

COMMUNITY NEWS

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Putting nature back into play

'Outdoor learning environments' are designed to help children grow

By Emily Vizzo

In a child's world, sand is for digging, water is for splashing and grassy hills are for rolling down.

At Progressive Design Playgrounds in Oceanside, owners John Ogden and Margaret Ryan believe there is a way to spark imaginative play among children, and it doesn't involve a stark metal slide.

They hope their "outdoor learning environments" stimulate children's imaginations and learning with playground equipment that incorporates natural substances such as dirt, water, grass and sand.

"For quite some time, children's advocates and political leaders have expressed concern that disconnection with nature has adverse effects on children," Ryan said. "There's a nationwide movement to connect children to the outdoors."

Ryan and Ogden, who are married, purchased Progressive Design Playgrounds in 2004. The company, which has 20 employees, focuses on designing and manufacturing play equipment built using plastic lumber made from recycled milk jugs, said Ogden, who is company president.

These structures can be augmented with natural elements, such as slides built into a grass hill, play creeks built from recycled plastic water troughs and sandy areas for digging. A setup can cost \$20,000, including the structure itself, installation and safety surfacing such as wood chips or grass.

Ogden and Ryan live in San Francisco with daughters Milla, 5, and Nadya, 2, although Ogden regularly commutes to Oceanside during the week.

Both are from Virginia. Ogden graduated from Radford University in Virginia with a history degree in 1991, and Ryan graduated from Virginia

Commonwealth University with a mass communications degree that same year.

After college, Ogden spent about two years working as a U.S. Senate staff assistant and legislative aide. He later worked with America Online in business development, marketing, sales and management roles.

Ryan, now vice president of marketing communications for Progressive Design Playgrounds, has spent 15 years working in public relations. She previously held executive positions in firms in California and New York, and after moving to San Francisco with Ogden in 1998, started her own public relations company.

Ogden, 39, and Ryan, 40, also run their own Sonoma County boutique winery, Olson Ogden Wines.

When clients call looking for a new playground, Ogden said designers help develop two-dimensional and three-dimensional plans that take into account size, budget and child age range. Perfecting the design can take four to six weeks.

Once government safety requirements have been met and the site prepared, building a playground can take from one day to a few weeks, depending on its complexity, Ogden said.

Yvonne Abdelrahim, director at Tutor Time in Oceanside, said that children enjoy clambering on the rock-climbing wall and crawling in the tunnels of the Progressive Design Playgrounds structure installed there in 2007.

"They love the play structure," Abdelrahim said. "It has a little something for everyone. At that age, kids are learning how to coordinate their hand and leg movements to be able to get on the rocks. It challenges them in the gross-motor-skills way. It's the centerpiece of our play yard."



John Ogden, president of Progressive Design Playgrounds, stood alongside a play structure at the company's Oceanside facility. Ogden and Margaret Ryan, his wife and company co-owner, have paid close attention to child-development research that indicated children learn and play better in more natural recreational environments.



Sergio Ibarra worked on building a play structure. Progressive Design Playgrounds builds play equipment with plastic lumber made from recycled milk jugs.

Ogden said the company has grown steadily over the years. He and Ryan expanded its services to include installation, something they once contracted out. And they have paid close attention to child-development research that indicated children learn and play better in more natural recreational environments.

"It allows them to learn without being told how to learn," Ogden said. "There are more opportunities to interact with nature."

It made sense to them as parents. Their daughter Milla frequently came home from preschool happily soaked from experimenting with the playground water fountain.

"It allows them to step outside their comfort zone and experience the world around them," Ryan said. "The natural environment has many benefits: emotionally, physically and academically."

Change continues to arrive for the company. Progressive Design Playgrounds is scheduled to move to a new location today at 2458 S. Santa Fe Ave. in Vista.

Developing their outdoor learning environments will be a key focus, Ryan said.

"We really see these outdoor learning environments as the next generation of play," she said.

"It's really come full-circle. We're living in a generation of Wii and PlayStation, and there really need to be more activities that engage children in the outdoors."

Eduardo Contreras /
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Online: For information on Progressive Design Playgrounds, go to pdplay.com.

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