

# Volunteers build faith from playground up

## Area residents bring healing to kids in places like Bosnia

By **SCOTT WILLIAMS**

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**R**OCKFORD — When these missionaries spread the word of God, the message goes something like this: Have faith and have fun.

Volunteers from First Evangelical Free Church are drawing global attention with their unusual offer to build playgrounds for needy children in foreign countries.

Organized as the not-for-profit Kids Around the World Inc., they just completed a mission in strife-torn Bosnia in September. It was their third overseas project since 1994.

Now requests are pouring in from people in such troubled regions as Africa and Southeast Asia. To many shaken by war or poverty, the playground has become a reassuring sign that Americans recognize their plight and are willing to help.

As Bosnian war survivor Emila Catic said in a telephone interview from Sarajevo: "It's like sunshine after rain."

For the Rockford missionaries, Kids Around the World is more than sandboxes

### How to help

To volunteer for Kids Around the World or make a contribution, call First Evangelical Free Church at 877-7046.

church members preach the gospel in homes, schools and churches. Organizers say they have succeeded both in spreading good will and encouraging a stronger belief in God.

In the former Soviet community of Brovary, Ukraine, two playgrounds were built in 1994 and 1995. Once only two churches served the 90,000 people of Brovary. Now there are 10.

"It's fun to see what has spun off," said Jim Rosene, president of Kids Around the World and youth pastor at First Evangelical Free. "The playground goes

in — and opens the door for who knows what." To them, it's a way of exporting American religion to people desperately in need of a little faith and healing.

During the crusades, which are gaining support among U.S. government diplomats,



Photos courtesy of Kids Around the World Inc.

Children enjoy the new playground in the community of Dobrinja, a Sarajevo suburb with a population of 20,000. Dobrinja frequently was caught in the cross fire during the Bosnian war.

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Now the missionaries are trying to decide where to go next. Through other international organizations such as UNICEF, word has gotten out about the generous American playground builders.

Requests have been lodged on behalf of Romania, Mongolia, South Africa, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, China and others. Kids Around the World organizers also are considering a written plea from the first lady of Ghana, an impoverished country on the west coast of Africa. In the letter, the first lady asked for help "to offer creative educational entertainment in a relaxed environment for children."

Another request has come from a not-so-distant place: Rockford.

Members of Christian Union Baptist Church, 1705 Kilburn Ave., have asked Kids Around the World for help building



A Bosnian girl tries out one of the features of the Dobrinja playground, which cost about \$65,000 and was funded by donations to the church-organized Kids Around the World.

Please see **Volunteers, 7A** ▶

■ **Who participates in Kids Around the World, 7A**