

TREE HOUSES

A kids-eye view of the world

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, August 5, 2007

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Brothers Joe and Sam Niemiec know what a tree house is good for.

It's good for hanging out and playing games. If you have a pulley and a box, it's good for hoisting your pet cat 15 feet into the air (even if it insists on immediately scurrying back down the ladder).

But what it's really good for is disputing unfair labor practices.

"We've once gone on strike up here," said Joe, 12, the elder brother by a year. "Too much work. We have to clean the toilets every Saturday."

Even in an age when cell phones and high-tech video game systems are a must for kids, the tree house is holding its own.

A simple platform in a tree may not cut it anymore — some designer tree houses with electricity and Internet access can cost more than \$100,000 these days — but the desire for kids to have their own space, high above the adults who tower over them in the real world, is as strong as ever.

"I think it is innate in most kids that they want to have their own space," said Jeanie Stiles, who has written numerous books with her husband, David, about tree house construction, including *Tree houses & Playhouses You Can Build* (Gibbs Smith, 2006). "There's always an attraction to being up in the air with nature and looking down on everything and getting a very open view of the world."

In Waterville, Jimmy and Michael Jagodzinski get a great view and then some as they climb around like monkeys all over their tree house, scrambling over tree bark 12 feet off the ground and sliding down a fire pole.

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The A-frame structure that the boys built a few summers ago with their grandfather, Tony Zaper, actually bridges two trees. It has flip-up windows, a secret door, and a rope ladder.

It's a great place to have squirt gun fights, hold kid-only meetings, or even just to get away when new carpeting is being installed in the house. But it's still missing something if you ask the boys, and they're not talking about furniture.

"They wanted electricity for a TV," explained their mom, Susie. "I said no, it's not going to be a TV room. It's the outdoors."

Which is precisely the reason that Rich Brundrett built one for his son, Will, eight years ago. He wanted him to spend time listening to birds, watching the clouds, looking at trees.

"Being a science teacher I really appreciate being out in nature," said Mr. Brundrett, who teaches at Perrysburg High School and fondly recalls all the good times he had in a tree house as a boy. "I think it's important, being a keen observer of nature, and you can do that from a tree house."

The structure dominates the family's Perrysburg yard, standing more than 10 feet off the ground, partially covered by a roof, and supported by several stilts in addition to a thick maple tree. There's a plaque identifying it as "The Fossil Club," in honor of one of Will's former interests.



Sam, 11, and Joe Niemiec, 12, play in their backyard tree house along Obee Road. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

The 13-year-old doesn't go up there much anymore, but it used to be a popular place for tossing Frisbees, model airplanes, and water balloons.

Sometimes, building a tree house is a chance for a father to live out his own childhood dreams.

"I always wanted a tree house," said Lance Dicken, 37, of Spencer Township. "I grew up in the city. We didn't have any trees or nothing."

TREEHOUSE TIPS

Jeanie Stiles, who writes books about building tree houses with her husband, David, has a few general tips:

- Use baskets and pulleys to get things up and down.
- Put a soft base underneath, in case someone falls.
- Allow for expansion of the tree. If a limb goes through the wall or roof, leave a hole that allows it to grow.
- Cool features include trap doors and rope bridges connecting tree houses.
- Conduct a safety check every year to make sure everything is secure.

Mark Durbin, a spokesman for First Energy, also warns to avoid building in any tree that is near a power line.

So when he was in the woods behind his home chainsawing down a large silver maple that he thought was dead and discovered that the base was still alive, he got an idea. Six years later, his backyard features a strange sight for visitors:

A wooden staircase leads up to a little house sitting on top of a giant tree stump that is nearly six feet around and seven feet tall. It has a deck out front and an old window air-conditioning unit that can be plugged in with an extension cord.

"I start out cutting down a tree, and this is what I end up with," Mr. Dicken said.

For his 6-year-old son, Ethan, it's the perfect place to play with others and watch for animals. So far he's seen bunnies, raccoons, and deer. ("It was black with white polka dots," young Dicken said.) What the boy really wants, though, is to sleep overnight inside.

Who hasn't wanted to sleep among the trees like the Swiss Family Robinson, whose tree house complex is recreated at Walt Disney World? Who hasn't wanted to follow in the footsteps of the cartoon character Arthur, who had a tree house of his own?

Many modern parents and grandparents had tree houses themselves. The difference now is that the successors they've built for a younger generation are often a bit more, um, grand.

"I think the change really is that now people are doing these monstrosities, giant \$200,000, \$300,000 tree houses where they can put electricity in them and live in them," said Ms. Stiles, the tree house author. She said one should be able to build a nice tree house for under \$1,000.

Bob Jaska, of South Toledo, started with modest goals in mind when he began a project for his grandchildren at his lake home in Brooklyn, Mich.

"I was just going to put a little platform to start out with for a slide to go into the water," he said.

One idea led to another, and the next thing Mr. Jaska knew, he had a two-story structure with numerous slides that dwarfed the willow tree at its center.

"This is like a mansion compared to what we had [growing up]. We just had a platform with wood around the sides and an old cardboard roof on it."

When Chuck Gbur began designing a tree house for his kids about five years ago, he thought big from the beginning. He grew up with a tree house in Youngstown, but its neatest feature was a fireplace made from coffee cans.

What he made just yards away from the Maumee River next to Toledo Country Club is a cozy two-story house with a deck that has a birch tree emerging through the floor and roof. The tree house was so elaborate that it required a building permit.

Its end result, though, was simple. Chuck III, 15, likes to read out on the porch, where there's a gorgeous view of the Maumee River just yards away. One of his sisters, Delaney, 11, plays capture the flag.

While many people build their own tree houses, there's definitely a market out there for businesses to step in. Tree house Workshop Inc., in Seattle, designs and builds everything from simple tree house platforms at \$85 a square foot to weekend getaways that have all the comforts of home and cost more than \$100,000.

"It's not just something that a father and son are doing on the weekends. It's something that is marketed and advertised," explained Anna Daeuble, designer and business manager.

She thinks the market will only continue to increase, even expanding to commercial uses like tree house cafes or inns.

“It’s going to be moving out of people’s backyards and into the mainstream,” she said.

For now, though, Tim Niemiec, 47, is content to have Joe and Sam’s homemade tree house in the swampy woods behind his Monclova Township home. He designed it on the fly, using remnants from the construction of the house and other materials at hand. The total cost was maybe \$250.

It’s impossible to say how long his sons’ interest in it will last. But Mr. Niemiec, who built it because he wanted to create good memories for his kids, has a feeling that it will be a while — one way or another.

“As quickly as they’re growing up, it may evolve into memories for their boys.”

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