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A New Way For Blind To Experience Anchorage Park



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Braille details will eventually be linked to audio narration. (Michelle Theriault Boots (KTUU-DT))

Michelle Theriault Boots

5:01 p.m. AKDT, May 11, 2011

ANCHORAGE, Alaska —

It's a crisp, bright afternoon at Northwood Park in Spenard. A muskrat swims in the pond and signs of early spring buds are on the trees.

Terrence [Van Ettinger](#) can't see it very well: The 34-year-old is legally blind due to an underdeveloped optical nerve.

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Terrence Van Ettinger checks out an

[interpretive sign at Northwood Park in Spenard.](#)



[Landscape architect Peter Briggs of Corvus Design listens to audio tracks that will eventually be part of the park's interpretive experience on his iPad.](#)

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and the area's geology alone. It's an issue of independence, he says.

"To know that I can come here and read the signs on my own," he says, "is phenomenal."

Landscape architect Peter Briggs consulted with Alaska Center for the Blind members while designing the project.

The feedback:

"I think there's maybe what could either be a tree or a post," he says with a laugh, using his cane to point into the distance. "Or maybe it's a pillar."

Ettinger and other people with visual impairments can now experience Northwood Park in new ways, thanks to 29 interpretive signs that offer lessons on geology, natural [history](#) and ecology to all -- not just to the sighted.

The Anchorage Park Foundation began the project in 2006 with the aim of increasing access, particularly for its neighbors at the Alaska Center for the Blind, which is located nearby.

"Parks are for all people here in Anchorage," says Beth Nordlund, the organization's executive director. "Some of us are blind and visually impaired but we can still provide content to people in different ways."

Van Ettinger teaches assistive [technology](#) at the Alaska Center for the Blind, finding tools -- like an iPhone device that hooks up to a Braille display -- that make life easier for his students.

"I try to find and then teach people to use the tools that are going to give them the ability to be successful in what it is, whether it's emailing their grandkids, fulfilling a report for a supervisor or taking inventory," he says.

He remembers going to parks in the Lower 48 growing up where "maybe they'd Braille-d up something that they'd stashed away in a back closet."

Now, he can come to Northwood to feel the same sunshine, smell the green grass and learn about things like hoarfrost



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High color contrast was important, as was large text.

The signs also feature shape cutouts, which add "texture and interest," according to Van Ettinger, and a Braille element that will eventually be linked up to audio commentary.

You'll see principles of universal design, says Briggs.

"It just made us a little bit smarter in what we were doing," he says.

But do the new interpretive signs actually make a difference?

Yes, says Rick Malley.

Malley, who is legally blind, was visiting the park with his service dog on Wednesday.

"I'd be here walking around and think, water, paved areas, birds and stuff," Malley says. "But this actually explains more about the marsh, the geology of the land – and it just gives me a much better experience of what I'm looking at."

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