

In The Pines North gets new place for kids to play

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Victoria Montenegro, 2, plays on the In the Pines North Playground and Sports Recreation area in Boynton Beach. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

GL Homes recently completed its latest Passion For Playgrounds initiative at In the Pines North in Boynton Beach with a ceremony for the affordable housing community's new playground, refurbished basketball court and soccer field.

The [GL Homes Passion for Playgrounds](#) program has assisted Florida nonprofit organizations with the donation and construction of a new playground. Misha Ezratti, GL Homes president, also is a board member of [In The Pines](#), a nonprofit group established in 1978 with a mission to provide affordable housing to local workforce and migrant families in Delray Beach. GL Homes first started at In the Pines North after building 20 units in 2009 and another 10 units in 2012.

"We do a Passion for Playgrounds project with one of our charitable partners every year and we decided In the Pines is to be the recipient this year," Ezratti said. "I came back here and I saw this back area, which is an outdoor amenity, was being underutilized and in a little bit of disrepair. We decided to not only give them a brand new playground but also refurbish the soccer field and basketball court so we can put some smiles on these young kids faces, and [give them] a place to have fun for many years to come."



The refurbished basketball court is shown during the opening of the In the Pines North Playground and Sports Recreation area in Boynton Beach. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The program's past projects have also included other nonprofit organizations, including Place of Hope and The Boys & Girls Club. Ezratti said it's about a 10-month process with a financial cost of over \$50,000 for the project, which includes the process of going through the county and handling the permitting, site plans, surveys and construction costs.

"We have partnered with over 100 charitable organizations in the state and usually ones affiliated with children," he said. "We identify an outdoor area that is in need. It's extremely rewarding to see the kids utilize the playground and be outdoors, especially during the pandemic where it's more important than ever to have a sense of normalcy. It's extremely a great feeling as someone personally involved with In the Pines to see this come to fruition."

Scott McCleneghen, who serves as the president of the board for In the Pines. said there are 70 workforce housing units between the two campuses. In the Pines South, which is in Delray Beach, has 40 units while In the Pines North in Boynton Beach consists of 30 units.



Augustina Mejia Garcia lifts her son, Andy Christopher Salanic Mejia, 18 months, down while playing on the In the Pines North Playground and Sports Recreation area. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

"We have a playground at the south campus and now the kids are playing in a brand new playground here," McCleneghen said. "This used to be just a big sports field for the kids. The basketball court was older and we had it redone. This is really a great improvement for the families who are residents here at In the Pines. GL Homes has been a big supporter of In the Pines with their time and financial commitment."

McCleneghen said the Building a Better Life program helps residents with health and wellness and they learn several skills, including their development of the English language as well as assistance to children with after-school tutoring. In the Pines has seven board members and they rely on donations to assist with day-to-day operations for the two locations.

"Our mission is to provide affordable workforce housing to migrant farm workers and agricultural workers in Western Palm Beach County," he said. "It's the one constant and a tremendous need in the county. We pride ourselves on providing a very clean and good environment. We have families that come from poverty stricken countries and we have programs to help our residents."



Keyla Portillo, 2, plays on the In the Pines North Playground. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Erika Mendoza, an In the Pines North resident for three years, said she is ready to use the new amenities.

"I have a 1-year-old so I will be going to the playground now pretty much everyday," she said. "I want him to go outside, so it's exciting. I usually take him for a walk. We can now go to the playground in the morning and the afternoon. He can play with some kids around the same age and it's perfect."

Maria Montenegro, who has five children, has lived at In the Pines for 12 years and said her kids will use the new playground and sports recreation area.

"It's the greatest idea because we did not have a playground," she said. "They were just playing in the parking lot and it's more fun now. My kids have been here since they were little. It's improved a lot. They have an after-school program to help the kids with homework. They cover the cost of the summer camp. They help us out a lot."

Montenegro said they faced challenges two years ago after her husband was deported and they temporarily relocated to Texas to stay with family. They have all since been reunited together at In the Pines.

"I appreciate everything and they have done so much for us," she said. "They helped us get back on our feet and into our apartment. We have been blessed to be here. We are very thankful. We have been able to save a lot and we are hoping to get our own home."



From left, Elena Castillo Flores, 5, Luna Delgado, 3, Aleena Castillo Flores, 4, play at the In the Pines North Playground. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Ezratti addressed supporters at the ceremony to unveil the new playground and sports recreation area. He credited board members of In the Pines, the team members at GL Homes and the Farmworkers Children's Council. He said the playground was dedicated in memory of Gerald Goray, who served as the longtime president of the board of In the Pines before he died in 2020. Goray's wife, Donna, is the founder of the Farmworkers Children's Council, which provides academic assistance to children at In the Pines.

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