

Alexi Ann, the daughter of Camas residents Jeff Hendricks and his wife Karen Goulding-Hendricks, died unexpectedly at the age of 22 months. Her memory has inspired her parents to take on a huge project.



COMBUSTIO PHOTO

From Camas baby's tragic death, a special playground is born

By Clarice Keating
Post-Record staff

From a small sightless child who passed away just before her second birthday has come a vision — an outdoor play space where children of all developmental abilities can safely play and learn.

The visionaries — Camas residents Jeff Hendricks and his wife Karen Goulding-Hendricks — have worked tirelessly since the death of their daughter Alexi to create an outdoor haven at the place where the family found its refuge during the arduous months of hospital trips, tests, seizures and worry about the unknown.

It will be known as the ARC Family Center Family Picnic Area and P.R.I.D.E. Playground.



Alexi came into this world Aug. 18, 2003. Even her birth was difficult — a portent of the few difficult years to come, and her final nine-day battle for life, which she lost in her parents' arms at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland.

"After she was home a few months, we realized she couldn't see," Karen said. "She kept her eyes closed all the time."

When they had the baby's eyesight checked, it became clear that her eyes were functioning correctly, but the portion of her brain that controlled sight was not working.

They did research. They found out everything they could about raising a blind child.

Karen and Jeff thought: "This is OK, she's blind. We can handle this."

Two months later, Alexi began having seizures. Doctors checked her brain waves, but they couldn't figure out what caused them. Sometimes Alexi would have outbreaks of seizures that couldn't be controlled, and the family, including Austin, who is now 6, spent many nights at the hospital. They spent hours on the computers at the hospital researching information about Alexi's problems.

"It seems so bad initially when you find out these things," Jeff said. "The more we learned, the more we started feeling fortunate [that her problems weren't worse]."

Again, they thought: "She's only having seizures. We can handle this."

Alexi's development was slow, and her list of physical issues continued to grow. She had major difficulty eating because, as they family discovered later, she had a small hole in her larynx into which food and drink would reflux. When Alexi tried to eat, it would lead to violent coughing fits, until she was red in the face.

"Nobody plans on [having a child with disabilities]," Karen said. "And, all of a sudden, you have one, and you have so much to learn. You feel like you're racing the clock, trying to figure out what's wrong."

Despite her physical hardships, Alexi was an extremely happy baby. Jeff and Karen said they only heard her cry six times in her short life, her face was usually plastered with a huge grin that lit up her big blue eyes.

Smiling was Alexi's main form of communication. She loved playing peek-a-boo, dancing with her mother, and snugg-

ling with her father and brother. She loved being held and listening to music. And Alexi loved being outdoors.



Soon after Alexi was born, and Karen and Jeff discovered her sight was compromised, they toured the ARC of Clark County's Family Center in Vancouver, home to the Parents Receiving Intense Developmental Education program, better known as P.R.I.D.E. for Kids.

The program, for children ages birth to 3 years, provides early intervention for babies and toddlers who demonstrate developmental delays.

P.R.I.D.E. was started 30 years ago by Judy Marick and Kay Parks, both parents of boys with Down syndrome who found that, at the time, there were little or no resources in the area for their children.

Today, Marick serves as program coordinator, and Parks is still heavily involved with the program, though not officially.

At P.R.I.D.E., children with sensory



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Camas residents Jeff Hendricks and Karen Goulding-Hendricks pose with their son Austin, now 6, and their daughter Alexi, who passed away in 2005 at the age of 22 months.

disabilities, such as vision or hearing impairments, and developmental disabilities, like autism or Down syndrome, can receive therapy and education from licensed and certified therapists and special educators. Parents attend sessions with their children to receive information and support, and learn the therapies needed for their child's continued support.

"It's a very comforting and nurturing place," Marick said. "We try to make it homey and easy on the families. We want them to feel like life is good, and everything is going to be OK."

Alexi went to P.R.I.D.E. classes once a week, where she sang songs, played and made friends, while her parents learned how to work with her from speech and physical therapists.

"It was one place where you could go where people don't stare at you," Karen said. "No matter what your disability was, you were normal there."

Just before Alexi passed away unexpectedly from pneumonia, on July 2, 2005, she was learning to walk in a special walker.

During the nine-day stay in the hospital leading up to her death, Alexi's friends and therapists from P.R.I.D.E. visited her at Doernbecher.

P.R.I.D.E. offered support for the Hendricks family for most of Alexi's 22 months of life.

The program moved into a newly renovated facility in 2005. The building has the infrastructure to offer safe, fun play and educational experiences for children within its walls.

Inspired by Alexi's love of the outdoors, the Hendricks family is aiming to help the 115 families that visit P.R.I.D.E. take those experiences outdoors.



Karen and Jeff held Alexi's memorial service outside the P.R.I.D.E. building, at the site that, today, is quickly taking shape into a playground with a special design for children with disabilities.

According to Karen, outdoor play is often a challenge for little ones with developmental delays and disabilities.

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The equipment is too large or ill-equipped; the terrain may be difficult to navigate with wheelchairs or other adaptive equipment.

Since October 2005, the Hendricks have worked tirelessly to secure donations and organize hundreds of hours of volunteer time to plan, design, prepare and install the project.

"Alexi required a good deal of care and time and not having her in our lives as left a hole in our hearts and schedules," Karen said. "The playground keeps us working on something positive and is healing. Knowing we can help other children with challenges experience joy and learn in a safe outdoor area is inspiring."

Hewlett-Packard, where Jeff works, has allowed its employees to use their "leadership training" days to work at the site, most recently to install the patio.

Countless businesses and

individuals have donated funds, time and expertise to the project.

The total project is expected to cost \$125,000.

To date, the committee has raised more than \$35,500 in cash donations, as well as \$11,500 in promised funds, and a \$20,000 grant from the Vancouver Rotary Club.

The project is still in need of monetary and in-kind donations. They hope to receive approximately \$45,000 in donations to finish the project.

The park will be dedicated Aug. 15, at the ARC Family Center, at 6511 N.E. 18th St., in Vancouver.

It's the day after Alexi's birthday.

"It's amazing, the impact this little person has had," Jeff said.

To donate or get involved, contact ARC of Clark County Executive Assistant Laurie Calhoun at 256-1562, Ext. 12. For more information about the project, log on to www.arc-familycenter.org.