

A large photograph showing a man in a vest and tie, a woman, and a young boy standing on a wooden walkway next to a treehouse. The man is leaning on the railing. The treehouse has a dark metal roof and wooden walls. The background shows trees with autumn foliage.

Treehouses for All

Build Them and They Will Climb, Burlington Foundation Discovers

By JOYCE ROGERS WOLKOMIR
Photographed by NATALIE STULTZ

RECENTLY, A CROWD gathered in Burlington's Oakledge Park — moms, dads, troops of excited kids, many in wheelchairs. They came to inaugurate a treehouse.

Snipping the ceremonial ribbon would be two boys who could not walk. And that was the celebration's point: children riding wheelchairs up into a big white oak.

Most kids like to climb trees. Maybe we inherited the impulse from ancestral tree-nesters. But for children who cannot climb, that urge to ascend must be poignant.

What if they could go up?

Burlington's mayor, Peter Clavelle, told the crowd he expected kids with disabilities to visit the new treehouse. Adults with disabilities too, and seniors

and picnickers and Cub Scout packs. He even imagined arboreal City Council meetings. Shelburne philanthropist Lois McClure said she contributed because the treehouse so pleased her late husband. But the most eloquent speaker was a boy who could not speak.

Christopher Osborne-Hull, 18, who has severe athetoid cerebral palsy, rolled to the microphone in a motorized wheelchair. He grinned at the crowd. His mother spoke for him.

"My Chris is wearing a Superman shirt in honor of his hero, Christopher



Chris Osborne-Hull drives onto Burlington's new accessible treehouse at Oakledge Park last fall. Top, Forever Young Treehouses founders Dr. Phil Trabulsy, left, and Bill Allen with camper Michael Ford in the treehouse the group built at Camp Ta-Kum-Ta in Colchester.

Reeve," Nancy Osborne said. Her son had eagerly anticipated the paralyzed actor's appearance at this opening, but Reeve died. "In spirit he's here," Nancy Osborne said. Then her son spoke to the crowd using his laptop computer. His synthesized voice exclaimed: "My first time up the ramp, it felt like I was really climbing to the tree!"

His mother said: "It's awesome that someone had the dream to do this."

This dream began in 1997. Dr. Phil Trubus, a hand surgeon at Burlington's Fletcher Allen Health Care, contracted hepatitis performing surgery. He had to take medical leave.

To cheer him up, his friend Bill Allen, an insurance man, suggested they build a treehouse together. An older neighbor's complaint — Why didn't they build it so *she* could climb up? — gave the two men an idea.

Both served on the board of the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which strives to fulfill seriously ill children's dreams. It occurred to them that treehouses might be good medicine for children with disorders from muscular dystrophy to cancer.

But how do you get a kid in a wheelchair up a tree?

For Bill Allen, who says he's never grown up, that was a mere detail.

Allen's enthusiasm is inspiring. He inspired architect John Connell, founder of Yestermorrow Design/Build School, in Warren. Connell inspired one of the school's teachers, James Roth, known by his childhood nickname, B'fer, who once lived in a treehouse.

They thought: What if, instead of shinning up the tree's trunk, you ascended a ground-to-treehouse ramp?

On Yestermorrow's campus, they built a prototype. Its long ramp rose gently enough for a child in a wheelchair to navigate. And the wooden ramp zigzagging up through the foliage doubled as a nature walk.

Soon Forever Young Treehouses set up shop in Burlington. B'fer Roth became chief designer and builder. And the new nonprofit built its first treehouse at Camp Ta-Kum-Ta, for kids with cancer, on the shore of Lake Champlain in Colchester.

Kids loved it. Requests began flowing in.

"It takes a village to build one of these treehouses," says Allen. Forever Young Treehouses supplies the design and expert workers. Funding comes from the sponsoring organization and donors. For instance, at two South Burlington schools — Central and Orchard — students raised funds to donate to Forever Young Treehouses. Volunteer workers pitch in. Because these treehouses require such long ramps and must be engineered to take the weight of wheelchairs and substantial numbers of people, costs average \$140,000. But that has not dampened enthusiasm.

Allen shows off a map marking every state where Forever Young Treehouses has completed a project or has one pending. Besides four in Vermont, the list includes California, Texas, Wisconsin, Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Connecticut and New Hampshire. "And we have requests from virtually every state," Allen says.

Each treehouse is specifically designed for its site. "For one thing, you have to consider the tree's species, maturity, growth rate, and — as the tree grows — how you will cut away flooring around the trunk," Allen says.

"At the start, it hurts the tree a little," says Allen, "but we use the best engineering and tree biology possible, and after the treehouse goes up, these trees get special nurturing."

Forever Young Treehouses' largest project was for actor Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Connecticut, for kids with cancer and serious blood diseases. It mimics an Old West outlaw hideout, including secret doors. It spreads its weight among 23 trees. Its ramp zigzags 340 feet. And the treehouse plus ramp totals 4,800 square feet. "When we were building it, Paul Newman would hang out with the guys, and he threw parties for us," says Allen.

Each treehouse is unique. For instance, Burlington's Oakledge Park project rests on steel beams instead of wood. This treehouse is open to all, and the number of people it must support is unpredictable so it requires extra strength. Local companies donated the steel beams, plus engineering expertise and skilled labor.



HOW TO CLIMB

Forever Young Treehouses, 178 Main Street, Suite 301, Burlington, VT 05401; (802) 862-4630; www.treehouses.org.

Oakledge Park. Open year-round; admission charged May 1 through Labor Day. On Lake Champlain on Burlington's south side; take Flynn Avenue into the park; the treehouse is to left of the large shelter. For information: Burlington Department of Parks and Recreation, (802) 864-0123.

On opening day, the treehouse's copper roof remained unfinished. But the hop hornbeam railings were up. So were the supporting beams and planking of ipe, a sustainably harvested hardwood from Brazil. Railing uprights, from a Waitsfield sawmill, were hemlock and spruce, some with bark still on.

And when the speeches ended, a wheelchair brigade rolled up the ramp, led by the two ribbon cutters, Chris Osborne-Hull and Ben Wood-Lewis, 5, who also has cerebral palsy. Walkers followed, including several golden retrievers. Allen and Phil Trubus were just back from Detroit, where Forever Young Treehouses received a da Vinci Award for helping people with disabilities. They looked on, grinning.

"I brought a friend up into a treehouse, an older guy with a heart monitor, and his heart rate dropped 20 beats per minute — a treehouse is more peaceful than a front porch," said Allen. "All the good things in life are up high, like heaven."

Joyce Rogers Wolkowicz lives in East Montpelier. Photographer Natalie Stultz lives in South Burlington.