



NEWS RELEASE

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Photos/Steve Laschever (Cutlines below)

Jonathan's Dream Park Enhances Accessibility with CRIS Radio Mobile App

Mobile App Makes It Easier For People Who are Blind to Navigate Playground

West Hartford, Conn. – Jonathan's Dream Park, an accessible and inclusive playground designed for all ages and abilities, is even more accessible now thanks to CRIS Radio's GPS mobile app that helps guide visitors who are blind or have low vision through the park.

State and local officials are joining Amy and Peter Barzach, whose son Jonathan was the inspiration for the accessible playground, to celebrate the launch of the CRISAccess Mobile App at the playground on June 16.

The mobile app enhances the playground's accessibility, particularly for people who are blind or have low vision. Audio descriptions of the playground equipment are triggered by the smartphone's GPS function or scan of a QR Code.

The \$1.2 million playground is located on the Mandell Jewish Community Center campus on Bloomfield Avenue in West Hartford.

Creating an audio tour of the playground has been a team project spear-headed by Ronit Shoham, the playground's project manager, who worked with the Barzachs to rebuild the original Jonathan's Dream playground in 2017.

"This new mobile app offered by CRIS Radio is an incredibly powerful tool for community access in outdoor spaces," said Amy Porter, commissioner of the state Dept. of Aging and Rehabilitation Services.

"As we move into warmer weather and people spend more time outdoors, this technology has the power to enhance the social and cultural experience for many people, particularly individuals who are blind or have low vision," Porter said. "Jonathan's Dream Playground, already designed for all, is a perfect setting to launch the app."

Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz also praised the collaboration. "Playgrounds and parks are wonderful spaces for children to play, build friendships, and most of all, have fun," she said at the event. "This app will provide children with visual impairments in the greater West Hartford community a safe and inclusive place to play with their friends and neighbors. I am thrilled to celebrate this launch today; it represents real progress in building inclusive public spaces for children across Connecticut."

Shoham approached CRIS Radio, the only radio-reading service in Connecticut that broadcasts audio versions of newspapers and magazines for people who are blind or unable to read due to other print disabilities, such as Dyslexia, Parkinson's disease, or other disabilities, to create an audio tour of the playground. The 42-year-old nonprofit has expanded its family of audio services with the help of new technologies.

"The new Jonathan's Dream addresses the needs of people with various challenges," Shoham said. "We want to make sure that kids and adults with visual impermanent can join in the fun and celebrate life at Jonathan's Dream."

The Greater Hartford Host Lions Club raised funds towards the development of the mobile app, and the balance was funded through a technology grant awarded by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. Matthew Woods Webber, a member of the Greater Host Lions Club, was also approached by Shoham about how the Lions could help with the expanding access at Jonathan's Dream Park because she knew about the club's focus on helping people who are blind or vision-challenged.

"We knew we wanted to help, not only because of the natural fit with our mission, but because we know how important a Jonathan's Dream is to our community," Webber said.

Paul A. Young, chairman of CRIS Radio's Board of Directors, expressed gratitude to the Lions Club and HFPG for its financial support and collaboration with the team at Jonathan's Dream Park. "CRIS Radio is grateful for the financial support that made the development of our CRISAccess Mobile App using GPS a reality," Young said. "We also are honored to work with Ronit, and other Mandell JCC volunteers and staff who share CRIS Radio's commitment to improving access for those with disabilities."

About CRIS Radio

CRIS Radio (Connecticut Radio Information System) is a 42-year-old nonprofit based in Windsor and is Connecticut's only radio-reading service providing audio access 24/7 to news and information for people who are blind or print-challenged, including those unable to read due to physical, learning, intellectual or emotional disabilities. CRIS Radio provides audible exhibits at museums, provides on-demand access to classroom materials, and streams in both English and in Spanish to hospitals and health care facilities. Thanks to more than 200 volunteers, all CRIS recordings feature human narration. For more information, visit www.crisradio.org.

About Jonathan's Dream Park

In 1994, Amy Barzach was playing with her two sons when she noticed a little girl in a wheelchair, crying, unable to join in because the playground wasn't accessible to her. The next year, when a disability changed the way her own child, Jonathan, could play, Amy remembered that little girl and, with her husband Peter and other son Daniel, decided to build an inclusive playground to honor him and called it Jonathan's Dream. Jonathan's Dream opened in 1996 after a massive community build on the campus of the Mandell Jewish Community Center (JCC) in West Hartford, Conn. The structures

were assembled by hand and were made primarily out of wood. The JCC and the Barzach family were not deterred. They planned to modernize the playground and reached out to the community for help. One of the first people to say “yes” was Ronit Shoham. The new Jonathan’s Dream was opened on October 22, 2017. The reimagined design, featuring equipment that requires children to be physically engaged in the areas of strength, endurance, and flexibility... and of course, it is inclusive.

Pix 1: Several state, local, and civic leaders celebrated the launch of CRIS Radio’s new mobile app at Jonathan’s Dream Park in West Hartford. From left, Mark Segar, president, Greater Hartford Host Lions Club; Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz; Brad Drazen, vice president of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; West Hartford Mayor Shari Cantor, Amy Barzach, who founded Jonathan’s Dream; Ronit Shoham, the park manager; Diane Weaver Dunne, executive director of CRIS Radio; state Sen. Cathy Osten; Amy Porter, commissioner, Dept. of Aging and Rehabilitation Services; and Paul Young, CRIS Radio board chair.

Pix 2: Listening to the CRISAccess Audio Tour mobile app on a personal smartphone that uses GPS to trigger audio descriptions of the playground equipment to help people with low vision better navigate the playground are, from left: Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz; Amy Barzach, whose son Jonathan was the inspiration for the playground; Diane Weaver Dunne, executive director of CRIS Radio; state Sen. Cathy Osten; and West Hartford Mayor Shari Cantor.