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## Dexter Chamber 2023 Organization of the Year - Dexter Friends of the Park

MARCH 22ND 2024 BY DEE LOFLIN

### Dexter Chamber 2023 Organization of the Year - Dexter Friends of the Park

The Dexter Chamber of Commerce held their annual awards banquet on Friday, March 22, 2024. Since the Chamber began 80 years ago, the theme was the 1980s. Members dressed in their best 80s themed clothing and the Elks Lodge was decorated in 80s theme!

Kim Williams, Chamber Director presented Organization of the Year.

In 2016, the seeds of change were sown by a retired special education teacher named Vicki Windham and two other retired special education teachers.

Their vision took root when they approached the Dexter Parks and Recreation board with a heartfelt request – playground equipment designed specifically for individuals with physical handicaps.

At that time, those facing mobility challenges found themselves excluded from public parks due to their wheelchair disabilities. However, the stars aligned, for unbeknownst to them, the Dexter Parks and Rec Department had already embarked on a mission to create universal playground equipment.

The convergence of these efforts led to the establishment of the Dexter Friends of the Park in April 2017.

This dedicated organization convened to address the pressing need for playground equipment catering to individuals with physical handicaps.

Extensive research revealed that over 700 students in Stoddard County Schools were disabled, underscoring the urgency for change. And so, the Boon Park Universal Playground was conceived.

The Dexter Friends of the Park set an ambitious goal – to create a playground that not only caters to all abilities but also fosters social, physical, emotional, cognitive, and sensory development. Their mission was clear: inclusivity for all.

Recognizing the vital role a universal playground plays in promoting community unity, social interaction, and physical well-being, the Dexter Friends of the Park became a driving force behind this transformative initiative.

This visionary organization, now comprising over 20 dedicated committee members, persevered in making the Boon Park Universal Playground a reality.

Since 2016, they organized more than 40 fundraisers, coupled with generous donations, raising an impressive sum of over \$160,000. Their commitment was further fortified by a grant from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources Land and Water Conservation Fund.

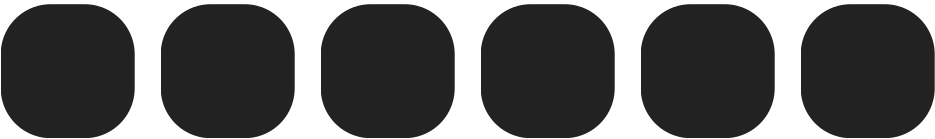
Finally, on November 1, 2023, the community officially celebrated the grand opening of the much-anticipated Boon Park Universal Playground.

Today, we stand here not just to acknowledge their accomplishments but to honor the Dexter Friends of the Park as the well-deserved 2023 Organization of the Year.

LAST UPDATED ON MARCH 22ND 2024 BY DEE LOFLIN

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