

Narnia-themed path provides a joui

Story by **DOUG JANZ** ♦ Photos by **MIKE MURPHY**

KINGSPORT — When volunteers broke ground for the Lions Narnia Braille Trail at Warriors' Path State Park, it truly was groundbreaking.

Once the trail opens later this month, blind or sight-impaired children will be able to experience the famous C.S. Lewis novel "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" through a series of eight stations that incorporate sculpted figures and specially made structures, Braille wording, large print type, audio clips and other media.

They'll have plants to feel and smell that go along with the story, giving the experience a nature component. The journey along the paved trail begins and ends by passing through two huge wardrobes, just like in the Lewis novel.

That's in addition to all the things already in place as part of Darrell's Dream Boundless Playground, which caters to children with various disabilities but is rewarding for everyone. Several Braille signs and exhibits are on display; everything is wheelchair accessible and specially constructed for kids with special needs.

The near future holds a fully accessible treehouse — something most special needs kids never

get to experience.

The Lions Narnia Braille Trail circles the playground and, when it opens April 14, will only make this special place more special.

"I would say it's a one-of-a-kind facility in the country," said Mary Steadman, vice chairman of the project for Friends of Warriors' Path State Park. "There are 120-some Boundless Playgrounds and this is maybe the third or fourth Braille trail. I would say no other place has all these components."

Chairman Betty DeVinney concurs.

"I don't know that you will ever see a playground comparable to this one all in one location," she said. "You'll see treehouses, you'll see trails for the blind, nature mazes, playgrounds in other places, but I

don't know of any facility that has a congruence of all these aspects."

It will be the first Braille trail in Tennessee as well as the first one in a state park. It's also the first Boundless Playground with a Braille trail, Steadman said.

Darrell's Dream Boundless Playground was opened in 2007 and is a four-phase project. The Lions Narnia Braille Trail is the second phase; the third is the treehouse and Phase 4 is a classroom amphitheater.

The Braille trail is a special project spearheaded by the Kingsport Lions Club, led by Doug Haseltine and with help from many quarters.

"We had been searching for some opportunities to do Braille trails for some time," Haseltine said. "We'd looked at other nature-related trails, providing Braille plates to describe some of the natural things, and that was perking along on the backburner when we happened upon the opportunity here.

"They already had the perimeter trail on the playground and had plans for some stations along the way with park benches. When we heard about that, it seemed like a great opportunity."

The Narnia theme, with Aslan the lion as a main character, was a good fit for the Lions Club. They decided they liked the storyline and felt it would be good to illustrate along the trail.

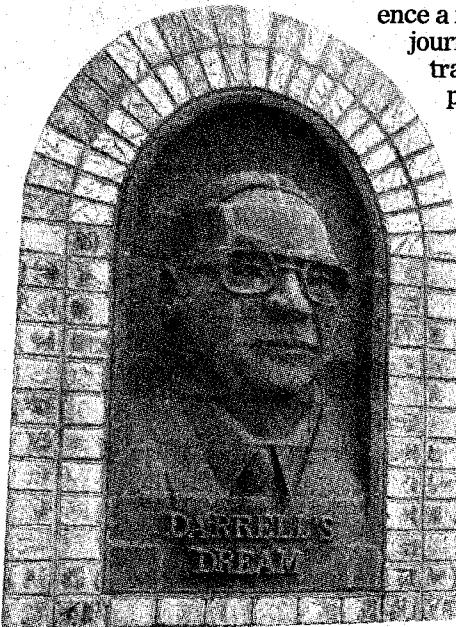
"It's just a great children's classic," Haseltine said.

The 1950 novel tells the story of four children who discover a wardrobe that leads them to the magical kingdom of Narnia, and they help save Narnia from the evil White Witch. The trail is based upon the book, not the popular 2005 movie, and the Lions even contacted the C.S. Lewis Foundation for permission.

Each station will tell part of the story. They'll include figures of characters like the lion, Mr. Tumnus and a white deer that signifies the end of the journey, as well as elaborate structures like a beaver home and Mr. Tumnus' cave built into the hillside.

Bumps on the trail, similar to those that signal to the blind that they're at a crosswalk, will be positioned at each station, and bright yellow colors will help those with limited eyesight to find each station. Each signpost will be located in the same place, making them easier to find, and on the signs will be high-contrast artwork as well as large print, Braille and audio messages.

"And we're going to have blinders for people to wear if they want to get a better understanding of what it's like to be blind," Steadman said. "They'll have to compensate with touch, sound and smell.



The Braille trail is within Warriors' Path State Park's Darrell's Dream Boundless Playground.

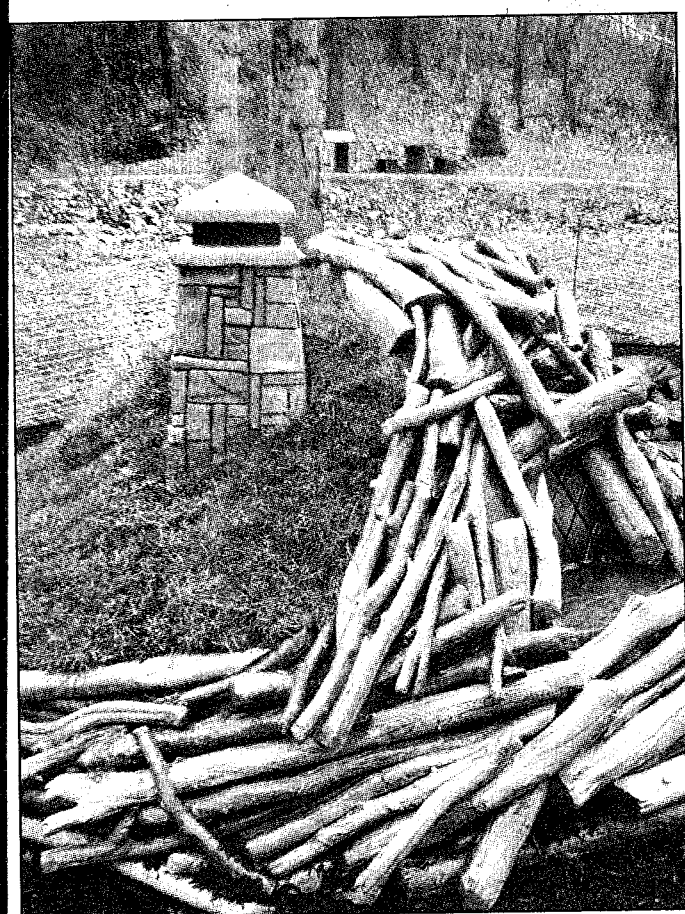
ourney for the blind

The senses are greatly enhanced. So it's kind of educational programming for local school groups."

The Kingsport Lions received help from the Lions Club International Foundation; Lions Clubs of East Tennessee; Lions District 12-N Charities Inc. and the Johnson City Lions Club. Various other sponsors are involved. Warriors' Path State Park has been involved in every phase, as well, particularly park ranger Marty Silver.

The Northeast Tennessee Master Gardeners, led by Gwynn Duncan, have also had a big hand in things. They're planting hundreds of native flowers, shrubs and trees along the route and in the playground, many of them in conjunction with the Narnia storyline — including ferns, poppy, hydrangea, wild geranium, Virginia bluebells, phlox — as well as herbs in the sensory garden in the middle of the playground — mint, dill, oregano, sage, rosemary, ginger, alum root, witch hazel and many more.

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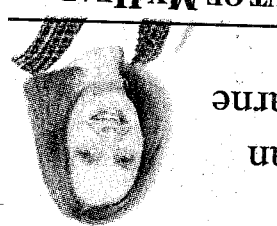


The Beavers' House



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Section E
Sunday
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and they're not just stopping to use the restroom," Smith said.

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Dealing with the scope of the whole playground project, including the Braille trail, was groundbreaking in that there wasn't much to base it on.

"Everything was brand new," Steadman said. "There was nothing to go on when we started. It was a lot of hard work."

DeVinney said the first ideas for what could go into the Boundless Playground came from a group of special-needs children who were tasked with designing their ideal playground. The tree-house, in the planning stages and expected to be ready later this year, was one of their favorite parts of it.

Organizers and volunteers have emphasized what a group effort the projects have been, requiring many partnerships and thousands of volunteer man-hours. But the rewards have already been great.

Families and classes have come from many counties and states to enjoy the place. Kids, parents and grandparents have benefited from it.

DeVinney said one of her best experiences came when a mother hugged her and told her, crying, "Both my children are special needs children and we never had a place until this one." DeVinney added, "I still go there and sit and watch and cry when I see the kids come off the buses and see their little faces so happy as they play."

The place enables kids with or without special needs to get used to being around each other, something that benefits them all.

"This broadens people's understanding of those with different abilities," Haseltine said. "That's one of the keys — allowing opportunities for people of all abilities to play side by side. Sighted, non-sighted, wheelchair — we're putting those kids right out there in the thick of things, where in the past there were always barriers."

Note: An opening dedication is planned for the Lions Narnia Braille Trail April 14 at 2 p.m. The playground is located near the Warriors' Path marina, close to the bridge crossing over to the island.

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By STEPHEN ORR
New York Times News Service

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