

Summer fun grows on trees

With its paved hiking trails through beautiful wooded areas, an outdoor chapel area, and the ability for youth groups from around the nation to spend a week getting to know individuals with developmental disabilities, Camp Matz on Bethesda's Watertown, Wis., Campus has been a summer attraction for over 35 years.

But this summer, Camp Matz became even more unique with the construction of a wheelchair-accessible treehouse on its grounds.

The treehouse itself is the first of its kind in the Midwest, with room to hold 10-15 people in wheelchairs plus staff. It features 400 square feet of area with a 200-foot ramp leading up to the treehouse. The ramp zigzags through the trees and provides places to rest on the way up or down. Campers at Camp Matz will be able to

use the treehouse to enjoy various activities and even experience overnight camping under the stars.

The idea for the project and the construction itself was generated by an organization in Vermont and came to life as a result of the generous support by a large group of Bethesda supporters. Forever Young Treehouses of Burlington, Vt., promotes the construction of treehouses that are universally accessible. The private, non-profit organization creates, develops and constructs accessible treehouses, all the while focusing on facilitating treehouse construction for children and young adults with special needs who are routinely confronted with barriers to fun and play in their daily lives. The organization, and its founders, believe an accessible treehouse is something that removes these obstacles and brings people of all abilities together and closer to nature.

"Our goal is to help everyone - regardless of ability - see the world differently and enjoy the freedom and peace that treehouses can provide," says Bill Allen, co-founder of Forever Young Treehouses.

Forever Young Treehouses are not only (American Disability Act) ADA-compliant, but also safe, unique in character and craftsmanship, and use building methods that protect the health of trees. Their organization also works within the client's financial goals to get the treehouse built.

For Bethesda's 100th anniversary, the organization adopted this special treehouse project for Camp Matz. The project had been something that had been discussed for several years, and the centennial celebration provided the perfect opportunity for such a venture.

And, in late June, the treehouse construction began. The project itself was built by five members of "Laborers for Christ," a program which operates as part of the Lutheran Church Extension Fund. It is an organized group of dedicated Christian men and women volunteering part of their retirement time to work for Lutheran congregations, schools and social ministry groups who construct their own buildings.

The treehouse was officially dedicated on Aug. 14, as a part of Bethesda's Watertown Campus 100th anniversary celebration.

"We are truly appreciative of Forever Young Treehouses, the members of Laborers for Christ, and our many loyal supporters for providing people with developmental disabilities the opportunity to enjoy nature in such a unique way," remarks Dr. David Geske, Bethesda president and CEO. "The excitement in the individuals' eyes and the smiles on their faces make it all worthwhile, and I believe it will be that way for many years to come."

If you would like to know more about the Camp Matz treehouse, or if you are interested in supporting the treehouse project, please contact Bethesda's development department at 1.800.383.8743, ext. 4420; e-mail development@blhs.org; or visit Bethesda's Web site at www.blhs.org and look under the "How to Help" section.



An in-progress construction photo showing how the Camp Matz treehouse was built right into the trees.