



# pieces of passion

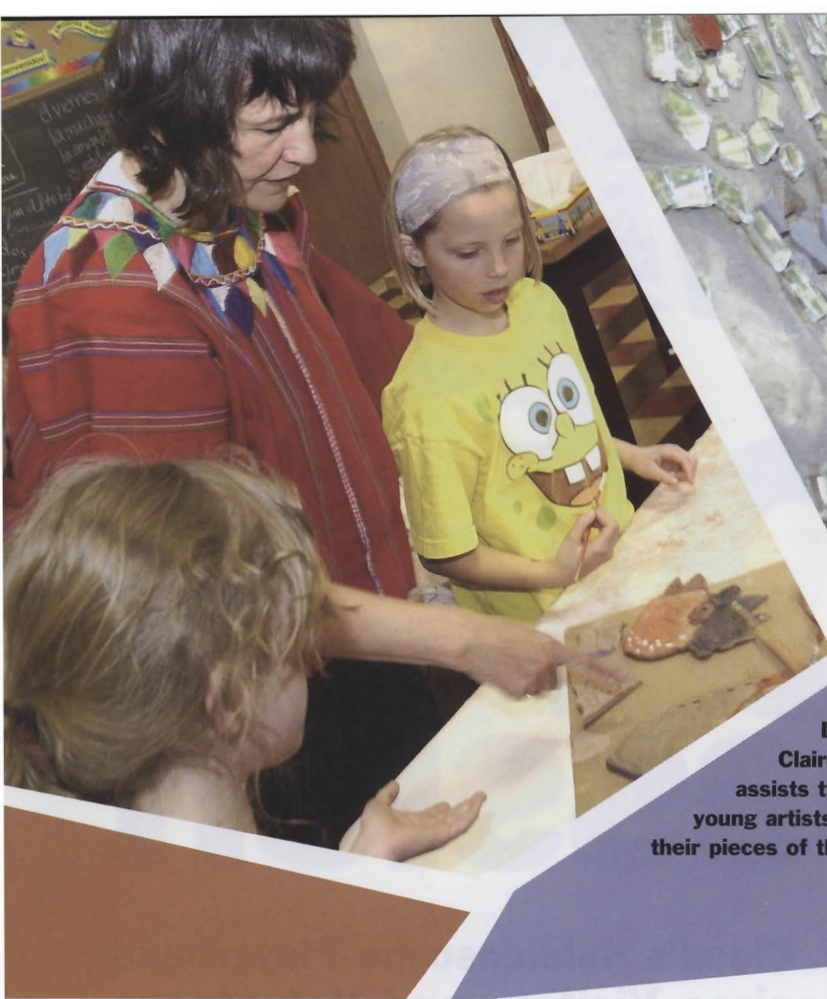
## St. Cloud's Kaleidoscope Playground Inspires Visitors and Volunteers

**e**nvision a park where people of all ages, abilities, races, and economic backgrounds meet. Guests leisurely stroll along the river—sweet spring breezes tickle hair and tantalize noses. The wind blowing gently off the Mississippi River brings the fresh scent of open water mingled with melting snow. Spring at Wilson Park brings a new beginning—for the park and for the community. The large American flag flapping across the crisp, blue sky hails new freedom and a renewed unity for St. Cloud's East Side.

This spring, park patrons will enjoy Wilson Park's latest addition—birds. The birds come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Some are four inches small, while others are four feet tall. Together, they create a bouquet of vivid color and range in style from realistic to fantastic. The park's Kaleidoscope Artscape is a mural of birds created by the community, for the community. It celebrates unity by eliminating boundaries associated with race, culture, ability, and economic background. The artscape was created to complement Wilson Park's new Kaleidoscope Playground, which is 95 percent handicap accessible—a playground designed to allow children of all abilities to play together as physical equals.

Thanks to four community organizations, numerous community members, and generous backing from contributors, such as the Initiative Foundation, the Kaleidoscope Artscape and the Kaleidoscope Playground are becoming a reality.

by Jena Klein photography by Jim Altobell



**Left:**  
**Claire Witt**  
 assists two eager  
 young artists as they paint  
 their pieces of the mosaic.



**Above:** Like a giant jigsaw puzzle, one more piece of the mosaic is installed to create a whimsical bird.

In 2002, St. Cloud's East Side Boosters, St. Cloud State University's Community and Democratic Citizenship Students, and the St. Cloud Parks Department realized they shared a common goal—to bring St. Cloud's East Side together as a community, and at the same time, to provide an opportunity for children with varying levels of physical ability to play, learn, and grow together. After extensive research, the St. Cloud Parks Department designated Wilson Park as the perfect location for what would become Kaleidoscope Playground.

The playground was built on a poured-rubber surface, so children can play safely and comfortably.

The “sway-fun” glider allows children with physical disabilities the opportunity to swing side-by-side with other children—perhaps for the first time. Other firsts for children with disabilities include raised sandboxes, sand scoopers, slides, spring pods, ramped bridges, and play panels. Most important, however, is the ongoing process of eliminating physical barriers that can arise between children—making everyone truly equal. Hopefully, that equality will continue far beyond the realm of the playground.

Soon after the planning for the Kaleidoscope Playground began, local artist Claire Witt approached the East Side Boosters about creating an artscape to complement the design of the playground. Her goal was to bring community members together to create art for their own community.

“The people who use the playground helped to create the artscape,” says Witt. “By working together, barriers and stereotypes that divide people begin to disappear.”

Witt worked primarily with St. Cloud's East Side Boosters, an organization that has been dedicated to community improvement since the early fifties. As plans progressed, Witt worked closely with Monica Hoffman, director of the Boosters—together they sought viable funding for the artscape.

“I kept thinking about national and local issues and possible solutions that demonstrated the concept of unity,” explains Witt, pondering the artscape's final form. “For example, Roosevelt's WPA.”

Works Progress Administration (WPA) not only created jobs in a time of need, but it also brought community members together to create timeless masterpieces and priceless

community togetherness. Although the WPA was a national effort, the St. Cloud area has several reminders of its success. St. Cloud's Selke Field brought sporting events to the area and its legacy will live on through the new stadium currently under construction. Another example is Munsinger Gardens. The original greenhouse, rock garden, lily pond, and fountain are the result of the WPA. The gardens still offer opportunities for families to unite through special events or to stroll through its colorful, winding paths. Other regional WPA projects include Cold Spring Ballroom and the wall murals at John Clark School in Rockville.

The Kaleidoscope Artscape is an excellent opportunity to provide the same quality of public service.

“One of the benefits of public property, parks specifically,” says Witt, “is to unify and strengthen families and communities.” The artscape and the playground give St. Cloud's East Side an opportunity to work together to create a healthier community.

In addition to unifying the community, Witt wanted to break down the boundaries that often restrict this unity. “The motif of birds was chosen,” says Witt, “because it symbolizes boundlessness. It was simple and direct subject matter that would appeal to the diverse groups of community volunteers who

**“They gave us the beginning,” says Witt.**  
**“The Initiative Foundation gave us a way to share that vision,” agrees Hoffman.**

helped make this project.” Her challenge, however, was to make both unity and boundlessness work together in the artscape design.

Ironically, it was in a local grocery store that all of the pieces came together. A book by Minnesota author Thomas J. Day, *I Took the Easy Way Out*, provided the answer. From this book, Witt confirmed what she already knew—despite different ages, abilities, races, and economic backgrounds, people are more alike than different. Some people have visible handicaps, but many more have “hidden handicaps.” Day, a quadriplegic, wrote, “I have a physical disability that is very obvious to everyone, but there are many people who have handicaps that cannot be seen.” Hidden handicaps can include low self-esteem, addiction, family turmoil, economic stress, perfectionism, burnout, depression, temper, headaches, insomnia, stress, procrastination, and more.

“That was the seed,” says Witt. From this book, the concepts of unity and boundlessness came together to create a mosaic artscape of birds.

Witt understands that everyone has hidden handicaps. Everyone also has hidden talents, which is exactly what Witt tapped into to create tiles for the bird artscape.

“We had many contributors,” she says, “both public and private school students, Rasmussen students, people with physical disabilities, home-school children, Girl Scout troops, hospital patients, and more. The process brought together cultures, talents, businesses, residents, and people with different abilities.” The result was to create a timeless masterpiece that broke down debilitating community boundaries and helped to unify the East Side.

While Witt worked to design and organize the artscape, Hoffman noted its effect on the community. “We wanted to celebrate the entire community at every level,” says Hoffman. “And right now, there are nothing but positive things happening.”

Hoffman continued to work as a liaison between the people and the community and sought funding for the artscape project. The East Side Boosters often work

closely with the Initiative Foundation, so it was natural to begin there. One of the Initiative Foundation’s focus areas is to enable people of all ages, abilities, classes, races, and cultures in central Minnesota. It strives to create healthy communities through collaboration and community participation. The East Side Boosters applied for and received a Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) program grant from the Initiative Foundation to create the Kaleidoscope Artscape.

“They gave us the beginning,” says Witt.

“The Initiative Foundation gave us a way to share that vision,” agrees Hoffman. And in addition to financial support, “they gave us the credibility we needed to be heard.” Other sponsors now include: MnSCU Center for Teaching and Learning; Learning by Doing program grant, Bush Foundation, Minnesota Omnibus Higher

Education Bill of 2001, American Express/Compas Audience Expansion Grant, and SCSU Community and Democratic Citizenship Students. “As people hear about what we’re doing,” continues Hoffman, “they’re asking to get involved and that’s good because right now we have more time than money.”

Keeping in line with the idea of freedom through breaking down barriers, another local volunteer, Stuart McCarter, wants to add a flying carp to the artscape. “I can see it in the water somewhere,” says McCarter, “but there’s water everywhere. I would remember that forever!” After all, the goal of the Kaleidoscope Artscape is to break down boundaries.

From its conception, the artscape has unified St. Cloud’s East Side. Volunteers of all ages, races, cultures, and economic backgrounds have come together to create a symbol of freedom. This provides the community the liberty to create something for themselves and the wisdom of knowing that everyone has hidden handicaps as well as talents. And that is priceless. IQ

**These two young people enjoy the challenge of selecting pieces that fit into the overall design of the Kaleidoscope mosaic.**

