



Once Upon a Time at



Fairyland's new Jack and Jill Hill was an instant hit with kids.

Jack and Jill Hill: low tech, high fun

Last Wednesday Children's Fairyland officially unveiled Jack and Jill Hill, a bright-green sliding hill that serves as the newest attraction at our theme park in four years. Since its opening, the Hill has not been without kids on it for longer than one minute.

The idea for the hill came to me nearly three years ago, when my daughter and I visited the Santa Barbara Zoo. Coming around a corner, I observed swarms of very little kids cavorting atop a gently sloped hill that

was covered in high quality Astro Turf. They were sliding down on pieces of recycled cardboard – and having the time of their lives.

I sat on a nearby bench and observed the fun for nearly an hour. Afterward I was convinced that a similar hill would be perfect for Fairyland. No instructions, no language requirements: just outdoor physical exercise driven by imagination. The zoo in Santa Barbara had appropriately named its attraction the

Ant Hill. But at Fairyland? It had to be Jack and Jill Hill.

But how to make it happen? First I brought in my ace operations manager, Ann Hyde, and asked her to go on a field trip to spend time with the folks who built the Santa Barbara Zoo's hill. How was it constructed? What was the cost? How did it stand up to wear and tear? Was it easy to maintain?

Thankfully, the team at the zoo was very open and helpful. They adore their hill, and it's one of the most popular features at the park.

Once Ann had all the information we needed, it was time to figure out how we could pull it off at Fairyland.

We determined the best spot for the hill was an underutilized patch of grass near our Pinocchio set. Our horticulturalist, Jackie – who you wouldn't think would be a fan of fake grass – surprised us by liking the idea. She helped us brainstorm about potential drainage issues.

Before we could start to think about building, we had to remove a funky old trailer that had once upon a time served as office space. We'd then need to find someone who could grade the area and build the hill using the right materials (literally tons of them!).

You've probably seen McGuire and Hester construction signs and equipment all around Lake Merritt. They're the company working on the bond measure-funded project that will transform the jewel of Oakland, making our lake more accessible to people instead of cars.

Founded by the two partners in Oakland in 1931, the company has taken on major projects such as laying all the underground utilities at the Oakland Army Base and installing a section of the Hetch Hetchy water system for the City of San Francisco.

We liked the fact that in 2003 McGuire and Hester made the transition from a family-owned business to a 100% employee-owned company. We also liked their stated goal of giving back to the communities they serve.

But perhaps most important to me was the fact that company president Mike Hester grew up in Oakland going to Fairyland, and he was gracious enough to listen politely to my pitch for his company to donate the construction work necessary to build our

hill. He's the strong, silent type, and he came by numerous times to scope out the area before agreeing to come on board. His team did a great job demolishing the trailer and building the hill while taking special care in our busy park.

We can't tell you how much their donation meant to us.

The most expensive part of the project was the purchase and installation of the high quality, made-in-America, recycled Astro Turf that would cover the whole area. Oakland City Councilmember Jane Brunner, who has one granddaughter and is expecting more – twins – heard about our dilemma and stepped up to give Fairyland a grant to complete the project. Calling Fairyland "a success story," she helped make us even more successful by adding this kinder, gentler sort of attraction.

A week ago Tuesday, we had a "soft opening" of the Hill prior to the formal event, and Ann and I got to observe the activity for some time. Here's what we learned: When kids see the hill, they know immediately what to do. Laugh. Play. Run up. Roll down. Walk up. Slide down. Repeat.

Parents are inspired to interact in many different ways – showing the kids how to use the cardboard "seats," sliding down with their kids, or just standing back and smiling. I have to admit that the two of us got a little choked up watching the kids have so much fun.

It's traditional for theme parks to announce their fast new rides with fanfare each summer. This year, Sea World unveiled Manta Roller (43 mph); Discovery Kingdom introduced Superman: Ultimate Flight (60 mph); and Six Flags Magic Mountain gave us Lex Luthor (85 mph).

Meanwhile, at Children's Fairyland in Oakland: Jack and Jill Hill (just fast enough). Yes, our newest ride is definitely more "gee whiz" than g-force. And that's the way we – and our young guests – like it.

C.J. Hirschfield is Executive Director of Children's Fairyland, which is located next to Lake Merritt at 699 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland. For more information call 452-2259 or e-mail cj@fairyland.org.



Fairyland board members Larry Magid (left) and Ron Zeno, Mike Hester with McGuire Hester Construction, Oakland City Councilmember Jane Brunner, Fairyland executive director C.J. Hirschfield, and Fairyland board member Theresa Nelson were joined by some Fairyland summer campers when the ribbon was cut to formally open Jack and Jill Hill, the park's first new attraction in four years.