

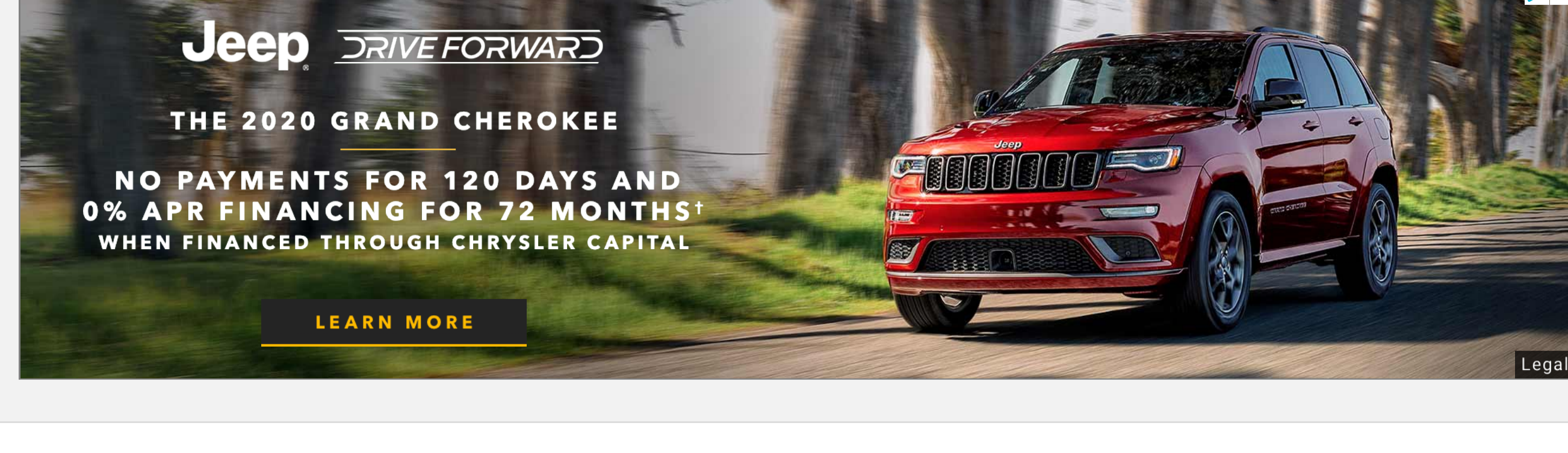


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Recreation

Volunteers give Napa's Playground Fantástico a makeover, reminisce about playground's early days

Courtney Teague Sep 7, 2019

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Volunteers organize Playground Fantástico pieces next to a newly repainted art piece by Gordon Huether during a playground build event in Napa on Saturday morning.

Courtney Teague, Register



Three thousand local volunteers gathered at south Napa's Playground Fantástico 17 years ago to build a whimsical, wooden playground that would become hailed as **one of the Bay Area's best**.

As time passed, splinters and other signs of wear and tear began to take hold. Wood doesn't last forever, said Jim Roberts, who organizes builds for the Kiwanis Club of Napa.

Nearly 60 volunteers from the Kiwanis Club and other local organizations spent their Saturday morning building a safer, hardier Playground Fantástico with one-of-a-kind features, organizers said. The effort was nostalgic for many of Saturday's volunteers who participated in the playground's original build in 2002.

The new playground, located on Old Sonoma Road, features musical, developmental and educational elements that project managers say will stimulate young minds. There are Spanish and English language elements to the new Playground Fantástico, and new trees and grass will be planted, too.

The playground makeover will cost the city of Napa about \$800,000 between labor and materials, said Ali Koenig, who manages Parks and Recreation Services projects for the city. The taller playground structures, intended for kids ages 5 to 12, was built by professionals, but having volunteers to help build the other part of the playground allowed the city to put more money into the design of the smaller playground customized for younger kids, said John Coates, Parks and Recreation Services director.



Newchic

The upgraded Playground Fantástico was the Kiwanis Club's seventy-third playground build in Napa County. Volunteers have worked on playgrounds for schools, parks and churches, from Calistoga to Napa Junction and Cuttings Wharf to Lake Berryessa, Roberts said.

"They care about the children," he said. "We provide the labor."

Matt Eisenberg, a Napa father who was a leader in building Playground Fantástico Saturday and in 2002, said it was exciting to see new energy and ideas poured into the new playground, as a new generation of parents stepped up to volunteer.

He credited the Freed family, which donated \$5,000 for the younger kids' "tot lot." The Napa Valley Education Foundation contributed \$15,000 to the effort.

"It's awesome," he said. "It is very much in need of replacement."

Jill Cadloni, Kiwanis Club president, said the rebuild of Playground Fantástico's "tot lot" is one of the larger projects the group has taken on.

"Everybody pretty much stepped up to the plate," she said.

Both Cadloni and incoming president Lance Hafenstein were part of the original build in 2002.

"It's a weird kind of déjà vu," he said.

Volunteering for the Playground Fantástico project is a tangible, long-lasting way to make a difference and give kids a safe place to have fun, Hafenstein said.

Jon Bawden, a Napa resident who works for playground equipment company Ross Recreation, said it's uncommon to get to work on a project so large. Bawden, who was among a group of roughly a dozen people who helped plan Playground Fantástico, said the process took so long because everyone wanted the playground to be unique and special.

"It took quite a while to get to this point," he said. "It's going to be a huge asset to this community."

Among the volunteers were employees of the Napa County District Attorney's Office and members of the Napa Police Officers Association, including officer Aaron Medina.

Saturday was bittersweet for Medina. He said he was sad to say goodbye to the old Playground Fantástico equipment that the community worked so hard to create and that his kids played on as toddlers, but "it's exciting to have the new equipment" and be part of the playground's rebirth.

Coates of Parks and Recreation said the department hopes to see this version of Playground Fantástico last 25 years or longer.

"Again, the community has come together," he said. "What a testament to the fabric of this community."

Playground Fantástico is scheduled to reopen to the public this fall.

Anyone interested in volunteering for the Kiwanis Club's next playground build at Veritas Christian Academy on Oct. 4 and 5 can contact them by visiting bit.ly/zJIWCM.

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