

Carissa Decelles, Opening Remarks

Grand Opening and Ribbon Cutting Cedar Wood Preserve Saturday, November 20, 2022

I've known Elanah for a few years now in a few different capacities from work, to our mutual interest in advocating for the rights and inclusion of disabled individuals. I was so excited to hear about this new project she was working on with the Avalonia. Not only is this new land preserve Avalonia's first in Norwich, a community I have come to love – but they are also striving to take accessibility into account in its creation... from level accessible trails and paths, to a designated handicap parking spot (which my van is currently parked in, lol)!

Open spaces are open pieces of undeveloped land that are accessible to the public – to enjoy the preserved wildlife that they may not get to encounter or experience in their day to day living. This is especially true of urban spaces like Norwich, making it all the more important. What is often times forgotten in making these lands accessible to the public, however, is in fact, accessibility! Accessibility that truly allows **EVERYONE** the opportunity to enjoy nature.

Nature for me as it is for many people, is where I go to find peace, calm, beauty, and inspiration. As an artist it is something that is rather pivotal for me – It clears my head, grounds me, and brings me joy. My friends and I very often go on walks outside with our dogs (usually when it's a bit warmer outside than it is today, haha)... but as a person who utilizes a wheelchair for mobility, we are pretty limited in the places that I can easily access. The go to usually ends up being state parks, biking trails that are paved, or even just the sidewalks around town – which are ALL great in their own respect, but none of them FEEL like you are meandering around IN the woods... amongst the trees and the fields and the wild nature that lives there. THAT is a totally different experience... one which Avalonia is seeking to provide with this project!

As a young child I was involved in the planning and development of a playground in West Hartford – the first fully handicap accessible playground in the state! I was asked to be part of the “dream and design” team, where children with various disabilities were asked about their dreams! – what did they dream of doing on a playground that they could never participate in before? An accessible swing was already taken by another child (lol), so my contribution to the project was an accessible tree house. Let me tell you, I was obsessed with this place... it was one of the few places I could

go where I could PLAY and exist without BOUNDARIES or limitations... every child deserves that experience.

This project, in many ways, is the adult version of an accessible playground... Every person, deserves to be able to access, enjoy, and PLAY in nature! I could not be more excited to be able to experience that here!