

Aries: Initiative

"You see, Mr. Lewis," Paul was saying, "we know that the City Council has talked a lot about making more playgrounds available, but nothing's been done. Now, that narrow lot you own on Tenth Street is empty and we thought — well — we thought if you were willing, we'd clean it up and set up a playground. The kids in that part of town sure need one!"

Mr. Lewis studied the two teen-agers sitting in his office, who represented a student organization called "ACT!" about which he'd heard a great deal lately.

"And what do you propose to use for equipment?" he asked.

"We think we can get donations," answered Sara. "There must be plenty of people around whose kids have outgrown backyard swings and slides. And we can build a few sandboxes, and get a construction company to donate some of those big pipes and things and make a maze that kids like to crawl through."

"What about safety?" queried Mr. Lewis. "A bunch of kids can get out of hand pretty fast if they're left alone, especially in that neighborhood."

"Oh, they won't be left alone," Sara said. "Enough of our members have volunteered to spend several hours a week supervising the playground so that we can keep it open after school and on weekends." Sara hesitated, then went on. "The *big* problem is going to be a fence. I don't think we can build the right kind, but we're hoping to get enough contributions so we can have one put in."

"We talked to the police chief, and he's willing to let us go ahead," put in Paul.

"Um-hum," mused Mr. Lewis. "I see you have it well planned. And what do *I* get out of this?"

"The satisfaction of knowing that your property is being used for something worthwhile," responded Paul promptly.

Mr. Lewis laughed. "Then I can't really say no, can I? Very well, you have my permission, and my blessings. And if you have trouble raising that fence, let me know and I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you very much, Sir. We know you'll be glad you did this," said Paul. They shook hands all around, and the students left.

During the next few weeks there was much activity on the vacant lot on Tenth Street, and also in other neighborhoods, where unused play equipment was rescued from basements and garages and loaded into Paul's father's pick-up truck. A local firm donated several truck-loads of sand, and another company laid an asphalt pavement. The students cleaned and painted the equipment, and built sandboxes, a maze, and a tree house that promised to be a feature attraction. They raised two-thirds of the money for a fence in an arduous door-to-door campaign, and Mr. Lewis contributed the remainder. The members of ACT! spent all their free time working at or for the playground, and a month after first talking to Mr. Lewis, Paul returned to invite him to the dedication ceremony.

On the day of the ceremony the playground was crowded with excited children and their happy parents. The mayor, the police chief, and Mr. Lewis all had places of honor on the platform. Paul and Sara made a few appropriate remarks, the parents applauded, and the children squirmed.

Then the mayor stood up. "I'm going to make this brief," he promised. "After all, this is a place to play, not a place to listen to long-winded politicians. However, we can't let these children loose on the equipment without first paying tribute to a fine group

of young people who, I hope, will serve as examples for the little ones. The adults in this city have discussed the pros and cons of setting up playgrounds for more hours than I care to remember, but it took a dedicated group of teen-agers to show us what initiative is and actually set one up! They deserve our admiration — and our thanks.”

After a warm round of applause, the ribbon across the swing was cut, Mr. Lewis took an uncomfortable ride down a slide, and the mayor and the police chief took an even more uncomfortable turn on the see-saw, much to the delight of the squealing children.

Then the children were at last permitted to play, and happy shouts and laughter filled the playground. The parents, too, seemed happy, and Sara was particularly touched as she observed some of the careworn faces in the crowd break into cheerful smiles.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” said one mother, approaching Sara and extending her hand. “My five children are always under foot at home, but I’m afraid to send them to play in the streets. Now they can come here, and I know they’ll be safe.”

“I’d like to thank you, too,” said a man. “My wife’s been sick, and she’ll be able to get more rest now if the kids can come here to play.”

Then Paul joined Sara and, standing a little apart, they smiled at each other. “Looks like taking the reins into our own hands paid off,” said Paul.

“I was a little scared at first,” admitted Sara. “But when I saw how people responded and how well things were going, I wasn’t scared any more. I guess if you plan carefully, and then take the initiative and *do* something, you’re bound to get results.”