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MLS WORKS: Leaving a Lasting Legacy

A new playground was built in Chester as part of the league's community outreach initiative

By Andrew Elsass

As the play on the field came to a close at the 2012 AT&T MLS All-Star Game, it was only just beginning for the children of the Chester, Pennsylvania community. An initiative of the MLS WORKS community outreach program, Major League Soccer joined the Philadelphia Union, AT&T, the Chester Upland School District, and organizers from KaBOOM! to construct a new playground and small-sided field at Science and Discovery High School as part of the All-Star Game festivities.

The new playground will provide more than 500 children in the Chester community with a safe place to play, and the AT&T small-sided field will increase awareness and provide additional opportunities for local youth to play soccer.

Along with KabOOM!, MLS WORKS met with local children months prior, where they drew up ideas for their dream playground. Many of these visions ultimately became a reality as playground committees incorporated the children's ideas into the final design.

Local volunteers were joined by MLS All-Stars in constructing the playground, while Philadelphia Union Academy coaches led drills and small-sided games for children as part of the AT&T Youth Clinic. Former MLS All-Star Alexi Lalas was on hand to participate, joined by the AT&T StreetStyle Soccer Team. The new facilities were officially opened via the ceremonial "cutting of the board" by MLS Commissioner Don Garber, Philadelphia Union executives and members of Chester Upland School District.

"We don't have to beg our players to participate—they offer their services," Commissioner Garber said. "It's what makes me proudest as commissioner of the league. Every year at the All-Star Game and MLS Cup, I get to talk to a bunch of guys and thank them for their service. But I just come and pat some backs, shake hands, pose for pictures, while they're here for hours and hours working on community projects, and I really applaud that."

Science and Discovery High School was chosen as part of Major League Soccer's effort to create sustainable projects that leave a lasting legacy. Now in its sixth year, this initiative has provided donations and goodwill to thousands of children and families under its "Unite. Volunteer. Serve." community service program. This is a collective engagement of MLS and its clubs to improve the quality of life in club markets at the grassroots level.

At MLS Cup 2011, MLS WORKS contributed to several Los Angeles communities with a variety of projects. MLS players like San Jose's Chris Wondolowski, C.J. Sapong of Sporting KC, and Seattle's Mauro Rosales—among many others—refurbished areas, planted trees, and painted facilities at Caron's Veterans Park. Several players, as well as Commissioner Garber and other league executives, were also involved in the refurbishment and subsequent dedication of the Catskill Avenue Elementary School library as part of American Education Week.

During the All-Star Week celebrations in New York last year, a new Guinness World Record was set for the number of consecutive penalty kicks taken and a \$25,000 donation made on behalf of MLS WORKS to the Hope and Heroes Children's Cancer Fund. MLS All-Stars teamed up with volunteers from NYC Parks and Rec to help renovate the HighBridge Community Center in the Bronx and assist in the construction of the center's new Splash House, an outdoor locker room facility. In attendance was Sir Bobby Charlton, Manchester United legend and the club's current chief executive, as well as other local elected officials.

MLS WORKS was launched in April 2007 to serve the role as the league's community outreach initiative dedicated to addressing important social issues affecting young people, serving as a platform for both League and club philanthropic programs. The foundation's inaugural project was hosted by Real Salt Lake at the 2009 MLS All-Star game. Players and volunteers constructed a playground at Northwest Recreation Center that now serves more than 3,000 children in the community.

Each of these undertakings is culminated by all the involved volunteers, local representatives, MLS players, as well as Commissioner Garber, partaking in the ceremonial "cutting of the board." This unique MLS WORKS tradition, not unlike that of a ribbon-cutting ceremony, marks the opening of each new refurbished space.

This December at MLS CUP 2012, another community-in-need will be identified as the location for the next MLS WORKS project, the next instance of Major League Soccer demonstrating its commitment to social philanthropy.