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## A Tree House Grows in Lamorinda

Cathy Dausman



Tabitha Kenney smiles from the window of her old tree house Photos Cathy Dausman

the tree house slowly took shape in Richard's basement over a three week period. Then it was disassembled, packed in a minivan and driven to Lafayette for installation.

Chris recalled the actual assembly required "lots of trips to the hardware store" and some work took place in the rain.

The exterior was primed and painted a woody green to blend with the scenery. Richard Kenney says his grandkids were "pretty excited" about their new lodging. The tree house even served as an outdoor location for 12 friends on Tabitha's eighth birthday.

The men signed their masterpiece on the foundation 2 x 4's. Then the family sold their house, and one night during what Chris Kenney called "a Mission Impossible moment" the children and their friends snuck out after dark to their tree house and added colorful signature handprints inside the roof.

After moving away for a time, the Kenneys returned to their early neighborhood and now live just three doors down from the tree house lot. They visit and play at the site often, enjoying tree house views, the tire swing and a nearby rope swing. The family says it has become a de facto neighborhood park, and Tabitha still likes everything about it...except for the spider webs.

Jay and Carole Haggman built a tree house in their Lamorinda back yard for similar reasons...their children wanted one. It's a two-story natural wood affair, supported by redwood trees 60 feet tall that bracket the house on either side. The second story is an open deck with a view to the west. The whole structure is vaguely reminiscent of a Hobbit habitat.

Haggman says it was built about 10 years ago, with help from a Berkeley contractor who installed the platform. He estimates he put at least \$1,000 into the project. Although still sturdy, it has since suffered from benign neglect. As the Haggman children grew up, their interests switched from tree house to trampoline and later to their in-ground swimming pool.

Adults are not immune to the lure of a backyard hideaway either, as evidenced by the Ewok tree forts in Star Wars Episode VI. And author J.K. Rowling recently received permission to construct two luxury tree houses for her children on her Edinburgh property. A story in The Daily Mail says Rowling's Harry Potter inspired dwellings will be 40 feet high, built from sustainable timber and include secret tunnels and bay windows. The contractor is one of the United Kingdom's leading tree house architects.

A bit closer to home, TreeHouse Workshop operates out of Seattle, Washington and hosts building workshops, designs and builds custom tree houses and sells specialized materials. Owner Pete Nelson recently published the coffee table book *Treehouses of the World*.

Michael Cass, Assistant Planner for the City of Lafayette, says although there is no code for building tree houses, ordinary zoning regulations do apply, and decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. The City's concerns include the building's structural soundness, the viability of the tree(s) involved, and sight views from adjacent properties. Homeowners might want to consult their town's or city's planning department before loaning junior the hammer.

Joyce Kilmer wrote, "I think that I shall never see...a poem as lovely as a tree." Add a house to that tree and it becomes a little more poetic. It starts as a young child's daydream in a backyard or an empty lot. Combine a tree, some friends, a bit of wood, and voilà!

Tabitha Kenney's tree house was built five years ago by her grandfather Richard Kenney, in the family's side yard near a small creek in Lafayette. There already was a "tree house" there, the elder Kenney said, amounting to little more than a few boards nailed across two conveniently horizontal limbs on a bay laurel tree.

The family scouted the site and felt it had potential. The new house would have a rectangular design, be approximately 4 x 6 feet, with a waterproof roof built from leftovers donated from a neighbor's roofing project.

It would be "big enough for four" Kenney said, with benches inside for seating. Richard committed to the project on the Q.T. This was to be a Christmas present for Tabitha, her sisters and brother.

Richard Kenney lives in Idaho, so the actual tree house project was built as a pre-fab. Tabitha's father, Chris, took critical measurements and sent them to his dad, and



A two-story tree house built between two redwoods features an open deck



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