

Volunteers build faith from playground up

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a west-side playground. More than 100 families attend the church or send children to an adjoining private school.

The Rev. Leonard James, church pastor, said he applauds Kids Around the World for its work overseas. But Rockford residents have endured their own problems with crime and poverty. He said the principle is no different than in Bosnia.

"We all have needs," James said. "There's a universal need — that's love."

The church and surrounding neighborhood are looking for help getting a playground built by next summer.

Kids Around the World organizers say they will consider the request, although they say the principle isn't the same. People in Rockford already have playgrounds. There's a public park district and other institutions ready to help neighborhoods in need. Bosnia and other areas targeted for help, organizers say, have been ravaged by war or poverty unlike anything seen anywhere in the United States.

Ralph Peterson, another member of the group's board of directors, said the missionaries take their directions from a higher power.

"We need to be sure where God wants us to be, whether that's the west side of Rockford or Vietnam," Peterson said. "As long as the Lord's telling me to go, I'll go."

Brovary beginnings

The playground concept evolved from Rockford's sister-city relationship with Brovary, the Ukrainian city. Leaders of the two communities had been courting each other since the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

Denny Johnson, a former Rockford alderman and an advocate of sister city relations, approached some of his friends at First Evangelical Free about making an overture toward the people of Brovary. The group settled on a playground, figuring that reaching the children was the best way to make a long-term impact.

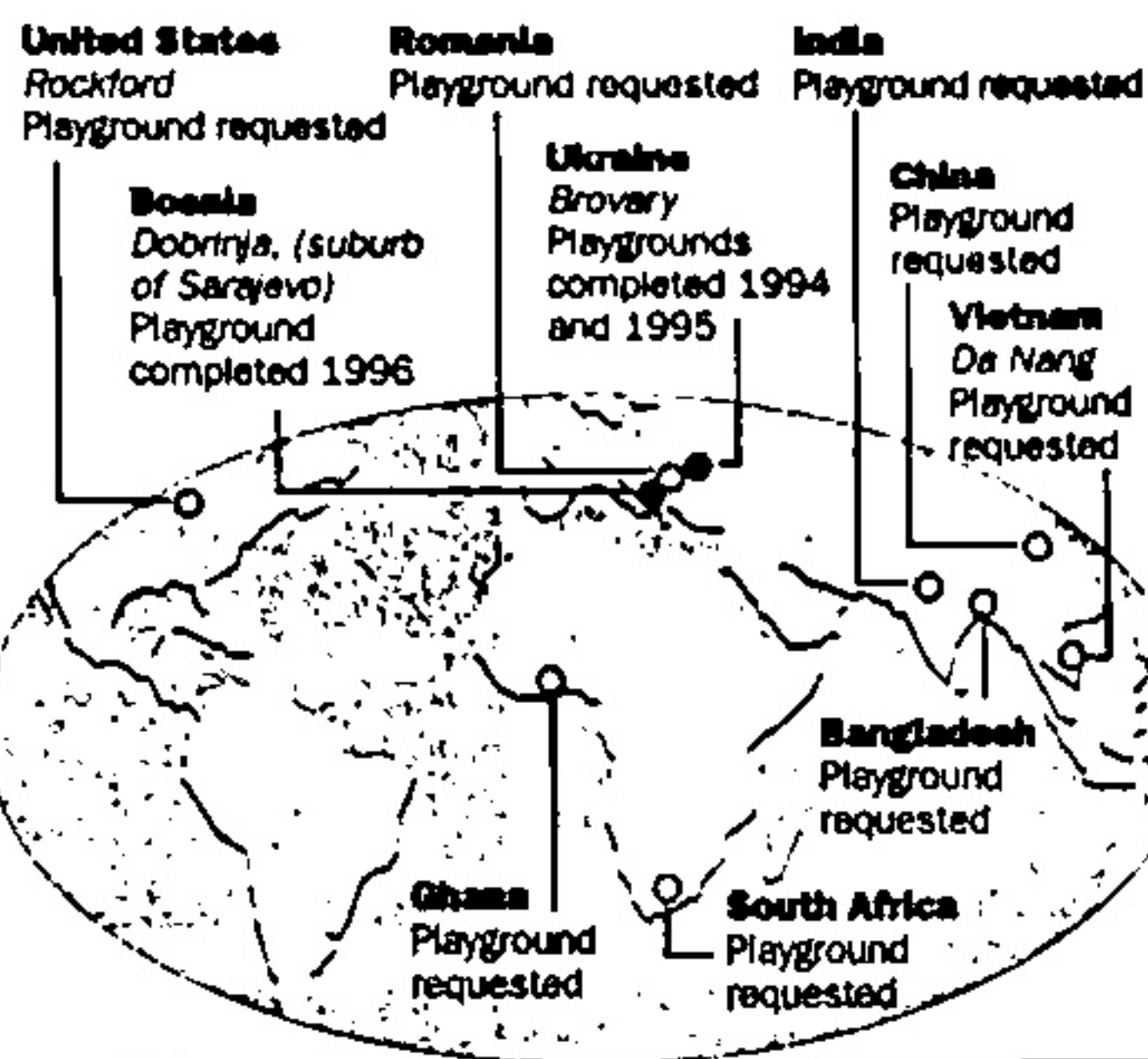
Johnson, who served on the city council in the 1970s and '80s, said it was a natural move for a church-affiliated group.

"This is something that Jesus would have done," the 58-year-old businessman said. "If he were here today, he'd be building playgrounds."

Through donations, the group raised about \$70,000 for the two playgrounds in Brovary and \$65,000 for the Bosnian playground. Organizers say they plan to make another appeal for money once they decide where to take their efforts next.

The dollars are used to pur-

Worldwide demand



The Register Star

The mission

Organizers of "Kids Around the World" formed as a not-for-profit corporation in 1995. They describe their mission as:

"Kids Around the World is a Christian ministry that is committed to reaching out to children around the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to help those who work with them around the world. This is accomplished in a three-fold purpose:

- "Evangelize children around the world.
- "Train and encourage those who work with children.
- "Network with other individuals and organizations who share the common goal of reaching children for Christ."

Board of directors

The members of First Evangelical Free Church who have taken leadership roles in Kids Around the World:

- Denny Johnson, president, Johnson Press, 2801 Eastrock Drive, Rockford.
- Charles Salberg, president, Potter Form & Tie, 2530 Laude Drive, Rockford.
- Ralph Peterson, president, On Site Woodwork, 4100 Rock Valley Pkwy., Loves Park.
- Jim Rosene, youth pastor, First Evangelical Free Church, 2223 N. Mulford Road, Rockford.

chase slides, swings, basketball nets, volleyball courts and other playground supplies. The hardware then is shipped overseas, while each volunteer for Kids Around the World pays for his or her own travel to the chosen site.

In the Sarajevo suburb of Dobrinja, Johnson and his fellow organizers were joined by about 20 volunteers for a crusade that lasted the first two weeks of September.

One volunteer, Dan Hendrickson, was drawn to the mission by the challenge of building a playground from the ground up under conditions that were uncertain and unstable. The 45-year-old Rockford Park District employee said it was a rewarding experience — and tough work.

The crews worked long days, rain or shine. They lived with families who volunteered to house the

American visitors. And they raced against the clock, knowing that their flights out of Bosnia left in 12 days.

"You can't miss a day or you're in trouble," Hendrickson said. "You surely don't want to have to leave with the playground unfinished. That's pretty much your biggest fear."

The Dobrinja playground was built on a vacant lot amid apartment buildings crowded with Bosnian children. It was completed with little time to spare. After a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony, children swarmed to the waiting slides, swings and other features.

Then the missionaries returned to Rockford.

U.S. officials' praise

But their work is not going unnoticed by American government officials. Diplomats with the U.S.



Photo courtesy of Kids Around the World Inc.

A banner marks the newest playground built by volunteers from First Evangelical Free Church of Rockford. The playground is located in a Bosnian community heavily shelled in the recent war.

Agency for International Development describe Kids Around the World as a unique tool for fostering international good will.

A letter from John Menzies, the U.S. ambassador to Bosnia, congratulated the playground crusaders, saying the Rockford group "exemplifies the ideal of American volunteerism."

Craig Buck, an American diplomat stationed in Sarajevo, said in a telephone interview that the playground is wildly popular among Muslims, Jews and members of other religious faiths. He said the missionaries made an impression on Bosnians with their preaching about God and the Bible.

But, he added: "They did more by example."

Making an impact

Catic, the Bosnian war survivor, agreed that the playground's symbolic value has touched residents there deeply. The 44-year-old mother of two said the purple-and-yellow playground is the most vivid reminder that war has subsided. It also offers hope that rebuilding is possible.

The religious teachings of Kids Around the World made an impact, too. Catic said her teenage son still talks about passages in the Bible that were highlighted by the American visitors.

Catic said she personally questions in what form God truly exists. But her belief in a higher being, she said, is never stronger than when she watches the children of Dobrinja playing on their sandboxes and swings.

"I know that something exists," she said.



Courtesy of Kids Around the World Inc.

Rockford businessman and church member Jerry Fleming breaks a sweat assembling the playground during the 12-day Bosnian crusade.