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A Dream Takes Root: Treehouses for Kids With Disabilities

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GREENFIELD, N.H. -- Jennifer McIntosh, 17 years old, tried to explain what it would mean to her to sit in a treehouse. Because she is paralyzed and unable to speak, a consequence of cerebral palsy, she did this by means of a laptop computer, which is controlled by her facial movements.

On the screen, she typed: "To be a kid."

For most children with disabilities, climbing into a treehouse is an all-but-impossible task. Bill Allen, a 43-year-old insurance salesman in Burlington, Vt., is on an unusual quest to help them.

Mr. Allen is the founder of Forever Young Treehouses Inc., a nonprofit group that builds handicapped-accessible treehouses in camps, treatment centers and parks. Started in 1999, the organization has built four such structures, three in Vermont and one in Connecticut. Work has begun on a fifth: a \$100,000 treehouse at the Crotched Mountain Foundation in Greenfield. It's a treatment center for people with disabilities, including Ms. McIntosh.



Bill Allen

The steep price reflects the difference between a garden-variety treehouse and one that's accessible to wheelchairs. A Forever Young project includes two structures: the treehouse itself and a very long ramp that climbs gently from the ground into the forest canopy. The treehouse must be able to support both the children and their wheelchairs, including some motorized models that weigh 400 pounds. The ramps can be as long as a football field.

For instance, at actor Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, Conn., the site of one of the Forever Young projects, a 300-foot ramp zigzags its way to a 600-square-foot treehouse. The house is built to resemble a hideout from the old west, complete with secret doors and oddly shaped windows. Construction cost: \$154,000.

"I loved it," says 9-year-old Daniel Licht, of New Rochelle, N.Y., who has a disorder that limits his upper-body movements. While he was at camp, counselors dressed as pirates chased him and other children up the ramp to the treehouse, where the kids found a treasure chest.

Mr. Allen says Forever Young is rooted in his own childhood love of treehouses. "I just think it's a raw deal for a kid to be sick or disabled and not be able to play in trees," Mr. Allen says.

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When he thought of the idea about five years ago, he was a director of the Make-a-Wish Foundation of Vermont, which grants the wishes of seriously ill children. He turned to John Connell, founder of Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Warren, Vt., which offers courses in homebuilding and woodworking. Mr. Connell, an architect, began assembling a team of students and teachers. Among them: James Roth, who lived in a treehouse for four years and builds rustic furniture of tree limbs. Mr. Roth is now Forever Young's chief designer and builder.

William de Vos, an arborist in Montpelier, Vt., and a member of the team, was at first concerned that the structures might damage trees and stunt their growth. But he came to embrace the idea, he says, as something that could improve both the quality of children's lives and "the quality of life of the trees." He devised an anchoring system that he says puts less stress on trees. Rather than hammer nails into tree trunks, he drills a one-inch-wide hole through the tree, runs a pipe and threaded bolt through it and attaches brackets to each end of the bolt. The brackets hold up the beams that support the treehouse.

Mr. Connell, meanwhile, was designing ramps that resemble nature trails, with large trees that poke through holes cut in the walkways. The ramps comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act, which specifies a maximum rise of one inch for each foot of ramps for the handicapped.



Dana Jenkins

James Erena's wheelchair-accessible treehouse in Milton, Vt.

"We discovered that kids in wheelchairs not only have never been in a treehouse, but never enjoyed a stroll in the woods," Mr. Connell says.

Michael Garnier, head of the World Treehouse Association, a group based in Takilma, Ore., representing treehouse builders, says Mr. Allen and his partners are "pushing the limits" of treehouse design. He points to the fact that Forever Young's structures typically are built in a cluster of trees. To secure the buildings against high winds, the trees are cabled together so they move as a unit rather than against one another.

To make the structures more affordable for clients, Mr. Allen lines up volunteers to work on the projects and local merchants likely to contribute materials or money. Some groups make donations to the organizations that will use the treehouses or to Forever Young. So far, he has contributed about \$15,000 of his own money.

In Milton, Vt., Paul Erena, a 43-year-old special-education teacher, spends some afternoons and evenings with his son, James, in a treehouse in their backyard. Built by Forever Young and paid for with a \$14,000 grant by the Make-a-Wish Foundation, the building allows the pair to watch squirrels and listen to rustling leaves.

In the winter, they sit by the wood stove in the treehouse, cook soup, listen to opera and watch the snow falling. James, who is 13, was born with a neurological disorder that severely limits his ability to move and speak.

"It has allowed him to have a different experience in what can be kind of a mundane day," Mr. Erena explains. He adds: "It's very therapeutic for me, too."

Sabrina Pickman, a 16-year-old high-school junior from Morrisonville, N.Y., is paralyzed from

the waist down. But this past summer, at Camp Ta-Kum-Ta in Colchester, Vt., she and her cabin mates had their own treehouse. Looking out the windows, she could watch the boats on Lake Champlain. At night, she and her friends rolled out sleeping bags on the treehouse floor. A total of 21 trees -- oak, locust and maple -- support the structure. A 120-foot ramp meanders through the woods, rising bit by bit to the front door of the treehouse.

"I think it's great that they made something everyone could get in, no matter what the problem," Ms. Pickman says.

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