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Counselor Gabriele Clark and Cradle Beach camper Tina Evans, 11, make their way down the ramp from the new treehouse, which is accessible to the disabled.

A beautiful view open to all

Cradle Beach treehouse accessible to everyone

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It's one of Cradle Beach's fabulous vistas: shimmering blue water beneath majestic oaks and sandy, grass-covered dunes.

You used to have to climb a tree to get that kind of view, but a new universally accessible treehouse at Cradle Beach in Angola is changing that for children like Ashley McHeeters.

"It's a long way up," said Ashley, 12, as she maneuvered her motorized wheelchair Tuesday through the 181-foot-long wooden ramp that curves to the treehouse that is 11 feet above the ground. "I hit the tree last time," she said with a laugh, "but I will get there."

The 650-square-foot wooden structure — complete with windows, open deck and rustic facade — can accommodate 25 people. Campers can see nature up close; three tree trunks come through the floor, and birds and squirrels are everywhere.



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Camper Eric Avent, 12, checks out the view from the treehouse.

"Here, it's a place to talk," Ashley said as she used binoculars to look out across Lake Erie. With a toothy grin, she added, "Everything's nice here."

It's the newest addition to Cradle Beach, which will host 850 disadvantaged and disabled children from Western New York this summer. A formal dedication is set for today.

"These kids don't often get the impression of being up high," said Cara Stillman, Cradle Beach executive direc-

tor. "I just can't stop smiling, seeing them up there. It's great."

A few years ago, Bonnie A. Brusk, the director of youth services, heard about Burlington, Vt.-based Forever Young Treehouses, a nonprofit organization that oversaw the construction. They spent the next few years designing and raising money for the \$135,000 tree house, which is the ninth of its kind in the nation and the first in New York State.

An Amish family from Sherman spent four months constructing the treehouse, using imported Brazilian teak and some locust trees from the camp's property.

"It's great for the more independent kids, too," said Brusk.

One of those, 12-year-old Tyler Degenfelder of Buffalo, said he had never been in a treehouse before. "It's fun up there," he said as he walked out of the camp's library. "Kids can hang out and look out at the water and blow bubbles. It's cooler up there, too."

Stillman wants to offer bird-watching and weather-predicting activities from the tree house.

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