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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



FOR INFORMATION CALL

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October 20, 2016

Alderman Michael J. Murphy  
(414) 286-3763

## **Inspiration, loving memories help spark rebirth for west side playground**

*Ceremony set for Saturday (11 a.m.) to open new Marcus DeBack Playground*

In 1996, Wright Street Playground was renamed for **Marcus DeBack**, a nine-year-old boy and innocent bystander who was shot and killed on the playground while leading a younger boy away from violence which had erupted on the basketball court. For **Alderman Michael J. Murphy**, who grew up playing at the playground, Marcus' death has inspired years of work to improve deteriorated and underutilized park spaces. The most recent iteration of this work is the **MKE Plays** initiative, which seeks to reconstruct those city parks most in need of improvement.

"It shouldn't matter where you live in the city, ALL of our youth deserve a high-quality playground that supports their positive physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development," Alderman Murphy said. "MKE Plays is an opportunity to reinvest in youth, and promote the value of play."

Understanding that funding for city-owned play areas has diminished steadily in recent years, and that community engagement is necessary for the sustainable use and maintenance of these spaces, Alderman Murphy's MKE Plays initiative seeks private financial support and resident participation in the park reconstruction process. While the initial goal for MKE Plays was to reconstruct 12 parks over three years (2015-17) and raise \$1 million for these projects, in just 18 months the program has leveraged more than \$1.4 million to be used at 14 locations across the city.

-More-

## **DeBack Playground reopens/ADD ONE**

Funding has come from local donors such as the Zilber Family Foundation, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Burke Foundation, Bader Philanthropies, Woman's Club of Wisconsin, Potawatomi Hotel & Casino's Heart of Canal Street, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, Fund for Lake Michigan, Northwestern Mutual Foundation, Milwaukee Bucks Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and individual donors.

Marcus DeBack Playground, the inspiration for this program, is **now open again** after a year of engagement, planning, and construction. **A celebration and ceremony marking the reopening is scheduled for Saturday, October 22 at 11 a.m. at the playground -- 2461 N. 55<sup>th</sup> St.** With the help of Marcus' mother, the Uptown Crossing Neighborhood Association, and local residents, MKE Plays has helped restore the playground as a symbol of the positive change happening in the community. It features a 90-foot zipline, walking track, fitness equipment, permeable pavement basketball courts, challenging toddler elements, and a 10-foot tall rope dome, all selected based on resident input.

But the space also serves as a reminder of the responsibility we all have to protect children's right to play. Marcus' tragic death was a blow to family and friends who knew this amazing young man and to a community struggling to protect the youthful innocence of our play spaces. For Alderman Murphy, Marcus' death was also a blow to the positive memories he associated with a space in which he had spent countless hours as a youth.

"I grew up on this playground," said Alderman Murphy. "My family didn't have money for vacations or summer camps, so for my siblings and me, the playground became our refuge. I owe a great deal of my success today to the lessons I learned there, conflict resolution, communication, strategy -- the list goes on and on."

With the current struggles of the city and its residents, it is easy to dismiss parks, like the one named for Marcus DeBack, as unimportant. It would be easier still, for Marcus' mother, Ms. Lisa Ettienne, to dismiss the park as unsafe and unworthy of investment. But she doesn't see it that way. At one of the first community meetings held for the park, Ms. Ettienne spoke up in response to opposition over the basketball court.

"Marcus loved this place. He loved playing basketball. This isn't an example of why parks don't work, it is proof that we need spaces like this more than ever," Ms. Ettienne said.

Several tears and several hugs later, residents agreed that this was an asset worth preserving.

(Please go to **[Milwaukee.gov/mkeplays](http://Milwaukee.gov/mkeplays)** to learn more about the MKE Plays initiative).