

Take a Walk

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Close your eyes and imagine a magical treehouse hidden in the woods, with secret doors and rope swings—the stuff of your wildest dreams!

Imagine children rolling their wheelchairs all the way around a lake and arriving at this wondrous place. At Camp Twin Lakes, a not-for-profit organization in Georgia, you don't have to imagine—it's the real thing.

Each year, thousands of kids in Georgia feel the joy of the Camp Twin Lakes (CTL) experience. CTL is actually a network of camps providing programs for children and young adults with serious illnesses, disabilities, and other challenges. CTL collaborates with more than 40 Camp Partner organizations, each serving a different population, to create customized camping programs for each group of kids served. Annually, CTL provides life-changing experiences for more than 7,500 campers from across the state and provides them opportunities to have a shared experience with friends facing similar challenges. The organization's goal is to teach its campers to overcome obstacles and grow in their con-

On the Wild Side

fidence and capabilities. Programs take place at two fully-accessible campsites in Rutledge and Winder, at children's hospitals across Georgia, and at day camps in Atlanta.

In 2009, the Camp Twin Lakes experience got a whole lot wilder. After many months of dreaming, planning, designing, and building, the campsite in Rutledge opened an interactive nature trail and fully-accessible treehouse. This past summer, thousands of CTL kids, teens, siblings, and parents enjoyed nature through a different lens at Selby's Treehouse. It is home to therapeutic drumming, as well as nature arts and crafts programs, and a place to learn about nature, the environment, and sustainability. It's also a place to play or just reflect and enjoy gorgeous views of the camp's upper lake.

Camp Director Dan Mathews explains, "When we were kids we spent so much time in the woods. For too long, children with limited mobility have had to sit on the sidelines and imagine what it was like. Now they can be a part of it – live it and experience for themselves the joy and wonder of it all!"

When campers were asked about their

feelings on Selby's Treehouse, responses like "really cool," "lots of fun," and "awesome!" were common. One camper in particular, a young man with a brain injury, said it this way: "I could never climb the ladder into my brother's treehouse at home, but we can all play in Selby's Treehouse! And it is way cooler than my brother's!"

Younger campers got to "sneak out" of their cabins with their counselors to go to an "exclusive" pizza party at Selby's Treehouse. In doing so, they built camaraderie and friendships that will last a lifetime, not to mention support systems that will see them through their hard times back at home, which often entail doctor's appointments, hospital visits, and ongoing treatments.

The treehouse also has become a special sacred place for campers. Many of the camp programs include a Remembrance Ceremony to honor campers who have passed away during the year. With the beauty of the natural surroundings, Selby's Treehouse became the perfect spot for campers to remember friends who they have lost. In fact, the corkscrew slide that leads from the treehouse deck to the

ground was donated in honor of a brave young camper battling cancer. Sadly, Terri lost her battle just before camp last summer. In her memory, Terri's friends from her cabin group gathered at the treehouse to go down the slide together. There wasn't a dry eye in Selby's Treehouse, but all erupted into laughter as the girls landed at the bottom of their friend's slide. Afterwards, they all gathered on the porch swings under the treehouse and told stories about Terri. Their grief turned in to a celebration of Terri's short but meaningful life under the protective shade of beautiful oaks, loving counselors, and Selby's Treehouse!

The Treehouse Story

The idea for the treehouse began in 2007 when Cynthia Gentry, founder of the Atlanta Task Force on Play and a longtime friend of Camp Twin Lakes, dreamed up the vision for a fully accessible treehouse – a safe and accessible place for kids to experience nature in ways they never had before. The idea was to find opportunities to get kids excited about the environment through exploration, discovery, and learning. Through interactive programming, children learn about protecting nature's most valuable resources through green conservation efforts. The treehouse is a model of sustainability, with solar panels to power ceiling fans and a water misting system, a roof of plants and grasses, a sundial, and a telescope for stargazing.

Architecture firm Lord, Aeck & Sargent, which designed the original facilities at the Rutledge campsite in the early 1990s, held an in-house design competition for individuals and teams to create treehouse design entries based on the organization's requirements and visual wish lists drawn for Cynthia by some of the campers. The treehouse would need to be wheelchair accessible, hidden in the trees, have enclosed and screened-in areas, and incorporate some of the campers' ideas, like fans to

keep them cool, a corkscrew slide, and hidden trap doors.

Lord, Aeck & Sargent senior associate Amy Leathers' winning design included a foundation of wooden telephone poles and a spiral staircase leading to a viewing deck that overlooks a 1,700-square-foot roof garden, domed skylights, and enclosed and screened spaces for programming. Campers got their wishes granted with a trap door in the floor, giant fans to keep the rooms cool during the hot Atlanta summers, as well as a rope ladder and tire swings underneath the treehouse. There is also a window in the floor so that campers inside Selby's Treehouse can see their friends on the ground below, and Terri's Slide connects both levels.

Sculptures Enhance Nature Trail

CTL's green treehouse is the pot of gold at the end of the nature trail rain-

bow. A fully accessible trail leads campers around the upper lake with inspirational and educational stops along the way. Ten students and two professors from the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) created 12 permanent sculptures that line the rustic nature trail. The totem-pole inspired sculptures stand guard along what the campers call the "wild side" of Camp.

SCAD students researched the history and spirituality of totem poles and found that totems serve as personified elements of nature. Developing original designs and themes, they carved their motifs into old telephone poles. Each sculpture represents an animal or ele-



ment of nature that watches over and protects the campers.

SCAD Sculpture Department professor Allen Peterson designed his three-foot-tall totem, which features a turtle and a duck, to be interactive, and created a steel drum for campers to entertain their friends. Student Michael Potts designed his totem as a snake that eats wooden balls so campers could interact and play with it. In fact, he left the balls unpainted for campers to personalize them.

At Camp Twin Lakes, they use camp activities to empower their campers and instill confidence and independence. Now, they're also teaching them the power of imagination! •