

Advertisement

LONG ISLAND / **TOWNS**

FIRST IN NEWSDAY

Long Island parks add 'communication boards' to aid nonverbal expression

Listen • 3:51 Automated narration. [Learn more](#)



This Rocco's Voice for Autism communication board, which was recently added to Blumenfeld Family Park in Port Washington, can help nonverbal individuals express themselves. Credit: Newsday / Steve Pfost

By Joshua Needelman
joshua.needelman@newsday.com
Updated September 2, 2026 6:37 am

[SHARE](#)

It wasn't until Sonny Spagnuolo's son, Rocco, was about 9 or 10 that Sonny said he got to "meet my son" for the first time.

Rocco, who has autism, is nonverbal and spent the early years of his life communicating using a device. Then, Sonny said, Rocky learned to express himself with a letter board, which features the alphabet and is used by nonspeaking individuals to spell out thoughts and feelings.

The breakthrough motivated Spagnuolo to create innovative ways for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to communicate, and in 2017, he launched Rocco's Voice for Autism. The Bethpage nonprofit has installed about 30 communication boards — which have images and words of various actions, emotions and more — at parks and schools across Long Island.

Advertisement

The Town of North Hempstead installed its first communication board from Rocco's Voice at John D. Caemmerer Park in Albertson in January, and added another last month at Blumenfeld Family Park in Port Washington.

"Everyone should feel welcome at the park," town Councilwoman Mariann Dalimonte, who represents Port Washington, said in an interview. "It's about creating an inclusive and accessible park for everyone."

The board marks the latest effort in Port Washington to reach individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The peninsula is also home to the nonprofit vocational and employment agencies the Nicholas Center and Spectrum Designs, as well as [the Books for Dessert reading club](#).



A close-up of the communication board shows various emotions and simple expressions at Blumenfeld Family Park in Port Washington. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

The town board accepted the communication board as a gift last December. It was valued at \$1,220, according to the resolution.

Supervisor Jennifer DeSena said in a statement that "every child deserves the chance to play, be understood, and feel at home in their neighborhood park."

The board is "not just another amenity but our way of making sure every child and family feels part of our community," she said.

The board, which is double-sided, is 6 feet wide and 3 feet tall and is mounted 12 to 18 inches above the ground, Dalimonte said. It includes icons for every letter in the alphabet, as well as numbers zero through nine. It also has images portraying various emotions: "happy" and "mad"; bodily needs: "hungry" and "thirsty"; and actions: "jump" and "play."

Advertisement

The idea for the communication boards came from Anna Di Chiara, Rocco's Voice's executive director. Di Chiara had seen similar boards at parks in North Carolina.

The nonprofit has donated communication boards to 13 parks in Oyster Bay Town and 10 in Hempstead Town. It also helps build inclusive playgrounds and has a scholarship program.

Rocco's Voice will donate a communication board to Port Washington North for the village's long-planned accessible playground, for which bids are going out this week, Mayor Robert Weitzner said in an interview.

"It's really important, at any location but especially a playground, to have children of all ages and abilities be able to communicate," Weitzner said. "These communication boards give children the ability to speak for themselves.

Stella Spanakos, co-founder of the Nicholas Center, has a son who is nonverbal. She said in an interview the boards are a "great tool."

Advertisement

"It's a beautiful step to see communities come together, where everybody is really an active participant; they're not just hanging out on the sidelines," Spanakos said. "To be able to say, 'No, I want to play on the slide.' Ah, so it's the slide that you like."

Earlier in the year, Spagnuolo and Di Chiara attended a park where a board had recently been installed. They noticed a mother and a son pointing at the board. Spagnuolo and Di Chiara approached the mother, who told them her son was using it to communicate.

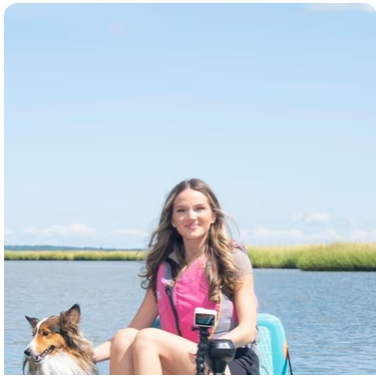
"Watching them use it," Spagnuolo said, "it's very moving, and very emotional."



By **Joshua Needelman**

joshua.needelman@newsday.com

Joshua Needelman covers the Town of North Hempstead for Newsday. A Long Island native and University of Maryland graduate, his work has appeared in publications including The New York Times and The Washington Post.



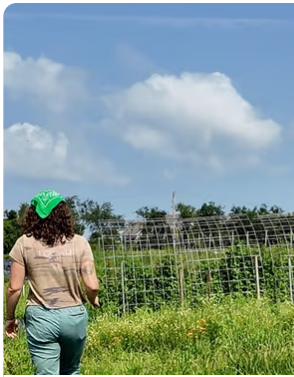
It's your last chance to book an LI 'bumper boat'

01:17



Eyewitness account of the Nepali flood

01:18



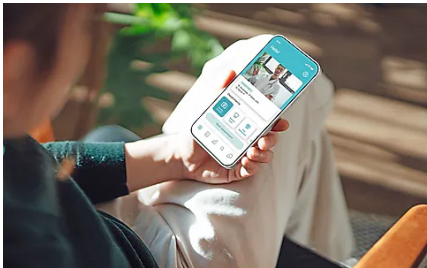
Out East: North Fork Fall Tour

02:58

NewsdayTV STREAMING NOW

UPDATED 40 MINUTES AGO Huntington Cinema Arts Centre co-director fired; Remembering 9/11: 3 LI brothers follow in fallen firefighter father's footsteps; Labor Day Weekend travel hacks; Biggest back-to-school day on LI; Tracking possible storms

[Get more on these and other NewsdayTV stories](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

The Critical Role of Hybrid Healthcare for New York Employers

BY VICTOR DESTEFANO, PRESIDENT, ANTHEM BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD IN NEW YORK

Access to healthcare is more than an employee benefit. For many New York employers, it's one of the largest business investments they make each year – and a critical factor in attracting...

Didn't find what you were looking for?

Search newsday.com



Advertisement

Quick Links

- About Us
- Subscribe
- Today's paper
- Email newsletters
- Newsday Live
- Careers
- Manage my account
- Mobile & TV apps
- Contests
- Archives

News

- Long Island
- Sports
- Opinion
- Politics
- News
- Business
- Towns
- High school sports

Advertising

- Media Kit
- Brand 360
- Newsday Productions
- Newsday Connect
- Classifieds
- Public Notices

Featured

- Funbook
- Obituaries
- Crosswords
- Things to Do
- Entertainment
- Restaurants
- Family
- Travel
- NextLI

[Terms of service](#) | [Subscription terms](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [California Privacy Rights](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Newsday](#) | [Reprints & permissions](#) | [Advertise with Newsday](#) | [Help](#) | [AI policy](#) |  [Your Privacy Choices](#)

Copyright ©2026 Newsday. All rights reserved.

