

## **\$200K treehouse built at Michigan camp for kids with medical needs**

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North Star Reach completes treehouse for campers

By Lauren Slagter

PINCKNEY, MI - Swimming, bonfires and making new friends at North Star Reach camp was an unforgettable experience for 14-year-old Dominic Weber in 2016. This year, he'll get to show the other campers the \$200,000 treehouse he helped to design.

North Star Reach's treehouse was built by the crew of "The Treehouse Guys," a show on the DIY Network. The episode featuring the camp in Livingston County northwest of Ann Arbor airs at 10 a.m. Sunday, June 18.

Weber will be part of the show, providing a camper's perspective to guide the work of hosts James "B'fer" Roth, an Ann Arbor native, and Chris "Ka-V" Haake and their crew.

"When I was on the TV show and I was helping plan it, it was so much fun," Weber said as he led a tour of the treehouse on Tuesday, June 13. "The crew was just this big family, and I felt like I was part of it. I was part of this family."

Weber, who lives in White Lake, was born with a heart defect and had open heart surgery when he was three days old. He quickly bonded last summer with other North Star campers who also have heart conditions.

North Star Reach, located on 105 wooded acres that includes three lakes, offers a traditional summer camp experience for youth with serious medical conditions. Doug Armstrong, founder and CEO of North Star Reach, wanted to give his campers a treehouse experience they likely wouldn't have otherwise.

"I think that camp in general is really looking at providing opportunities for kids that they just don't often get in their normal lives," he said. "Especially for kids with any kind of health challenge or mobility challenge, they're typically not climbing the trees, not up in a treehouse. Being able to give that experience to them was important."

North Star Reach camp featured on "The Treehouse Guys"

In keeping with North Star Reach's mission, the treehouse is handicap-accessible, with two ramps leading from the trail to the 1,800-square-foot deck around the wooden structure overlooking Woodburn Lake.

From the crooked windows and roofline to the incorporation of car parts, skis and license plates into the walls, the treehouse has the whimsical look of a childhood fort - with the craftsmanship of a professional team of architects and builders.

Inside, the treehouse has plenty of nooks with fun features. Stuffed animals adorn the walls, and the space has colorful cushions and bookcases.

"The design in this case - and it often is with our work - is we're trying to make it look like a kid did it," Roth said.

Roth enjoys the childlike wonder inspired by being in a treehouse, and he appreciated the mission of North Star Reach. The Treehouse Guys specialize in building universally-accessible treehouses.

When we do open these treehouses up to someone who is in a chair and you watch them go up there and they're just grinning from ear to ear, nothing's more satisfying," Roth said. "To me that's the greatest pleasure to see the pleasure that we're enabling for a kid who's previously been left behind."

The crew worked on North Star Reach's treehouse from August to October last year, Roth said. He got to visit his childhood home his late father built on Sunnyside Boulevard in Ann Arbor, which was a special moment for him that also will be featured in Sunday's episode. Roth said he even made it to a University of Michigan home football game while he was in town.



"My father was a real big influence for me to even be interested in building and designing. ... The house just totally gave me shivers up and down my spine," said Roth, who graduated in 1976 from Ann Arbor's Pioneer High School and also attended Slauson Middle School and Eberwhite Elementary School.

North Star Reach began fundraising for the treehouse years ago, and then applied to be featured on "The Treehouse Guys" last year. The Dance Marathon at the University of Michigan donated \$500,000 to the North Star Reach over five years, and \$200,000 of that contribution went to the treehouse.

"It's cool now to see someone like Dominic in there playing and having fun," said Rachel Tomassi, a recent University of Michigan graduate who was the internal director for Dance Marathon and has volunteered at the camp.

North Star Reach - which is part of the global network of SeriousFun camps supported by Paul Newman - hosted 200 campers and 184 family members in its first year. Now going into its second summer, the camp plans to double that number, said Ami Walsh, communications director for North Star Reach.

Each weeklong camp caters to a different population of children and teens, including youth who have had organ transplants, with cardiology conditions and sickle cell disease. North Star will have a camp where children with a serious medical condition can attend with their siblings and then a teen week for 16 and 17 year olds.

There is no cost to families to send their children to North Star Reach, and medical staff are on hand to accommodate the campers' special needs.

"We really just try to eliminate all the barriers so the kids can come and feel included and then feel normal because they're surrounded by kids who have gone through similar challenges," Armstrong said.

Weber had previously attended SeriousFun camps in North Carolina before going to North Star Reach last summer. He said the campers' shared medical conditions quickly faded to the background as they start having fun together.

"Going to this camp and you meet these other kids with heart conditions, that's kind of like the first conversation that you have with them," Weber said. "You talk about that like on the first day, but then after that they just kind of become people and not really the heart condition behind them."

This post was updated to clarify that of the \$500,000 the Dance Marathon at the University of Michigan donated to North Star Reach, \$200,000 was spent on constructing the treehouse.

