

COURTESY OF  
PATRICK HOERTER  
**Isaiah Hoerter**  
(right) hugs his  
brother closest  
in age, Jojo.



# Honoring Jojo

## Family seeks help to build inclusive playground

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USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

**W**AUSAU - The Hoerter home is brimming with energy. Jasmine, 6, twirls through the house in a floral sundress while Isaiah, 4, trails her, shouting and laughing. Micah, 2, is shy but active and wastes no time tottering after his siblings at full speed. Elijah looks on, smiling at everyone and everything. From the look on his face, if he weren't only 9 months old, he'd be tumbling around the deck with the rest of them.

On the back porch of their home in Wausau's West Side, Patrick and Destiny Hoerter watch over their four children and think about the fifth who died over a year ago. Josiah "Jojo" Hoerter died from complications with MeCP2 Duplication Syndrome, a rare genetic disease, on Feb. 7, 2015. He was the Hoerters' biological nephew and when they



COURTESY OF PATRICK HOERTER

A bird's eye view of the 1.3 acre Jojo's Jungle.

finally were able to adopt him at 11 months old, they knew something wasn't right. He was behind other children his age, unable to talk or walk. As he grew, he was confined to a wheelchair and eventually needed home

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### How you can help

Donations can be made here via the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin. Be sure to mention "Jojo's Jungle Fund" in the memo line of the check.

Businesses can contact Patrick and Destiny Hoerter at 715-571-0010 or [play@jojosjungle.org](mailto:play@jojosjungle.org) to organize a fundraiser or form a committee.

The Hoerters are working on providing anyone the opportunity to purchase pavers, keep an eye on [www.jojosjungle.org](http://www.jojosjungle.org) or their Facebook page for updates.



# Inclusive

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care for nearly 20 hours a day.

They spent years trying to make his life better, bouncing between hospitals and home care before realizing with the amount of care required to keep him alive and happy, Jojo might not have a lot of time left. Jojo qualified to get a wish granted by the Make-a-Wish Foundation and that's where the idea for the inclusive playground began to take hold in the Hoerters' minds. But Make-a-Wish said Jojo needed to be alive for the wish to be granted, and the family knew he would never live long enough to enjoy the playground.

Make-a-Wish flew Jojo and his family to Michigan instead, where he said goodbye to his foster family and biological parents before dying in February. After feeling the deep loss within their family, the Hoerters decided to make this dream of an inclusive playground a reality to honor Jojo.

An inclusive playground is built over a rubber surface instead of wood chips for easy wheel chair access. It has higher 8 foot platforms for kids to wheel under and zip lines with seats for those who can't sit unassisted on a regular swings. But it's more than just architectural specs, walkways wide enough for wheelchairs and expression swings where parents and children can swing facing each other. It's a place where special needs children can gather with their friends and be freed from the isola-

tion of living in a world that isn't always accessible.

In Wausau, JoJo's Jungle will be located at Brockmeyer Park, 4200 Stettin Drive.

The Kids Are Special Here or K.A.S.H. Playground in Stevens Point was an inspiration to the Hoerters. K.A.S.H. board president Kareen Everman understands more than anyone how important a place like this is in a community. In 1977, Everman's son Brett was in a car crash just before his second birthday. He suffered a traumatic brain injury from the accident that left him severely disabled. Although he's 21 now and defied doctors predictions that he wouldn't live long, transitioning into motherhood with a disabled child brought Everman a different perspective.

"I didn't know there was a need until my son was disabled," she said. "People just think we live in an accessible world but ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) regulations are minimal and if you have a kid in a wheelchair you learn that really quickly."

Everman spearheaded the project to build K.A.S.H. Playground and has consulted many people in the years since, including the Hoerters, on how to add an inclusive playground into their community.

"Our kids don't want to be playing by themselves," she said. "They want to be around other kids."

That sentiment is a large part of the reason behind the designs for Jojo's Jungle. "We realized Jojo will never be able to play on this playground," said Destiny. "But his friends can, disabled or not."

When they approached

the county about the project a week before Jojo died, it was with a four-year timeline from idea to playground, accounting for fundraising, land surveying, city permits and construction. They originally thought it would be completed in 2018 but that was shortened significantly in May by a \$1 million donation from B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation.

"Now, thanks to that grant" Patrick Hoerter said, "we figured we could do it in half the time. Two years total."

But even with other generous donations from local companies, like the land surveying donated in kind by Becher Hoppe, the Hoerters are struggling with how to move the project forward.

"We just don't know how to do certain things," said Destiny, "We really need the help of the community and people who have done some of the things we haven't before."

Though many people in the community have suggested ways to raise more funds, the Hoerters now need help putting on those events. They want to start a yearly 5K race in memory of Jojo, but need volunteers and people who have done it before to help them. "We will help anyone to fund an idea, we're just not sure where to even start," Destiny said.

The Hoerters are still planning to break ground for the project on May 21, 2017, which would have been Jojo's 5th birthday. "It's symbolic," said Patrick, "but we have an awful lot of work to do if we want to see the playground exist next year." They've been busy planning and finalizing renderings of the playground

since the donation and hope the community can help them with a final push forward.

"I still miss him every day," said Destiny. "And as I'm picking out things for the playground I know he would love, it's so hard for me to know he won't ever get to play on them."

Jojo's whole family misses him, especially his sibling closest in age, Isaiah. Isaiah can often be found wondering aloud, "Daddy, I wish these steps went all the way to Heaven so I could go get Jojo," or as the family walks around in The 400 Block, "I wish those skyscrapers went all the way up to Heaven so I could bring Jojo back."

The playground project has been a way for the family to remember their brother and son, as well as bring the community together. Destiny emphasized the need for a playground like this not just for the children, but for the parents of the children. "A typical friend doesn't understand that I can't just meet them at the park at 10 a.m. with a special needs child," she said. "This would be a way to bring together parents who don't have to feel alone."

The Hoerters hope the 1.3 acre playground will become a safe, enjoyable environment for the community and with a little more help from the city of Wausau, they're sure they can accomplish their goal in time to honor Jojo next year.

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