

# Millidgeville "PEAK's" Interest in Kids' Active Living

*By Jane Barry*

*The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

Four years ago a caring group of parents in the Millidgeville area came together to discuss what they might do to help address the disturbingly high levels of physical inactivity and obesity among elementary school-aged children and the community in general.

They dubbed themselves Millidgeville PEAK (Parents Encouraging Active Kids). A committee was initiated with the goal of addressing these unsettling trends as well as fostering increased environmental stewardship in our community.

The group did their homework and cite research that indicates that the provision of a green play area has been shown to promote social inclusion of all people regardless of gender, class, race and ability. Such areas also facilitate higher levels of active, imaginative and constructive play, attracting children who are at risk of inactivity or low physical activity, and are not usually engaged on a "typical" playground.

By establishing an area for use as an outdoor "classroom" with seating, the group states that it "encourages exploration and study of the natural world, increased environmental awareness and stewardship. Studies overwhelmingly support that students showed more enthusiasm, creativity and engagement for learning in an outdoor classroom, especially for those students who require an innovative learning approach."

In such an outdoor, natural environment, it's conducive to instilling genuine respect for nature and each other, where more co-operation and civility has been documented.

Karen Keating Small and Cathy Connolly agreed to act as the leaders of the initiative and begin the daunting task of raising approximately \$60,000 for a fitness trail, trees and outdoor classroom and new active play equipment.

As past president of the M. Gerald Teed Home and School Association, Karen Small readily obtained the wholehearted support of School District 8 and the school, given that M. Gerald Teed is adjacent to the green area and available to both students and community.

They realized the connection between active living and academic success for their 250 plus students. Many Canadian schools involved in such greening projects note a culture of environmental stewardship developing among their students. With new residential development burgeoning and other playing fields nearby, the timing was right for Millidgeville.

The project, the first of its kind in Greater Saint John, borders on Black Street, adjacent to M. Gerald Teed School and was completed on June 12, 2009. The grand opening last October was attended by many of the financial contributors to the successful completion of the project.

"The Millidgeville PEAK Committee extends thanks to all of our funding partners for their support of this innovative green space fitness project," says Cathy Connolly, co-chair.

In addition to the support of parents and families of M. Gerald Teed School students, it was supported by generous grants from numerous community funders, including the Greater Saint John Community Foundation and the New Brunswick Children's Foundation, the Government of New Brunswick and City of Saint John.

After two years of planning, including improvements to the overall drainage of the adjacent sports field, the new recreational green space was thoroughly enjoyed by the community over the 2009 summer season, encouraging active living and participation by all ages and by the student population upon their return to school last September.

As the project focuses on the development of natural green space enhancement, it continues to offer opportunities for active recreation throughout the winter season when the traditional playground equipment is closed due to safety precautions.

The natural elements of the green space include mature evergreen trees, raised berms, cedar balance beams, stepping rounds, a seating area and pathways. The graded gravel base facilitates ease of access, enhances safety and encourages the use of the area as an outdoor fitness circuit.

Through the significant partnerships that were established for this project, the PEAK committee has created a valuable asset for the community at a time when the latest statistics are increasingly pointing to the need for collective action in more ways than one. Visitors to the Millidgeville PEAK green area are helping support the goal of decreasing childhood obesity, increasing inclusive physical activity experiences across all ages and abilities and providing outdoor classroom experiences for various community groups while fostering environmental stewardship.



A Millidgeville community group, Millidgeville PEAK, spearheaded the enhancement of green space recreational opportunities on Black Street with the support of local families, foundations and government. Pictured at the official opening are from left Mark Crowley, principal, M. Gerald Teed School; Karen Keating Small, co-chair PEAK committee; Trevor Holder, MLA Saint John-Portland; Chris Toole, director of finance, School District 8; Kim Gogan, PEAK committee member; Mike Murphy, Greater Saint John Community Foundation board member and Joan Smith, NB Children's Foundation board member, both funding partners; Frances Roderick, PEAK committee member and Cathy Connolly, co-chair PEAK committee.



**Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)**