

CREDO

THE INSIDE VIEW

Darell Hammond

Soon after Darell Hammond moved to Washington, D.C., in 1995, he read a newspaper story about two children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car. He knew it could have been prevented had they had somewhere else to play, and the story inspired Hammond's career. The 38-year-old co-founder and chief executive officer of D.C.-based KaBOOM! now oversees a nonprofit devoted to bringing communities together to build playgrounds across the country. Last weekend, KaBOOM! completed its 1,669th project.



Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I consider myself much more spiritual than religious. I don't identify with any particular faith, but I am deeply respectful of religions' cultural traditions and the communities that form around places of worship.

Did anyone or event especially influence your path in life?

I grew up in Mooseheart group home, outside of Chicago, from the ages of 4 to 18, because I was the seventh of eight kids, and my mom had a nervous breakdown and my father abandoned the family. I remember being struck at a very young age, reading the newspaper and learning about schools that cut their football team, or eliminated their band — but I knew that in the place I was growing up, we had everything we needed and desired. And that's because of the 2 million members of the Loyal Order of the Moose who supported us. I knew I was special, I knew what the standards were. I didn't know their names, but I knew that my contribution to society would be in thanks to the members of the Moose who didn't know they were raising me, but they were.

Your organization helps to build community playgrounds. Of all causes, why playgrounds?

There are two answers. First, playgrounds are a definable project on a definite timeline on which communities can see a real success. They can see a finished product in a playground, and can have the experience of building it together. And by that, they can create community capital along the way by interacting with neighbors, building trust and bonds, and a shared sense of history and place.

And why play? There's no doubt we've become a society that regards play as a luxury. But child-directed play and imagination and creativity are really important, and it sets a foundation for younger kids. It makes them want to read, and want to problem-solve, and want to negotiate with their peers. I think we're pushing kids to grow up more quickly than we need or want them to, and we should be allowing them more child-directed activities and more places to be kids.

Operating a nonprofit organization in difficult economic times, what values must you hold tight?

I think you have to have a tremendous sense of optimism and a belief that what you're doing really is making a difference and having an impact. In these times, the scarcity of resources has made us be more compelling and passionate about why play and community matter. It's made us sharpen how we communicate that our existence matters.

At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I think that when better is expected, good is not enough. I think that as a society, we have a culture of low expectations, and I'm passionately fighting to break that cycle. For me, I didn't want to be like my father — it was about breaking that cycle. For kids and families in troubled communities, it's about how they break the path they're on, and have a higher belief about what's expected of them. And I mean both internally, in terms of what they expect of themselves, and externally, in terms of rising above expectations other people have who look in at their community. I believe in setting the standards high and keeping them high. I believe in continual improvement. I don't just want to be counted, but to make a difference while I have a life.

— Leah Fabel