise awareness about the power of Kindness and the mental and emotional needs of youth. In 2020, during the tragic pandemic period, the Children's Grove has continued its work and added the new initiative, The Business in Kindness Awards, of recognizing businesses and non-profits that have excelled in assisting their customers, employees, and community people-at-large who have been adversely affected by COVID.

Children's Grove members are available to make presentations to local groups and visit communities interested in the work of the Children's Grove. Indeed, continued success of the Children's Grove endeavors depends on a shared vision – of parents, neighbors, teachers, youth/service groups, faith-based leaders, school volunteers and business people all joining together in a firm commitment to support the safety and nurturing of our youth. This vision and commitment motivate us all to act upon the belief that "a single act of kindness can change a life forever" – because it can, at the Children's Grove and everywhere.

The Children's Grove success story is due to the goodness of its mission, the tireless efforts of its volunteers, to the generous support of individuals and businesses who give annually through the CoMo Gives Campaign and to all who donate Kindness Trees and Butterfly Benches and Kindness Libraries.

Founding Members, Past Board Members & Current Board Members

Carolyn Allen • Mark Boehner • Iris Calloway • Chris Campbell • Karen Chandler (in memorium) • Tara Collier • Christine Corcoran • Susan Currier • Anne Deaton • Mary Druce • Kim Dude-Lammy • Katherine Foran • Lisa Fritsche • Susan Heinsz • Mary Jo Herde • Melissa Holyoak • Darlene Johnson • Vinita Khanna • Matt Kitzi • Lorah Lackland • Judy LeFevre • Suzanne McDavid • James Melton • Julie Middleton • Pete Millier • Rose & Mike Porter • Erin Reynolds (in memorium) • Marjorie Sable • Jolene Schultz • Joyce Smith • Judy Snyder • Mike Snyder • Georgalu Swoboda • David Thomas • Sharon Thomas Parks • Robin Weneker • Barbara Williamson • Lael Van Holt