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COURTNEY & PAIGE: Courtney Faye Smith (left) and her friend Paige Lopez clown for the camera. The Lopez family started a Web site with links for people to donate to various children's charities. Courtney's Sandcastle is one of them which seeks to build a handicapped accessible playground in San Clemente.

PAUL BERSEBACH, SUN POST NEWS

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Web site helps kids help kids

Elementary school friend wants to help raise money for Courtney Faye Smith's 'Sandcastle' park.

By **FRED SWEGLES**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Courtney Faye Smith and Paige Lopez have been pals since kindergarten.

"She's my BFF (Best Friend Forever)," writes Paige on a Web page that she has dedicated to Courtney.

The two 10-year-olds attend Truman Benedict Elementary School in San Clemente and are awaiting construction of Courtney's Sandcastle, a specialty playground that SunCal will build as part of an 8 1/2-acre soccer park in the emerging Marblehead Coastal community.

Earlier this year, Paige's 8-year-old sister, Kate, found some money, and the sisters decided to donate some of it. The girls and their stepmom, Tracy Lopez, found a Web site for an organization that helps abused kids and made a donation.

"The girls kind of lit up ... their eyes .. they were like really happy to help people," Tracy Lopez says.

That inspired the Lopezes to design a Web site, www.childrendonate2.org, where youngsters and their parents can help organizations that help people and animals.

There's a link titled "Spinal Muscular Atrophy," with access to Web sites of organizations that can help people like Courtney. She has SMA and gets around in a motorized wheelchair. There's also information on how people can donate to San Clemente's park foundation to help fill a funding gap for Courtney's Sandcastle.

The park could be under construction this fall, opening in the fall of 2008. The playground will be designed to be fully accessible to Courtney. The theme will be a castle-like playground structure, surrounded by a simulated moat. Some other features are designed to appeal to the senses – like a garden with plants that produce aromas when touched and a sensor-driven water feature.

Courtney, meanwhile, is finding delight in her new pet, Michaela. In August, Courtney got the 2-year-old golden retriever-Lab mix as her service dog. They play together. They cuddle. All the while, Michaela has made the fifth-grader more independent.

"She can help me pick up stuff," Courtney says. Asked what else, and Courtney says "there's 43 other things" that Michaela can do.

And how does Courtney feel about getting her playground? "Yippee!" she proclaims. And Paige? "That'll be fun. I'll get to say that my friend has a sandcastle named after her, a playground."

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