

**Sitton, Bear and Kugelman families donate \$30,000 toward a nature-theme playspace to benefit Moreno Court families in West Pensacola.**

***Groundbreaking on the playground space for children under 5 is set for Jan. 19.***

PENSACOLA — Three Pensacola area families are making a \$30,000 investment in the children of Moreno Court.

The Sitton, Bear and Kugelman families have made their commitment to the families of young children in Moreno Court through the construction of a nature-based, early learning play space. Groundbreaking for the project is set for 11 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2021.

All three families collaborated to make sure that the playground could be brought to life.

“Kristen and I get so much joy out of helping people in the community, especially children,” said Josh Sitton. “We are excited to have been a part of this amazing project for children to enjoy for years to come!” Sitton, a retired Super Bowl champion with the Green Bay Packers and Pensacola native son, is a member of the Studer Community Institute board of directors, and co-owner of Bear General Contractors.

The Bear Family Foundation chose to support this project to enable children in our community the chance to enjoy the outdoors, in a healthy and playful setting, said Cindi Bonner, member of the family foundation’s board, and incoming president of the SCI board of directors.

“The Sitton Bear Kugelman playground will provide an opportunity for children to communicate, in person, with one another and to also spend time together, with other family members,” Bonner said. “Furnishing the space allows a child to explore their imagination and for memories to be made.”

Jane Lauter, president of the Kugelman Family Foundation, said her family is thrilled to be part of the project.

“The Kugelman Family Foundation is elated to support this project with other local foundations,” Lauter said. “We believe in our Pensacola community and working hard to make it better each and every day. Together we can do great things and allow opportunities for children to continue to grow and advance in positive ways.”

Studer Community Institute has shepherded the project as part of their partnership with Area Housing Commission, which manages the housing complex off Old Corry Field Road. Bear General Contractors are managing the construction and installation of the playspace, which is based on a similar space at the Bodacious Brew-Thru. Both playgrounds have been designed by Caldwell and Associates.

Research shows that being in nature boosts a child's brain development and ability to focus, be creative and solve problems. This project takes elements of play and nature and combines them into a learning space that is beautiful and fun.

Area Housing Commission management will donate the space for the project and will maintain the garden once it is in place. Managers on site will work with residents who will help to maintain the space as part of the community volunteer hours they are required to give annually.

"SCI's mission in our early learning work is to build a brain, build a life and build a community," said Shannon Nickinson, director of early learning for the nonprofit institute founded by Quint and Rishy Studer in 2014. "By investing in the families of Moreno Court, the Sittons, the Bears and the Kugelmans have shown that they value the potential of every child. We hope their investment in this neighborhood will serve as an example to the rest of the community about the commitment to building a culture of early learning from the ground up."

Adding this to the common space of Moreno Court, which serves Warrington Elementary School, enhances the living space there and gives those children an important outlet for play and learning beyond what traditional playground equipment can provide.

The goal of the project is to provide the children of Moreno Court with an educational play space that highlights nature and the environment as part of the design. This will inspire their play to be purposeful, it will give them a connection to the natural world they do not currently have, and it will inspire the community at large to replicate such an investment in other under-served areas.

Shirley Henderson, deputy executive director of Area Housing, said the play space can be used as the location for lessons about the importance of play, about ways to build parent talk and interaction into play time and to provide an outlet for learning in a safe, fun environment.

"Children learn about their world through their senses," Henderson said. "Creating a safe, diverse and developmentally appropriate outdoor learning environment can allow them to explore and learn so much more about their senses and nature."

Since 2014, Studer Community Institute has created public awareness, programs and projects to boost the kindergarten readiness of our community's children. State education data shows that only 47 percent of children are ready for kindergarten in Escambia County. SCI's in-hospital and in-person education programs have worked to increase parent knowledge of the role language and interaction plays in healthy early brain development, a critical component of a child's ultimate school readiness. To learn more about that work, visit [www.studeri.org](http://www.studeri.org).

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