

NEWS & VIEWS

Communication board installed at park

BY LARISSA FUENTES

A new communication board at Blumenfeld Family Park in Port Washington is giving children of all abilities another way to express themselves and participate in play.

The double-sided board was unveiled during a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Thursday, Sept. 10, attended by North Hempstead Town Supervisor Jennifer DeSena, Council Member Mariann Dalimonte, Sonny Spagnuolo, president and founder of Rocco's Voice for Autism, Joe Galante, board member of Rocco's Voice for Autism, Lee Ann Vetrone, director of development of The Nicholas Center and Stella Spanakos, co-founder of The Nicholas Center. The board was donated by Rocco's Voice for Autism through a partnership with The Nicholas Center and the Town of North Hempstead. It is designed to help children who are

nonverbal or have difficulty communicating express their needs, interact with friends and feel included at the playground.

"A park should be a place where everyone belongs, everyone can play, and everyone can be heard," Dalimonte said. "This board is more than a resource — it's a meaningful step toward creating a more inclusive community where every child and every family has the opportunity to communicate, connect, and feel that they truly belong."

The double-sided board is 6 feet wide and 3 feet high, mounted 12 to 18 inches above the ground for accessibility and installed near designated play areas. It features the Rocco's Voice for Autism logo, reflecting the partnership behind the project.

Spagnuolo said Rocco's Voice began in 2017 after his son was diagnosed with autism. He said he initially struggled to understand

PHOTO BY LARISSA FUENTES



Rocco's Voice for Autism donated a communication board to be used in Blumenfeld Family Park.

autism and wanted to help other families facing similar challenges.

"What I have is the mental approach of, like, I can fix anything. I couldn't fix this," Spagnuolo said. "So, in order for me to stay sane and to do something, I decided to start this organization so we could give back to other families who are going through it as well."

Spagnuolo said the goal is to give people the same opportunities regardless of ability. He described the new installation as the organization's first double-sided communication board, following a suggestion from a council member that future boards be accessible from both sides.

"This is how I finally met my son through pointing at letters and spelling, which I didn't know he could do," Spagnuolo said. "To have other kids go up and communicate through the board ... everybody has a voice."

Spanakos said she had been working for three to four years to bring communication boards to parks. Her son is nonverbal, she said, and the project is personal because of the difficulty some children face when they cannot express themselves.

After learning about Rocco's Voice through a communication board in an Oyster Bay park, Spanakos reached out to the

organization. She said the boards can help children communicate, reduce frustration and create opportunities for conversation.

"It's very difficult, because if you can't communicate, then your frustrations build, because you can't express yourself," Spanakos said.

Spanakos said the board can also benefit toddlers learning language, speech therapists and teachers working to include all children in play.

She called the installation at Blumenfeld Family Park a major step toward making playgrounds more inclusive and said she hopes to see communication boards installed in Nassau County parks and elementary school playgrounds.

DeSena thanked Rocco's Voice, the Town of North Hempstead Parks Department and The Nicholas Center for their work.

"Communication is a huge part of that," DeSena said of creating inclusive playgrounds. "We want to make sure that anyone that goes to a playground can feel included."

The ceremony concluded with officials, organizers and children gathering to cut the ribbon and celebrate the new addition to the park.