



Melody Richardson: Building Playgrounds and Dreams

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For nearly an entire year, **Melody Richardson** spearheaded an effort to build a playground at Perkerson Elementary School in south Atlanta, where the majority of students come from economically disadvantaged families. On April 18, 2009, (after having been rained out on March 28, 2009), Melody's dream came to life, when hundreds of volunteers from numerous organizations, including the Family Law Section of the Atlanta Bar Association, churches, and a girl scout troop gathered for two days to build an incredible playground. Where previously there was only a vandalized basketball court, a little bit of grass and a lot of weeds, there are now swings, slides, monkey bars, a tether ball and a covered outdoor classroom.

As chair of the Family Law Section of the Atlanta Bar Association, Melody partnered with the Atlanta Bar Foundation and both the administration and PTA from Perkerson Elementary School to raise funds to build the playground. Melody developed a program called "Pennies for Perkerson," whereby she delivered empty water jugs to law firms across the city for employees to dump their excess change to help fund the project. Melody applied for and received grants from KOOL-AID, KaBoom! (www.kaboom.org), the Atlanta Bar Foundation, the Georgia Association of Women Lawyers

and the John and Mary Franklin Foundation. With assistance from the Perkerson school community, who conducted donut sales and a holiday flea market, Melody raised over \$40,000.00. To involve the students, Melody had them draw pictures of their



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dream playground; the majority of the elements drawn by the children were incorporated into the build. Some of the children's drawings were framed and given to individuals and law firms who donated money for the project.

While one may think buying the equipment and having it installed is all that must take place in order for a playground to be built, it is far from the truth. Melody had to coordinate the necessary insurance policies, obtain concrete and other surfacing needs, procure professionals to install the equipment and arrange for volunteers to be fed. Melody came up with the idea of a "children's corner," where students from the school could watch the playground being built while participating in activities to keep them occupied. One of Melody's



dedicated volunteers donated mosaic tiles so the children could design cement stepping stones for use around the play area.

There is no way to calculate the hours Melody spent on the project. I witnessed her spend days working on grant applications, organizing volunteer teams, attending PTA meetings, counting change and giving of herself in any way possible to reach the goal of building a playground for the children of Perkerson Elementary School. She never once complained about the amount of time the project was taking away from her business. Rather, the project emboldened Melody. She never missed an opportunity to rally support for the playground, whether at Bar meetings, CLEs or Court appearances. In typical Melody fashion, she wanted all of the praise to go to the volunteers, the students and faculty from Perkerson Elementary School; she was always reticent to take any credit.

While I now work with Melody, I got to know her when I worked for the *Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation*. She was one of our strongest and most dependable volunteers. She dedicates countless pro bono hours to representing the interests of low-income families and children; her devotion to this project came as no surprise to me. Melody's compassion for children who may not lead the most privileged or fortunate lives is embodied in the playground she had built for them. ■

