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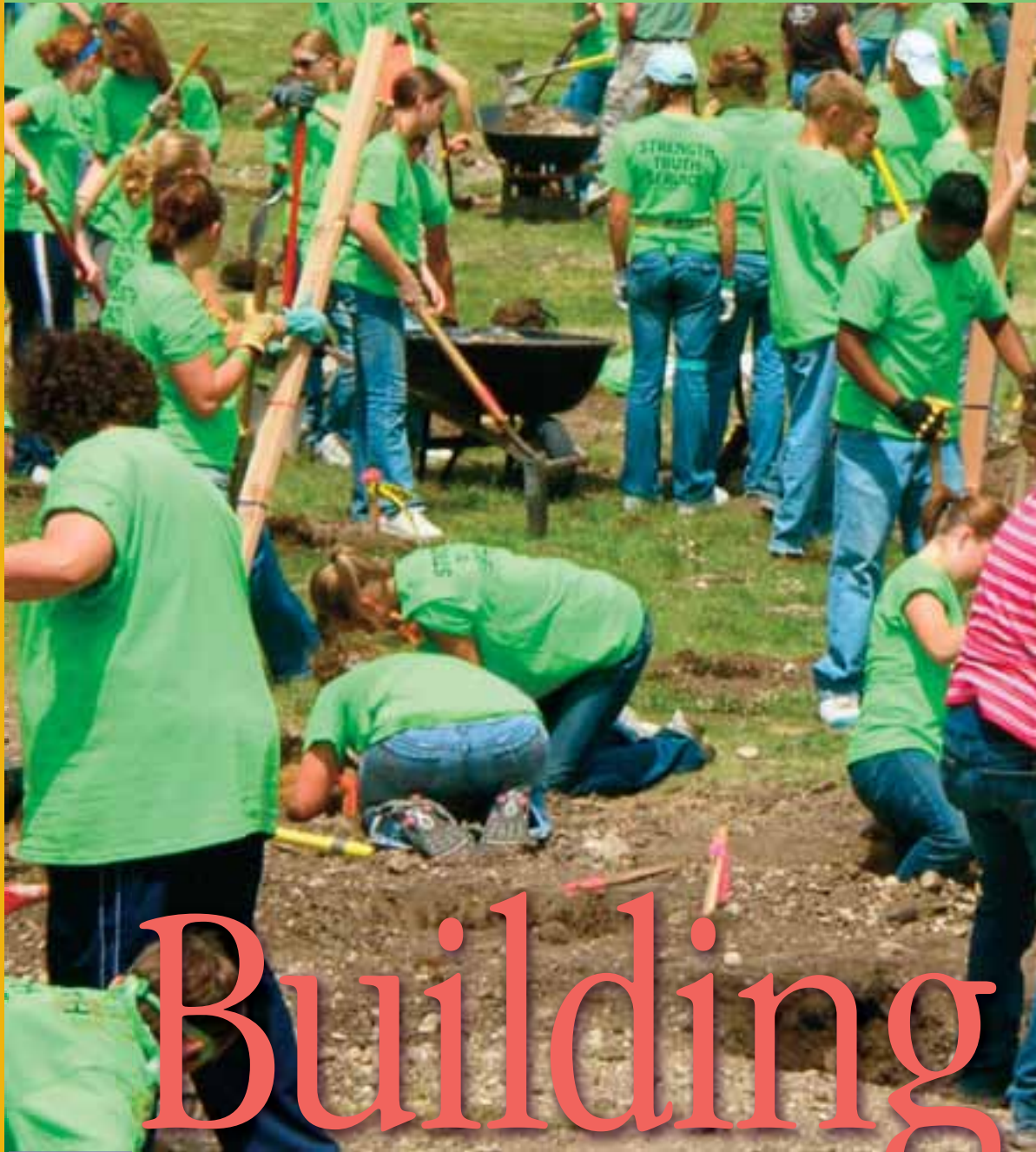
A simple project became a unifying force in one community.

From a distance, the future site of Ryan's Place Park looked like a bumpy field of holes and unnaturally bright grass. But if you looked more closely, you just might see a shovel or a head pop out of one of the holes, and then you'd notice you weren't looking at grass at all—you were actually seeing more than 200 teens in neon green T-shirts.

Such was the scene at the Providence Utah Stake youth conference. This year, in addition to spiritual firesides, dances, and games, the youth spent several hours up to their elbows in dirt and rocks—lots of rocks—preparing an empty field to become a memorial park.

It started in August 2006, when a little boy drowned during a family trip. After

Digging holes for playground equipment made a deep impression.



Building



losing their son Ryan, Craig and Alisha Adams wanted to build a swing or maybe a seesaw, something for their other children to remember him by. Within a few weeks, the project grew into a full-fledged memorial park, complete with a rocket ship playground and a dragon slide. It became a community effort to build a monument to all children.

Volunteers from across Cache Valley (in northern Utah) donated time and money to design and build Ryan's Place Park, but first someone needed to dig the foundations for the playground supports. That's where the Providence stake youth came in.



Ryan's Place

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CINDY DUNKLEY, GEOFF SMITH, AND TOM REESE



It took muscle and dedication to turn this area into a place fit for children.



“Show Me Your Muscles”

Whenever Ryan was sad, his dad would say, “Show me your muscles, Ryan.” The little boy would immediately perk up and flex his arms, any hurt forgotten. Ryan’s parents told the youth this story at the conference’s kickoff fireside.

“Sometimes life is tough, and we need to show our muscles,” they said.

The youth took this message to heart when they arrived at Ryan’s Place Park. Digging more than 100 deep, narrow holes would not be easy. And the soil they dug in didn’t help matters, since it contained more rocks than dirt.

“Each hole took tremendous effort because the ground was so rocky,” explains Becca Smith from the River Heights Second Ward.

Instead of backing away from the challenge, the youth found creative ways to dig. “Some were in holes up to their shoulders, while others were being held by their

ankles as they reached down into the bottom of holes to remove rocks,” says Jano Rees from the River Heights Third Ward.

David Thunell, who is from the River Heights Fourth Ward, was impressed by the positive attitudes he saw around him.

“Never before have I seen so many teenagers working together with such determination and without complaint,” he recalls.

Kyra Moon, who is from

the Fruitland Acres Ward, found that same attitude within herself. “As I crouched in a three-foot deep hole, armed with a plastic cup to get the rocks and dirt out, it hit me that I really wanted to dig holes right then. I wanted to do whatever I could to help.”

Building Unity and Faith

All that digging did more than strengthen their physical muscles. The youth realized it was also developing their testimonies and sense of unity.

“It was so inspiring to see so many people dressed in green T-shirts, devoting a few hours of their lives to honor someone they might not have even known,” Kyra says. “We were all of one heart and one mind, working toward a common goal, and we were all happy. It was just like Zion.”



Lindsay Bagley of the Providence First Ward agrees. “I looked out among the youth of my stake, my friends, and I saw hundreds of us all working together to dig holes, and I knew that this was what we were supposed to be doing. We were supposed to be building up our community and building up each other.”

Many of the youth, like Alyna Briscoe of the Providence Eighth Ward and Zac Hendrickson of the River Heights Second Ward, felt the spirit of community so strongly that they came back later that week to finish the park.

Benjamin Allred of the Providence First



Ward learned about the joy that comes from service, especially when that service includes hard work. "Digging holes was not what you would call fun, but it didn't need to be, because it was so satisfying."

Becca Smith is grateful that this experience helped her gain perspective. "Service has a way of showing me what is important and what isn't. I can see in more focus where my priorities are and how I need to change."

Building on the Rock

For Kyra Moon, building the park became a chance to build a stronger testimony. She now better understands how she can be an instrument in God's hands through service.

"God used us to help heal broken hearts," she says. "It's wonderful that something good came out of this tragedy, and it's a testimony to me that Heavenly Father cares about us and understands our needs."

Alex

Keith of the Cobblestone First Ward says he has gained a stronger testimony of Jesus Christ. "I have more faith in God than I have ever had before, and I know without a doubt that my Savior lives."

"I know that Jesus Christ took upon Himself my sins and died for me so that I may have eternal life," adds Jenna Rounds of the River Heights Fourth Ward. "He died so that all may live again and so that we can be with our loved ones forever."

After so many hours of digging through rocky soil to create a more solid foundation, these youth better understand the importance of building their lives around the Savior.

"I need to have a solid foundation of rock so that when Satan tries to confuse me about my values, I can do what I know is right," Jenna says. "The Savior is my rock. In spite of all my weaknesses, He makes me strong."

Memorial for Everyone

The park looks a lot different now that it's finished. The playground echoes with children's laughter. In addition, there is a cobblestone path that bears the names of children who left this life all too soon. The bittersweet contrast reminds grieving families that they will be with their loved ones again.

"This park is a fun, happy place to remember our family," Craig Adams says. "One of these days we're all going to be reunited, and it'll be such a happy day. When that day comes, all of our suffering will be worth it because we'll be with Ryan again." **NE**

