# Change the conversation to: Accessibility

With so much sad and scary discourse circulating, this month seemed an appropriate time to launch a counter-narrative in the form of our first public UniDescription Report. Positive news, like what is in this report, has been happening in 2020, too. And you are a part of it.

Our small research-and-development team — working from a tiny speck of an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean — has been collaborating for the past five+ years with people from around the United States to steadily improve media accessibility, especially for those who are deaf-blind, blind, or low-vision. We are sending out this report as a way to further connect with you (our partners), to share our collective successes together, and to update you about what we are planning. We have many exciting ideas in motion!

This week is Helen Keller Deaf-Blind Awareness Week, for example, and one of our Co-PIs, Dr. Megan Conway, is doing her part to make a more-accessible world as a Research and Accessibility Specialist for the Helen Keller National Center. Through her advocacy, we have expanded our UniD research scope this year to explicitly include people who both cannot see and hear well, as a distinct audience for Audio Description.

Next month is the 30th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Maybe that would be an ideal moment for you to lead new public conversations about the accessibility of your favorite places, say U.S. National Park Service sites, and how you might be able to improve that accessibility for more people?



**PHOTO:** ACB members listening to Audio Description in Yosemite National Park as a part of the UniD Project

**DESCRIBING:** A horizontal photograph, the centerpiece visual on the page

**DESCRIPTION:** A highlight of The UniDescription Project's field tests so far was the trip to Yosemite National Park, in November 2017, which attracted about 30 American Council of the Blind members from the California Council of the Blind chapter in Fresno, CA. ACB chartered a bus for this activity, and this photograph shows eight of those participants, most wearing winter coats, and one of their guide dogs, gathered at a lookout. A medium-sized waterfall (not Niagara Falls, not a trickle) pours down one of the park's sheer granitic walls about a hundred yards, or so, in the background. Even though everyone is dressed for cold weather, it's a sunny day, and two of the ACB members are holding their coats instead of wearing them. A couple of large logs nearby appear to block the path to a dry stream bed filled with huge gray boulders that match the tone of the nearby rock walls. Small trees and bushes in this dry bed provide some green in the scene. The identifiable ACB members – Veronica Hernandez, Sajja Koirala, Joey Ruiz, Martha Espitia, Nikki Richards, and Chenier Derrick – are listening to UniD descriptions on their smartphones while enjoying the natural environment. Photos of this trip were posted on the ACB Facebook page, and the post broke the organization's record for social-media responses, topping 100,000 pageviews for the first time in the group's history. (Image Courtesy of Jamie Gibson-Barrows).

# Descriptathon 6 is on! Sound art, too

## UniD's 3Ds: Descriptions, Descriptathons, Digital Infrastructure

Besides documenting here what we have done, we also want to share our plans for what we are going to do next. For the 2020s, we are focused on our core 3Ds: Making better Descriptions, Descriptathons, and Digital Infrastructure.

For Descriptions, we will continue to refine all genres through empirical research, working next at park sites in the National Mall and in the Midwest (for Descriptathons 6/7), but we also wondered how Audio Description could be approached as an artistic medium, as "auteur" description. In that vein:

- The **National Endowment for the Arts** (NEA) recently awarded The UniDescription Project a **$10,000 grant** to create a novel form of "Audio Description art," around the Goldsworthy Walk in The Presidio area of San Francisco, within the **Golden Gate National Recreation Area**. Andy Goldsworthy, from England, has installed four pieces in The Presidio, "Spire," Wood Line," "Tree Fall," and "Earth Wall." Our UniD sound artists, Andy Graydon and Ernst Karel, will use Audio Description to describe and respond to that visual art, and the art sites, in ways that emphasize acoustic aesthetics.

As noted, we will be collaborating on many more descriptions, at NPS sites, and elsewhere, including:

- Thanks to grant support from **Google**, we will be offering **Descriptathon 6** Aug. 18-20 with a focus on NPS sites in the **Washington, D.C., area**, and in the **National Mall** in particular. In 2016, one of the first three NPS collaborators was the Washington Monument, so we are excited to add some nearby Audio Description at the Lincoln, MLK, and Jefferson memorials. Also, D6 will include for the first time representatives from both **Parks Canada** (that country's version of the NPS) and the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**.

- Before D6 is even underway, though, we already have received a funding commitment from the **Midwest Region** of the NPS to conduct **Descriptathon 7** for parks in the middle of the country, which is also an area we have been aiming to serve better. As of this printing, we have not determined exactly how many parks will be involved or the dates of D7, but those details will be announced soon.

For UniD impact, and about infrastructure, we also have much good news to share:

- For the second year in a row, the **American Council of the Blind** has celebrated the work of a UniD collaborator with a **national award**. **Michele Hartley**, Media Accessibility Coordinator for the **Harpers Ferry Center** (HFC), the interpretive design center for the NPS system, will be lauded next month by ACB for her Achievement in Audio Description in Visual Art, Museums, and Visitor Centers. While UniD is only a part of her accomplishments noted, UniD would not exist without her commitment and the behind-the-scenes support from so many at the Harpers Ferry Center and the **National Park Service**. Congrats and thanks, again, Michele!

- UniD webtools are being updated and released regularly, including new options for **geotagging** your descriptions (connecting them to place), **metatagging** your descriptions (connecting them to search terms), and connecting descriptions across platforms (linking **mobile- and web-based systems**).

# Timeline: UniD Highlights

## 2014

**August 2014** – First NPS grant awarded to UH research team

**Sept. 2014** – Suitcase-sized box of NPS brochures arrives at UH

**Sept. 14, 2014** – UH-led research team assembles for the first time

**Fall 2014 –** Getting organized, creating goals, objectives, tactics

## 2015

**April 2015** – UniDescription name chosen, a tribute to UniGrid

**May 2015** – First UniD scholarly presentation, in San Juan, P.R.

**July 2015** – Academic research on UniD shared in Limerick, Ireland

**Fall 2015** – UniD website and mobile app prototyping begins

## 2016

**Spring 2016** – UniD website and mobile app prototyping continues

**January 2016** – First academic journal article published (in RDS)

**April 2016** – First beta tests of UniD tools; three parks participate

**May 2016** – UniD debuts its first descriptions in partnership with:
Washington Monument, Golden Gate, Hawaii Volcanoes

**September 2016** – Research on UniD shared in Washington, D.C.

**September 2016** – First fully functional beta version of UniD website

**September 2016** – Descriptathon 1 is offered; 8 parks participate

**November 2016** – Keynote lecture on UniD; Quito, Ecuador

## 2017

**February 2017** – Descriptathon 2 in Harpers Ferry, W.V.; 28 parks

**May 2017** – Afghan Disability Rights Conference in D.C. uses UniD

**June 2017** – Google and American Council of the Blind join UniD

**September 2017** – Descriptathon 3; 15 California parks participate

**August 2017** – UniD research shared in Halifax, Nova Scotia

## 2018

**May 2018** – UniD workshop at National Tech Museum in Prague

**May 2018** – UniD workshop in Athens, Greece

## 2019

**January 2019** – Section 508 and WCAG 2.1 AA evaluation passed

**March 2019** – Descriptathon 4, with 24 sites, mostly in Northeast

**July 2019** – ACB's Pfanstiehl R&D honor awarded to PI Oppegaard

**August 2019** – Descriptathon 5, with 28 sites, mostly in Southeast

**December 2019** – 100th NPS site releases UniD Audio Description

# Post-brochure, what's next?

If you have completed a Descriptathon training, and your site brochure has been described, and your descriptions have been added to your website, you might be wondering what you can do next? Plenty!

You now have training and open-access, open-source tools designed to create and share Audio Description at will. The Descriptathon brochure training is just the first step toward making an accessible place, just as your place needs more than a single brochure to be interesting to visitors. A brochure provides basic orientation to a site, but what about multimodal access to the rest of the visual media in your place, including wall texts, signs, pamphlets, waysides, and exhibits. Those could be more accessible, too. So what do you want to work on next?

Improving accessibility isn't a single silver-bullet shot. It's a systematic commitment to designing (and revamping) all media as accessible as possible. It's a process. It's continual. It's a team effort.

... And, what about if you, as a patron, already have listened to the brochure description of your nearby park? And even visited the site as a part of a UniD field test. And used that description to plan your visit, enhance the experience, and reflect upon it afterward? What more can you do? Plenty! Public attractions, like NPS sites, need active partners to help create new Audio Description and to test what exists now. These public resources can be places you regularly visit and get to know well. If people at that place have worked on the UniD project already, they probably are open and eager to collaborate further. If your favorite place needs more Audio Description, let them know what you would like to develop with them. Make yourself available and serve as a resource.

# 100+ NPS sites using UniD in 2020

African Burial Ground NM
Badlands National Park
Big South Fork NRRA
Blue Ridge Parkway
Boston African American NHS
Bunker Hill - Boston NHP
Cabrillo National Monument
Cape Cod National Seashore
Capulin Volcano NM
Carl Sandburg Home
Castle Clinton NM
Cesar E. Chavez NM
Channel Islands National Park
Charles Pinckney NHS
Chickamauga / Chattanooga
Congaree National Park
Cowpens National Battlefield
Death Valley National Park
Denali NPP
Devils Postpile NM
Eugene O'Neill NHS
Everglades National Park
Faneuil Hall
Federal Hall NM
Flight 93 NM
Fort Moultrie NHP
Fort Point NHS
Fort Smith NHS
Fort Stanwix NM
Fort Sumter NHP
Fort Vancouver NHS
Frederick Law Olmsted NHS
Freedom Trail - Boston NHP
Gates of the Arctic NPP
General Grant NM
George Washington MP
Gettysburg NMP
Golden Gate NRA
Governors Island NM
Hagerman Fossil Beds NM
Hamilton Grange NM

Harpers Ferry NHP
Harry S Truman NHS
Hawaii Volcanoes NP
Herbert Hoover NHS
Home of Franklin D Roosevelt
Jamestowne at Colonial NHP
John Day Fossil Beds NM
John F. Kennedy NHS
John Muir NHS
Johnstown Flood NM
Joshua Tree National Park
Katmai NPP
Kennesaw Mountain NBP
Keweenaw NHP
Kings Mountain NMP
Lassen Volcanic National Park
Lava Beds NM
Little River Canyon NP
Longfellow House-Wash.'s HQ
Lowell NHP
Mammoth Cave National Park
Manzanar NHS
Minute Man NHP
Mojave National Preserve
Morristown NHP
Mount Rainier National Park
Muir Woods NM
New Bedford Whaling NHP
New River Gorge NR
Ninety Six National Historic Site
Obed NWSA
Olympic National Park
Overmountain Victory NHT
Pinnacles National Park
Point Reyes National Seashore
Port Chicago Naval Mag. NM
Puukohola Heiau NHS
Redwood National Park
Roger Williams NM
Rosie the Riveter/WW II NHP
Russell Cave NM

Saint Paul's Church NHS
Salem Maritime NHS
San Francisco Maritime NHP
Saugus Iron Works NHS
Sitka National Historical Park
Statue of Liberty NM
Steamtown NHS
Stones River National Battlefield
Stonewall National Monument
Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace
Thomas Edison NHP
Timucuan EHP
Valley Forge NHP
Washington Monument
Weir Farm NHS
Whiskeytown - Shasta - Trinity
Women's Rights NHP
Yellowstone National Park
Yosemite National Park

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## Abbreviation Key:

**EHP** = Ecological and Historic Preserve
**MP** = Memorial Parkway
**NB** = National Battlefield
**NHP** = National Historical Park
**NHS** = National Historic Site
**NM** = National Monument or National Memorial
**NMP** = National Military Park
**NP** = National Park
**NP** = National Preserve
**NPP** = National Park and Preserve
**NRA** = National Recreation Area
**NRRA** = National River and Recreation Area
**NS** = National Seashore
**NWSA** = National Wild and Scenic Area