



Lions Clubs International
FOUNDATION

Sensory Courtyard Awakens Children's Abilities



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A hallway of the Fremont Public Schools administration building in Fremont, Nebraska, USA, has been transformed into an oasis. The Sensory Courtyard is an area dedicated to engaging all five senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). Regardless of their background, children, young adults, and entire families are welcome to enjoy the hands-on experiences of the Sensory Courtyard. Rock-formed columns showcase the visual, tactile and audible properties of flowing water. Dancing lights and reflections soothe the spirit. As natural light filters through the glass ceiling, families gather at the sensory table to learn and play games together while listening to calming wind chimes.

The Sensory Courtyard is a sanctuary for children with a multitude of special needs who might otherwise not be able to explore their world safely and comfortably. It is a home to a hobbit house, a fossil garden, a tree swing, and even a Snoezelen Room—an environment where multiple therapeutic and relaxing functions stimulate children. It encourages the exploration of new textures, promotes positive attitudes and inclusion, and enriches educational and motor skills development.

Aside from offering sensory stimulation, the Sensory Courtyard also serves to raise awareness of special needs within the community, from visual impairment, mobility limitations, and tactile defensiveness.

Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) awarded a US\$75,000 grant to the Lions of District 38-O to support the Fremont Public Schools' Sensory Courtyard.

Visit [lcif.org/Grants](https://www.lcif.org/Grants) to learn more about grant funding to assist Lions' districts in developing and implementing large-scale humanitarian projects.

Lion Mary Robinson

Robinson is a true testament to the power of the human spirit and continues to bring light and life to her community and to embody the Lions' motto "We Serve."

Lion Mary Robinson is a teacher of students who are blind and visually impaired. She is a certified orientation and mobility specialist at Fremont Public Schools. Robinson, one of the most highly trained teachers of the visually impaired in the nation, dream the idea for the courtyard after learning about a young child who is blind and made great strides when he began gardening with his mother. Lion Mary had worked for a few months with her Lions club, neighboring clubs, local non-profit organizations, artists, architects and the school board to bring her dream to life. Only months before the courtyard was due to be unveiled, progress came to a screeching halt when Robinson received a devastating diagnosis. What she had written off as simple fatigue was, in fact, acute myeloid leukemia (AML). AML is a cancer of the blood and bone marrow; it is the most aggressive form of leukemia with the lowest survival rate.

Armed with her incredibly positive attitude, support from her family and community, and her inability to give up, Robinson fought for her life. Her treatment was very aggressive and, at times, caused her to be very sick. But all the while, she kept a smile on her face.

Lion Mary Robinson



The grand opening of the Sensory Courtyard was postponed while Robinson was being treated. After many rounds of chemotherapy, she was cancer-free and the courtyard opened to rave reviews.



The Snoezelen Room | A New Awakening



Snoezelen Rooms are relaxing, multi-sensory environments that serve a multitude of therapeutic functions. These rooms are shown to reduce anxiety, stimulate reactions and encourage communication. Lights, sounds, textures and smells can be used to calm agitation or spur exploration. Users can – but are not required to – control certain aspects of the environment.

Snoezelen rooms are an important tool serving children on the autism spectrum, those with behavioral concerns, people with visual impairments and even older adults with cognitive disabilities.



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When you are given a diagnosis of autism, developmental delay or anything else that places your child in the special needs category, you quickly become overwhelmed by all the things that the doctors, family, friends and society tell you they can't do. You have repeated discussions on areas of development where your child isn't to par with his peers. I wanted to do everything I could for my children. I gathered all types of material to educate myself on what I can do to help them acquire these skills and started to lose focus on all the amazing things they can do. The Sensory Courtyard helped put that in perspective; it's an area made for them to excel and learn in. It gives us a fun family experience, free of judgment of the abilities my children lack. There are not many situations in our community where we get to experience things together as a family. This time together is precious, these moments together are irreplaceable, and I thank the Sensory Courtyard for giving my family this experience.

— Summer Mau, Autism Center of Nebraska, Board of Directors

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Ayden's Story | Succeeding Where Other Methods Failed

Like other three-year-olds – Ayden Crom is vibrant, silly and headstrong. But he is also tactile defensive, which means that his body interprets the sensation of touch with fear, pain or discomfort. Tactile defensiveness is a sensory integrative dysfunction, so Ayden's brain has difficulty processing the information it receives through his senses.



Ayden's involuntary responses to touch kept him from meeting many development milestones for his age. In fact, the pain of anything touching the soles of his feet was so great that he would walk on his knees. While tactile defensiveness does not affect his ability to learn, it certainly impedes the learning process.

At first, Ayden was unable to interact with many of the Sensory Courtyard experiences. Sitting on the edge of the ball pit in the Snoezelen Room was all he could handle. But his teachers persisted, taking him back regularly over the next several weeks. He got a little bit closer to the ball pit each time, experimented with putting a toe in and eventually jumped in! Now Ayden will sit in the pit and cover himself with the balls, rock on the horse, accept a ball in two hands and sit on a hard chair. He explores the fossil garden without fear and presses his feet against the squishy bottom of the mud hole.

With patience from those caring for him and the safe, encouraging environment of the Sensory Courtyard, Ayden has made incredible progress overcoming his tactile defensiveness. He is catching up on key developmental milestones and is now ready for preschool!

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We as a team worked on many avenues to help Ayden with his tactile defensiveness. Having the Sensory Courtyard helped further Ayden's goal by providing different sensory stimulation and enhance awareness. The Sensory Courtyard also provided the ability to have hands-on educational experiences at our fingertips.

— Mary Pat Pistillo, teacher of the visually impaired

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It has been an incredible benefit to the children of our school, especially those who are most challenged, that Mary's vision has become a reality of an educational wonderland. This was possible only through Mary's determination, a lot of hard work, and the generosity of our community members and Lions Clubs International Foundation.

– Sandi Proskovec, president, Fremont Public Schools Board of Education

I love taking my son to the Sensory Courtyard and seeing his face light up with each new sensation and sensory element. Looking around the courtyard, I could see the smiles of all the children and parents. It is a beautiful experience.

– Miranda Long, parent,
Fremont, Nebraska

It feels so good to know that lives are being changed in a positive way because of this amazing environment. Lions Clubs International Foundation played such a big role in making this dream become a reality. You are the foundation, or the rock, of this project and it couldn't have been done without your amazing support. There are not adequate words to express my gratitude.

– Lion Mary Robinson, teacher, Fremont Public Schools, Program for the Blind and Visually Impaired

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A Work of Art... *And LOVE*

Michael Torres, owner of de la Torre Art Design in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, is a famous artist specializing in theatrical exhibits. Robinson's passion for the Sensory Courtyard coupled with Torres' excitement and creativity produced an environment that engages all senses and inspires the mind's eye.

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Exploration and discovery have molded me into who I am today,” he says. “My hope for the children in this community is that this environment sparks their imagination and leaves them with a sense of wonder.

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Working on the Sensory Courtyard was a labor of love for Torres. He spent countless hours crafting, sculpting and hand-painting many elements of the courtyard.



In summary, we have introduced you to, or in some cases reacquainted you with, the Sensory Courtyard. The Sensory Courtyard is impacting children, families and entire communities every day. But as Lions know, the work is never done. Robinson dreams of expanding the courtyard to include even more hands-on sensory experiences. Perhaps camping or space exploration areas are in the wings. Additional art or tasting activities could materialize. Just as in other areas of Lions' service, as the needs grow, the services do, too.

SensoryCourtyard.com

Learn more about the mission of Lions Clubs International Foundation through *Campaign 100: LCIF Empowering Service*, which helps make stories and outcomes like this possible through our grants.

lCIF.org/BE100





CAMPAIGN | 100
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Visit lCIF.org/BE100 to learn how Campaign 100 will sponsor and deliver programs addressing the distinct needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations such as the elderly, the disabled, females, orphans and others disproportionately impacted by social and economic factors and requiring special services.

To support projects like the Sensory Courtyard, donate to LCIF's The Empowering Service Fund today.

Donate today!



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