

Nonprofit raising funds for NJ's first 'Playful Learning Thinkscape,' in Morris Township

July 20, 2022



Supporters at site of future MOMI playground in Morris Township. From left: Jaryd Moran, Bowman Consulting, Landscape Engineer; Robert Indig, Devimy Equities, Marketplace Mall developer; Jeff Grayzel, MOMI board member; Andreia Santos de Araujo, MOMI board member; Sara Sorenson, President and Co-Founder of MOMI; Nicole Pittaluga, Co-Founder of MOMI; Joe Forgione, JMF Properties, Colgate site redeveloper, July 19, 2022. Photo by Bill Lescohier

From the Museum of Makers and Innovators (MOMI):

What is a "Thinkscape"? The first one in New Jersey is coming soon to a park being constructed in Morris Township.

"What if we could build our communities around families and how children learn?"

That is the question that Sara Sorenson and Nicole Pittaluga, co-founders of the Museum of Makers and Innovators, also known as MOMI, had back in 2020 during the height of the pandemic.

Now they, along with their team at MOMI, a local nonprofit organization — are doing just that at a community park that will be part of the new Morris Marketplace.

The Morris Marketplace is a shopping mall under construction on a site adjacent to Mennen Arena on E. Hanover Avenue in the Township.



Artist's rendering of the 'Red Pole Forest,' part of a planned MOMI play area in Morris Township, July 2022. Image courtesy of MOMI.

“Research shows that multi-generational learning — through child and caregiver engagement — builds important life skills and connections that last longer and help shape educational attitudes towards learning outside of the classroom,” says Sorenson.

“And what better place to create more joyful, and inclusive and equitable learning experiences for all ages but in an outdoor shopping mall where families routinely gather. As a parent I know first-hand the challenges of shopping with small children and having a place that combines errands, entertainment and learning is truly helpful.”

MOMI was established in 2018 and has a mission to build more playful communities and a world-class children’s museum in New Jersey — the only state in the country that does not have one.

While building a new regional museum will take time, Sorenson and Pittaluga wanted to make a community impact now and demonstrate that learning occurs everywhere. And creating a thinkscape was the direction they wanted to go.

Thinkscape brings the benefits of playful learning — which combines the enjoyable nature of play with a learning goal — to a public space.

“Once we heard about the park and had initial discussions with the developer and the township, we just knew we had to get involved,” says Pittaluga, who is also a Morris Township resident.

So she and the MOMI team collaborated with the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network — a nationwide think tank of early childhood researchers and policymakers — and partnered with Morris Township and DeVimy Equities, the developer of Morris Marketplace, to bring innovative learning to the design of the pocket park at the strip mall.

When the mall was announced MOMI’s founders reached out to the developer to ask if they could partner on the park included in the plans. The mall’s vision was to create a place that could be seen as a town square — a destination that connects communities across the region.

MOMI suggested incorporating creative placemaking, elements of a children’s museum, and the daily routine of shopping and dining. Designs of the community park are nearly complete thanks to a \$10,000 grant in seed funding from a local family foundation.

The community park — Morris Marketplace THINKSCAPE — as it will be called, is planned to include six innovative playful learning spaces.

Whether telling a story at the Story Spinner, playing a matching game at the Memory Match, jumping through the Playful Path, meandering through the Red Pole Forest, exploring sounds in the Sound Garden with musical flowers, or exploring the properties of water at the Creative Canvas, there is something for everyone.

The park will be the first in New Jersey to join communities all over the world that have provided families with a children’s museum experience that is free to enjoy.

Jeff Grayzel, former Morris Township mayor, is a MOMI founding board member.

“When my kids were younger, we would take them to children’s museums wherever we would travel. When the opportunity arose to work with the developer of the Morris Marketplace to incorporate a community park into the design, we jumped on it,” says Grayzel.

He added “I am excited that MOMI will build its first installations at this new park to benefit the children and their families in the surrounding community.”

To make these playful learning spaces real, MOMI will need to raise \$100,000 to build this new installation. Thus, MOMI has launched a fundraising campaign and is hoping the community will help.

“We are thrilled to bring this innovative, forward-thinking project to the Morris Township area and are hopeful that we can garner enough support to complete the project,” says Sorenson.

To donate or become a sponsor, or for more information, visit [here](#) or email [here](#).