

ASHLEY'S BIG PLANS

Told by Dawn M. Hutchison

Seven-year-old Ashley looked out from her bedroom window. A tall white man, wearing a baseball cap, was measuring the vacant lot in front of her apartment, and she thought she'd better have a talk with him. He probably didn't know it, but she had big plans for this space. Ashley pulled on her red-and-blue jumper and scampered down the stairs, braids bobbing. She darted past her mother and little brother, and ran outside.

People in the neighborhood had been watching Darell Hammond all morning from their apartment windows. Some had even walked by for a closer look at what he was doing. But Ashley was the first to speak to him. "Have you come to build the playground?" she asked. "A playground, what a great idea!" said Darell, with a smile. *How could she know that?* he thought to himself.

"I'm Ashley," she said. "I've been praying for a playground, and I have big plans for it!" "What exactly are your plans?" Darell asked. Ashley dashed back into her apartment, returning with a handful of drawings. By then, other kids had started to gather. Darell looked at Ashley's drawings and listened to the neighborhood kids. It seemed they all had big plans. "A dinosaur you can climb on," said one. "A big ship," said another.

Darell looked around at the dry, dusty, grassless area. He could just imagine what the area was used for at night. He was right. The Southeast Washington, D.C., housing complex was poorly maintained. The

neighborhood was known mostly for its poverty and crime. The lot was a breeding ground after dark for illegal activity: drugs, gangs, and violence.

Darell immediately liked Ashley. She reminded him of himself when he was her age. He was a dreamer too, always coming up with ways to build a better world for children like himself. Now, twenty-four-year-old Darell had an idea to turn this place around, and he could use her help.

As the co-founder of KaBOOM!, Darell rallies inner-city residents to rebuild community spirit by building playgrounds. He gets local people to pool their money and volunteer their time, church organizations to cook food, and businesses to donate construction materials and tools. Darell wanted to make sure Ashley's neighborhood had a playground. There was much to do, so he got started, telling Ashley he would be back soon.

A week later he returned. This time Ashley's mother and her neighbors, Ms. Marshal and Ms. Law, came out to talk with him. He told the women about the children's dream, and how he wanted to help them make it come true. "But, it's going to take a lot more than imagination," he said. That was an understatement. What it would take was one hundred volunteers and about forty thousand dollars, Darell told them, as Ashley's mother stared in disbelief.

There weren't many more than one hundred adults living in the entire complex, and many of them were single mothers who had little spare time. As for the forty thousand dollars, well, that was simply going to take a miracle. Darell understood Ashley's mother's concerns, having heard them from other parents in other housing projects. But he knew

they could do it. He told stories of how other neighborhoods had come together and accomplished the impossible.

The mothers weren't sure how they were going to make it happen, but for the children, they wanted to try. Even the kids wanted to do their part. "I'll help out, Darell!" Ashley yelled, as she disappeared down the sidewalk with a trail of children following her, in search of one hundred adults.

And her work paid off. A week later the community meeting was so packed, the kids had to gather outside. With paper and crayons, the youngsters drew more of their playground ideas. Inside, the adults talked excitedly. Before long, churches, grocery stores, and even the local gas stations had posters advertising the community playground project. Ashley and the other kids led a penny drive to raise money.

But as the time to build the playground neared, they were desperately short of the funds. Many people were convinced the project would never happen. "Not in that neighborhood," they said. "You'll never raise that kind of money or get enough volunteers." After a while, even Darell became disheartened.

One day when he was almost ready to give up, Ashley ran up to him, out of breath. "Darell, we raised \$9.97 in pennies this week! Isn't that great?" she asked. "That can buy something, right? A sliding board, maybe?" In that moment, Darell knew Ashley would never give up. "Yes, Ashley," he said, "that will buy something wonderful," as he put his baseball cap onto her little head. If this little dreamer wouldn't quit, neither would he.

That's when fate stepped in to lend a hand. Later that day, Darell got

a call from the local lumber yard. They wanted to donate a semi trailer full of wood, and five truckloads of wood mulch to spread around the playground! The next day someone else called, donating some old tires. The paint store contributed paint and brushes. The church offered to make breakfast for volunteers and send their youth group to help. The miracle Ashley's mother had asked for began to materialize.

Before long, the empty lot was filled with piles of donated supplies and swarms of people! These volunteers worked tirelessly for four straight days. On the second day it rained, but that didn't dampen their spirits. They just kept building.

The whole apartment complex was filled with the echoes of hammers and saws, and clouds of sawdust. It was a beautiful sight to see. On the last day of construction there were nearly five hundred volunteers! Even the children helped. They filled wheelbarrows and buckets with mulch, spreading it across the enormous playground. They screwed the last bolts into the tire dinosaur, and hung the tire swings.

When the work was done, Ashley's mom and the other neighbors stood back, amazed. Their community playground was finally finished. Ms. Marshall just shook her head, saying softly, "I never would have imagined . . ." But Ashley wasn't surprised. "Darell and I, we always knew," she said with confidence, as she stared at the twenty-four-foot sliding board. "We had big plans."

Adults need children in their lives to keep their imagination fresh and their hearts young and to make the future a reality for which they are willing to work.

MARGARET MEAD

This was the first playground built out of a partnership between Darell Hammond and Dawn Hutchison, who went on to co-found KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit organization that has since constructed more than one thousand community playgrounds. KaBOOM! gets individuals, organizations, and businesses together to create safe and accessible places for children to play. In the process, KaBOOM! helps communities establish partnerships for making further improvements. For more information on the know-how, resources, and training available from KaBOOM!, visit their Web site, www.kaboom.org; or phone 202-659-0215.