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Play for all

By ROBIN FOSTER

## **T.H. Rogers dedicates barrier-free playground**

Special needs students at T.H. Rogers School joined parents, teachers and supporters Monday to dedicate their barrier-free playground, a project that faced its own obstacles in the five years since it was conceived.

"I always believe when you have positive intention, and it's for the kids, it always works out," said Principal Cathryn White.

Surrounded a cushioned, rubber mat, the colorful play equipment has ramped access and ground-level activities to offer unrestricted access for students of all abilities. It's the school's third barrier-free playground to be funded in part by Be An Angel Foundation, the Houston charity dedicated to improving the quality of life of children with multiple disabilities and profound deafness.

LaMyrle Ituah, the school's former assistant principal who now works with Houston ISD's alternative and charter school programs, led the dedication ceremony, recognizing individuals and organizations that persevered so that "The Dream Becomes a Reality."

Be An Angel helped build the original playground 15 years ago, Ituah said. But by 2003, it was not functioning properly, she said.

"After years of play, wear, tear and weather, the playground needed to be replaced. And so the drive was on," Ituah said.

Be An Angel was on board immediately, matching the T.H. Rogers PTO contribution of \$20,000 raised by "Walk and Roll" and spaghetti supper fundraisers. Lone Star Recreation came up with a state-of-the-art design almost within budget.

When Houston ISD began its review, though, a major drainage problem was discovered. HISD paid for the \$7,600 overhaul, but more funds were needed to accommodate the new equipment. Post Oak Little League joined the project, donating \$10,000.

Nancy Manley, the school's former principal who now directs HISD's alternative and charter schools, said the cost of ADA-approved equipment is "phenomenal."

The original playground had cost \$85,000, she said. According to HISD, the new playground cost \$249,000. With the donations, the remaining costs were paid from leftover school funds and the district.

The new playground offers multi-sensory experiences that are critical to support the learning needs of special students, Ituah said. The equipment includes special swings for wheelchairs, a flex bridge, climbing wall and sand box. Four large umbrellas provide shade in the play area.

This latest project brings to nearly \$3 million the amount that Be An Angel has provided for T.H. Rogers' special needs students, said Marti Boone, the foundation's executive director. The charity also has contributed to the pool facility and to the school's media center as well as helped families purchase hearing aids, wheelchairs or other adaptive equipment.

In addition to its special programs for students who are multiply impaired, T.H. Rogers also has a successful Vanguard program.