

Christmas In The Park Aims To ‘Spread Joy To All’ This Holiday Season With Inaugural ‘Accessible Sunday’ Plans

Steven Aquino Contributor 

Steven covers accessibility and assistive technologies.

Nov 27, 2023, 11:54am EST

“Christmas should be accessible to all. We want to spread joy to all.”

That’s what Debbie Degutis said to me last week during a private tour of Christmas in the Park located at the two-acre stretch of Plaza de Cesar Chavez in Downtown San Jose. Christmas in the Park, which began in 1980, is described on its website as “an annual holiday tradition that takes place in the heart of Downtown San José” [that] has brought people from all over the Bay Area together during the holidays.” The Park is transformed into a so-called “holiday fantasy” featuring more than 40 animated and musical exhibits, lights, community-decorated Christmas trees, and an impressive 65-foot illuminated Christmas tree.

The venue has been, and always will be, free to the public.

Christmas in the Park, of which Degutis serves as managing director, is a nonprofit organization which runs the eponymous park during the holiday season with help from fundraising and the community. This year, Christmas in the Park opened this past Friday, on Black Friday, and is open daily from Noon until 11:00pm until January 1. On Sunday, December 10, Christmas in the Park is hosting “Accessible Sunday,” a special day designed for people with disabilities. There will be a special so-called “Sensory Santa” from Noon to 2:00pm, where disabled children can visit Santa stress-free in his house in a private, virtually secluded setting. The site also features wheelchair accessible ramps, curb cuts, and more accommodations for disabled guests who visit the park.

As a complement to Accessible Sunday, Christmas in the Park partner in the San Andreas Regional Center has planned special hours throughout December for disabled children to visit Santa’s House inside the park.

“It’s important to Christmas in the Park [and] to our nonprofit organization to make our event accessible to everybody, whatever that means to them,” Degutis said of the ethos behind Accessible Sunday.

The interview with Degutis was exclusive to me and this column.

The overarching goal of Accessible Sunday is, in a nutshell, show empathy. Degutis explained it gets “pretty busy” at Christmas in the Park, with 700,000 visitors coming in and out. As such, the immense crowds can potentially be daunting and overwhelming to many disabled people and their families. Not only can navigation be challenging for someone who is Blind or low vision, and/or whom may have mobility conditions, but the sheer number of people crammed into a relatively cramped space may prove too much in sensory terms. This may be the case for a person who has certain neurodivergent disabilities such as autism. Accessible Sunday is meant to accommodate all those people.

“We want to make sure that our entire community is included,” Degutis said. “A big crowded park isn’t always the most friendly, and we want to make sure we’re the most friendly event we can be.”

As I’ve written in the space innumerable times, that Christmas in the Park is focused on accessibility is yet another lesson that accessibility and especially assistive technologies isn’t limited to things that light up and make noise like smartphones and laptops. It’s logical to think otherwise, but for the disability community, accessibility touches every aspect of life. It’s also why laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act are on the proverbial books; it regulates technology for the outside world—like what Degutis and team are espousing—to make physical spaces more accessible. It’s important to remember tech can be analog too; Christmas in the Park is yet another shining example of its application.

Christmas in the Park employs five people full-time; this includes Degutis, who started in January. Planning, she said, is truly a year-round endeavor for the team, and is a sprint until the venue opens in late November. Much of the work involves programming—getting the trees which surround the park, displays, and more—which Degutis works on alongside her operations director. While Degutis is focused more on the business and marketing sides of Christmas in the Park, her colleague in Keith Peffer concentrates on logistical facets, technology very much included, of making Christmas of the Park a reality every year.

One of the people who is helping make Accessible Sunday possible is TJ Rodgers. The Wisconsin-born Rodgers is founder of Cypress Semiconductor, stepping down in April 2016 after serving as the company’s CEO for over three decades. In a brief phone interview with me recently, Rodgers explained he was drawn to Christmas in the Park and Accessible Sunday in part because, being an active philanthropist, he asked his longtime public relations agency to keep him abreast of any giving opportunities. He learned of Christmas in the Park’s idea for Accessible Sunday for the disability community, which Rodgers said requires spending extra money “that wasn’t in the budget.” Rodgers wanted to do something to help make Accessible Sunday go from conception to fruition because he really wants to see disabled children and their families enjoy Christmas in the Park like anyone else.

“We turned it into a party for a whole day for kids with special needs. It was a huge opportunity,” he said of investing in Accessible Sunday.

For Rodgers, the motivation to help Degutis and Christmas in the Park stems from being a trustee of his alma mater in Ivy League school Dartmouth, based in New Hampshire. Like his college’s endowment, he wants to see his money go towards good causes and towards helping people live better. Christmas in the Park is one of those good causes.

Degutis called Rodgers’ support “really important” because it allows her to budget for things, like paying the salaries of her staff, without necessarily robbing Peter to pay Paul. The funds from Rodgers can go towards better amenities or a stipend to pay for Santas; during my visit to the Park, Degutis said she’s on the prowl for multilingual Santas, hoping to get Spanish-, Vietnamese-, and ASL-speaking ones. However vital money is to get Christmas in the Park up and running, however, Degutis emphasized Rodgers’ generosity and willingness to help means something far beyond sheer pragmatism in getting the place running.

“What that shows is the level of support for what we’re doing—that’s what’s important,” she said. “That means that what we’re doing is right and that people see the value in it. They’re showing that with TJ’s support; what he’s given us, that just kind of put a pep in our step. It’s like, ‘Okay, we’re doing the right thing. They believe in us.’”

Degutis said her organization’s relationship with San Jose City Hall is “a strong one.” She’s invited city leaders, including new mayor Matt Mahan, and is excited for them to see what has been built because Christmas in the Park hasn’t done anything like this “on this scale” before. “I hope when [city leaders] see it [that] some bells start ringing in their heads and then we can collaborate next year and do even more.”

When asked about what she wants for Christmas in the Park and Accessible Sunday, Degutis reiterated what she said at the outset about wanting to make the Park a place for literally everybody. Accessible Sunday is in Year 1, and Degutis hopes “people see what we’re trying to do and the difference we’re trying to make and the joy we’re trying to spread,” adding she hopes the organization drums up enough support in this first go-round that 2024 will be “even bigger and better.” It hurts Degutis to know there have been families who haven’t visited Christmas in the Park because it’s too crowded or they can’t maneuver their wheelchair or whatnot. It makes the experience unintentionally exclusionary. One such improvement came up during my tour, when we walked by the train rides and Degutis suddenly realized they are inaccessible to wheelchairs in their current state. She vowed to get working on that later in the afternoon, telling me that “isn’t acceptable.”

Christmas in the Park has room to grow bigger and better, indeed. However successful the Park has been over the last few decades, Degutis readily acknowledged their success could actually be problematic.

“This [the first Accessible Sunday] is a start.” Degutis said of the room to grow. “There are families, people of all ages, who need a little special time and accommodation so that they can enjoy the holidays. I want to make sure our park is there for everybody... I want to make sure we take those barriers down and let everybody enjoy Christmas in the Park.”

Degutis doubled down on making Christmas in the Park inclusive.

“I’ll be there at midnight if that means somebody can come through the park,” she said of her commitment to the cause. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make it available to everybody.”

