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## Glee in the trees

The lofty dwellings built by Forever Young aren't your typical tree houses. They're designed to allow kids in wheelchairs to get up among the leaves

**Kate Jennison**

National Post

Phil Trabulsy was feeling irritable and restless. It was 1998 and, at the age of 39, Phil, a surgeon in Burlington, Vt., had suddenly been grounded. He'd contracted hepatitis from one of his patients and, unable to work while he was being treated for the disease, he was pretty much housebound. He hated his new state of inactivity, which is why when his friend Bill Allen bounced through his front door with a crazy idea about building a tree house, Phil found himself really listening. Your house is on 11 acres, Bill reminded him. It's wooded and beautiful. You'll be working with your hands. Surgeons do that, don't they? Work with their hands?

He handed Phil a book about tree houses he'd found on another friend's coffee table -- state-of-the-art tree houses Phil had never seen in his life.



**CREDIT: Forever Young Tree Houses Inc.**

**A design proposal for Forever Young's fifth wheelchair-accessible tree house, in Crooked Mountain, N.H.**



**Phil Trabulsy and Bill Allen have a soft spot for a tree house they built for 11-year-old James Erena in his backyard.**

"I mean, these were Marriotts," says Phil, "not the Motel 6s Bill and I had grown up with." It didn't take long before Bill had him out back with a chainsaw. They'd drawn plans and milled wood, and then somewhere in the middle of this process Phil's 74-year-old neighbour Barb started showing up with her lawn chair.

**"It's a place James can go anytime he wants," says Bill.**



**The structure built at Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp for sick children in Ashford, Conn.: (Photo ran in all editions except Toronto.)**

Daily she sat and watched them build. She told them stories about the tree house she had when she was a little girl, and they told her stories about theirs. Bill had built his with his brothers and cousins at the age of nine, out of two old barn doors. Phil had built his at the age of 11 with his two younger brothers. It was in an apple orchard, and Phil and his brothers had used it to plot against other neighbourhood boys. When Phil and Bill finished their grown-up 250-square-foot tree house complete with roof, windows and a door, they made a wooden, shaft-like ladder for it. To their surprise, Barb did not approve.

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Just how, at the age of 74, was she going to get up a steep shaft ladder like that? she asked Phil and Bill. And what about Phil's mother? she reproachfully reminded Phil. She had a bad ankle. She would never be able to get up that ladder. Suitably shamed, Phil and Bill took down the shaft ladder and replaced it with a staircase with two landings and a railing. "It dawned on us," says Bill, laughing, "that pretty much everyone wants to get in a tree house."

The insight led them to thinking about all the children both of them worked with at the Make a Wish Foundation. Many of them were disabled and in wheelchairs. "I'd look at those kids," says Bill, "and I'd know they were never going to play baseball or football or basketball. But at least if they could experience what it was like to be in a tree house, they'd have had something of a regular childhood."

They talked and mulled over the idea, and then one day, after a few drinks at a local bar with his friends, Bill found himself launching into a discussion about wheelchair-accessible tree houses, and someone told him to contact John Connell, a local architect and the director of Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Warren, Vt. As soon as Connell heard from Bill, he picked up the phone and called James Roth, an

instructor at the school known as B'fer. "You've got to meet Bill Allen. This guy's a kindred spirit," he told B'fer.

B'fer is a childhood nickname Roth inherited when he was five years old. "Because his full name is James Burton Roth, James's father used to tell him he was James, B for Burton, Roth. One day, five-year-old James told his dad he liked all his names except the B'fer one. Howls of laughter followed and James has affectionately been known as B'fer ever since. That said, the name B'fer is only for use among tree-house buddies and friends. "I'm still James to the bank or the IRS," says B'fer laughing.

"And a lot of us men have tree houses," continues B'fer as he explains Connell's comment. In fact, between the ages of 25 and 30, B'fer's preferred residence was a tree house. "I was single at the time," he says, "and I had friends who had land with a bunch of great big old trees." With his friend's permission, B'fer built himself a 200-square-foot octagonal tree house. Below was an open pit fire and a cooler for a fridge buried deep in the ground. "It was my summer home," he says, adding that in the winter he'd rent a house in town until the weather was good again. He even courted his wife in his tree house. "And she'd liked it and everything," he says. Clearly though, she wasn't interested in living in it. So B'fer had to get a regular house, with a lawn to mow and a mortgage to pay.

"But when I met Bill," continues B'fer excitedly, "and I heard his idea of getting kids in wheelchairs into tree houses. Well, I just knew it was meant to be."

With Connell and B'fer's help, Phil Trabulsy and Bill Allen were able to form Forever Young Tree Houses Inc. in 1999. So far, the non-profit organization has built four wheelchair-accessible tree houses in camps, treatment centres and parks across the United States and is currently in the process of building a fifth at Crotched Mountain in New Hampshire. The first tree house was a prototype B'fer and Connell put together in the grounds of Yestermorrow's Design/Build School. With the help of an arborist, they were able to come up with an elaborate bolting system that enables large wooden ramps, capable of carrying motorized wheelchairs weighing up to 400 pounds, to be attached to a series of trees. The ramps to the tree houses are often as much of a thrill for the kids in wheelchairs as the arrival at the tree house itself. The average cost of these tree houses is US\$100,000, although the fourth, built at Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp for sick children in Ashford, Conn., ran to US\$154,000. It was completed on May 27 this year, and has been engineered to withstand snow, heavy wind and earthquakes, as well as old-fashioned horseplay.

The house is 800 square feet, but the ramp leading up to it is 4,000 square feet. "It's home plate to centre field in a football field. It weaves through 23 trees and it's just fabulous," says Bill. Between the ramp and the tree house, 48 people in wheelchairs can be accommodated. And to the Forever Young team's delight, as they were building this tree house they discovered Paul Newman has had a tree house in his back yard for the past 20 years.

"He loves them," says Bill smugly.

"He hides in it and throws water balloons down on people," Phil says.

"And when we'd finished building the tree house at his camp," adds B'fer, "he said he was ready to sell his house and move in."

The specialized design, labour time, size and types of materials used are all part of the reason the cost of these tree houses is so high. "They're hand-built houses," explains Bill, adding that rarely are two pieces of wood in these tree houses the same size. Two engineers are often on site as they are being built, and consultations with arborists are essential. "A big part of building the tree houses," says Bill, "is making sure you don't kill the trees while you do it." The tree houses and their ramps have to be built in such a way that the trees can continue to grow safely around them.

But while the bigger tree houses are stunning, technically advanced and dramatic, B'fer, Bill and Phil all have a soft spot for a smaller tree house they built for 11-year-old James Erena in his Vermont backyard. It was built through the Make a Wish Foundation and cost US\$15,000. "It's in a maple, an oak and a beech tree," says Bill. "And it's a place where James can go anytime he wants."

After the tree house was built, James's father put in a wood stove so James and his family could be out in it in the winter time. He told Bill the first time James was up in the tree house in his wheelchair, the wind blew and the whole tree swayed. "He'd never heard James squeal more loudly or more happily than on that day," says Bill proudly.

Meanwhile, Phil and B'fer recommend all of us who can should build ourselves tree houses. B'fer says they're wonderful places to meditate and daydream. "They're intimate hideaways," he says. "And you can spy on people."

"I feel more like Phil when I'm in my tree house," says Phil. "I'm more in touch with the moment and my mind isn't busy. And if I'm in the tree house with someone else like my kids or Bill or a friend, then I'm with them completely."

"They're ageless places," says Bill. "When you get into one, it doesn't matter if you're in a wheelchair or you're 74 or you're 12. The playing field is level and you all seem to become the same mysterious age." He has begun singing the Bob Dylan song, which was the inspiration behind the name Forever Young Tree Houses Inc.

"Build a ladder to the stars, climb on every rung, may you stay forever young ..."

"It's true," adds B'fer, "you just don't get old when you live in the trees."

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