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Playground a step toward revitalization

By Shawn Regan
Staff Writer

First came the construction and sale of four, two-family affordable homes -- so pristine and colorful they almost seem to sparkle against the backdrop of unkempt tenements and urban blight.

Yesterday, another piece of the North Common Neighborhood's rebirth was realized with the dedication of the community-built, newly christened Reviviendo Playground. It is located on what was for more than a decade a vacant lot at the corner of Summer and Newbury streets in one of the city's poorest and most crime-riddled areas, about a block from the downtown.

About 100 neighborhood adults and children gathered at the playground with politicians and other luminaries to name the park and share its story.

"For many of you, it may look like this park sprung up overnight, but it took years, and even the most optimistic of us thought it might never actually happen," said Tamar Kotelchuck of Lawrence Community Works, a nonprofit affordable housing developer. "In 1998 it became clear that the neighborhood wanted to build a place for children to play and be safe. ...This is the result of that vision."

Reviviendo -- which in Spanish means "rebirth" or "renewal" -- Playground was built over two weekends this past spring. Efforts to build the playground began in 1999 with the help of Groundwork Lawrence, which supervised its design and development. More than 150 neighbors of all ages participated in its creation.

Thirty-two individual and business donors contributed about \$70,000 and volunteers, including local construction contractors and architects, saved about \$60,000, Kotelchuck said. The city, which owns the land, chipped in a \$40,000 federal grant to build an iron gate and metal fence that

surrounds the playground.

"I have planted flowers and trees, watered them and helped design and build the playground," said 11-year-old Sandra Torres, who lives in a tall, yellow, vinyl-sided tenement next door to the park with her mother, Carmen Grana, and four siblings. "My dream and the dream of many children in the neighborhood has finally come true."

Jennifer Juno, 31, said all three of her young children helped build the park and play there almost every day. Many adults, she said, also lounge on the iron benches and picnic tables scattered around the park's thick, green lawn.

"It's our park," she said. "This used to be an empty lot filled with trash and overgrown with weeds. Look at it now."

In a corner of the playground, a large jungle-gym rests on a gravelly, soft-rubber slab. Rows of purple, orange and yellow flowers line the rim of the park and small trees and bushes dot the inside.

Immediately surrounding the park are two large, multistory tenements and one of four two-family, low-income homes recently built and sold in the neighborhood as part of Project Reviviendo. The maroon-colored house with yellow trim at 43 and 45 Summer St. looks like it was painted yesterday.

"This is a great example of what the city can do when we work together," said City Councilor Julia I. Silverio, who attended the event with Mayor Michael J. Sullivan and state Reps. Jose L. Santiago, D-Lawrence, and David M. Torrisi, D-North Andover. "To the young kids: This is your park. You need to take care of it and protect it. The adults will help you, but it's up to you."

Those at the celebration cast ballots to name the playground, choosing between "Reviviendo Playground" and "Doctor Scarito Playground." Dr. Nina Scarito was the state's first female obstetrician and delivered more than 20,000 babies during her 40-year career in Lawrence. She lived in a home across the street from the playground until her death in 1994.

The city seized the playground property two years ago from its previous owner for nonpayment of more than \$100,000 in taxes. A grocery store that once occupied the property was destroyed by fire in the late 1980s.

CommunityWorks targeted the North Common Neighborhood for revitalization due to its high rates of poverty, crime and

vandalism. There are plans to build 17 additional units of affordable housing at four large buildings in the neighborhood.

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