

On the Playground For Children – and for Josie

By Matt Lazier

Fran Durekas (HD 1990) remembers several excellent professors from her time at Cal Poly – but none who had as profound an impact on her studies and her career as Josephine Stearns.

Stearns taught at Cal Poly's Preschool Learning Lab before she died in 1992, and Durekas studied there with her.

So when the playground at the lab reopens this fall after a \$190,000 renovation Durekas initiated and largely funded, the Sunnyvale alumna wants it dedicated in her beloved professor's name.

"She was a mentor who made me passionate about what I do. She really pushed me to think about how I could have the biggest impact on children," said Durekas, a College of Liberal Studies Honored Alum who founded a firm called Children's Creative Learning Centers, which designs employee childcare facilities.

Faculty in the Psychology and Child Development Department say Durekas' vision and donation will impact Cal Poly students learning to work in childcare as well as the youngsters they care for at the Preschool Learning Lab.

Durekas approached the university in spring 2007 about developing a new playground. "Cal Poly has given so much to me," she said. "It absolutely set the foundation for my success. This was a chance to give back."

She felt the playground was an area of the program that could use a lift. "The space that existed was not very exciting for the children," she said.



Playground memories - (left to right) Eileen Joseph, director of advancement for the College of Liberal Arts; Psychology and Child Development faculty members Jasna Jovanovic, Denise Daniels and Jennifer Jipson; and Landscape Architecture faculty member David Watts at the tire swing at the new Preschool Learning Lab playground.

Photo by Matt Lazier

Benefactor



Fran Durekas, who honored her mentor and professor Josephine Stearns.

Contents

Inside this edition:

- [Note from the Editors](#)
- [2009 Grads: Ready to Work](#)
- [Winds of Change](#)
- [Detoxing Arsenic](#)
- [Protectors of the Land](#)
- [Hotshots: This Choirboy Packs a Punch](#)
- [Playground Rebuilt to Honor Professor](#)
- [Class Notes Now on PolyLink](#)
- [Alumni Action: Come 'Home' or Go Far](#)
- [University News](#)
- [Get Involved](#)
- [What's Wrong with This Picture?](#)

Reader Survey

Win a \$25 Gift Card

Child development faculty agreed, saying the playground was static, had too much concrete and didn't provide many ways for preschoolers to learn while they played.

Durekas brought ideas for how to improve things. She met with child development and landscape architecture faculty, who in turn engaged students in the process.

Durekas' enthusiasm proved contagious. Just as the plan was being presented for approval, a second, anonymous donor stepped forward, allowing for the inclusion of several additional components in the design. Work on the project began in the spring 2009 quarter.



Multimedia: [Playground Construction Slideshow](#)

Make sure popup blockers are OFF
Requires Flash player. [Download Flash player free](#)

Preschoolers returning in the fall will find a playground that connects their playtime more directly to their natural surroundings. A slide follows the slope of a hill. A dry creek bed winds through miniature sand dunes. Tags identify all of the native plants. And Cal Poly students will help preschoolers grow and eat fruits and vegetables from an organic garden.

Wherever possible, the playground contains sustainable and natural components, including pea gravel and an engineered wood surface called Fibar.

"We're trying to put the children back in contact with nature, by removing artificial surfaces," said David Watts, a landscape architecture professor who led the design of this project and has worked for many years on study and design of playgrounds.

This goal complements other exciting new directions in which the preschool lab is headed. The child development program is revamping its curriculum for the lab to focus more on supporting children's natural curiosity about science and math by providing rich opportunities for exploration and discovery, said professor Jennifer Jipson. This move reflects Cal Poly's overall effort to focus on science, technology, engineering and math – or STEM – disciplines, she said.

It was important to the donors, she added, that Cal Poly students be involved in the development of the playground.

Child development student Hillary Sinnott is designing the organic garden for her senior project. She hopes it will be used to introduce the youngsters to biology through growth of the fruits and vegetables, physics through collecting and weighing what they've grown, and even engineering when Cal Poly students help the children build netting and poles for their plants.

Watts, meanwhile, involved some of his students in the design of the project and in learning to do site inspections during construction.

The project is a change of pace for Durekas. Her company usually determines clients' goals and then creates a child development facility to meet those aims.

"This is very special," she said, "because it's a chance to create a teaching tool for students. It's different from anything I've ever done."

Help us plan future editions of Cal Poly magazine: [take our Summer '09 Reader Survey](#).



Complete the survey by **July 10** and you will automatically be entered in a drawing for one of four \$25 gift cards good for Cal Poly Gear on the El Corral Web site.
[Take the survey now](#)

[CP Home](#) • [CP Find It](#) • [Get Adobe Reader](#) • [Assistance Accessing News Web pages](#)



Events • News Releases

Cal Poly Update E-newsletter

Alumni • Giving • Athletics

Cal Poly Public Affairs

California Polytechnic State University

San Luis Obispo, CA 93407

805.756.1511

polynews@calpoly.edu