

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Camp's New Treehouse Provides Play and Educational Opportunities for Kids With Special Needs in Georgia

RUTLEDGE, Ga., Dec. 1, 2009 – Come take a walk on the “Wild Side” ... or a roll, a climb, a slide or a swing.

Those are just a few of the things that kids who face serious illnesses, disabilities and other challenges can do at [Camp Twin Lakes](#)' extraordinary new treehouse, located in a secluded part of the camp known as the “Wild Side,” an undeveloped area where kids can immerse themselves in nature. The treehouse serves as both a play area and an educational classroom for learning about nature, the environment and sustainability.

The treehouse story

Camp Twin Lakes' original camp site in Rutledge, about 50 miles east of Atlanta, is complete with climate-controlled camper cabins, wheelchair-accessible recreational facilities, and a state-of-the-art medical lodge where camp attendees in need can receive procedures such as chemotherapy or dialysis. The site was master planned in the early 1990s and the facilities

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designed by architecture firm [Lord, Aeck & Sargent](#), which updated the master plan in 2007. In response to Camp Twin Lakes' goals, the plan envisioned wheelchair accessible nature trails traveling around the camp's two lakes, one leading to a "Wild Side" with a treehouse where campers could connect with nature.

"For several years we talked about having a treehouse that would enhance our nature program and get kids excited to be in a natural setting where they could learn about the different ecosystems," said Eric Robbins, executive director.

While the master plan update was in process, Cynthia Gentry, a longtime friend of Camp Twin Lakes and founder of an organization called the [Atlanta Taskforce on Play](#), approached Robbins about building a playground at the camp.

"The only problem with a playground was that we'd just built one," Robbins said. "But when we mentioned our idea for a treehouse Cynthia jumped at it and took charge of the project as its creative director."

"My first step was to hold a workshop with some of the campers for their input about an ideal treehouse," said Gentry, who also is an artist. "They had some awesome ideas, and I analyzed their drawings to look for common threads. I also studied Peter Nelson's books about treehouses around the world and then presented my vision and goals to Lord, Aeck & Sargent."

The firm decided to hold a design competition for the architects in its offices in Atlanta, Ann Arbor and Chapel Hill. Individuals and teams created six entries based on Camp Twin Lakes' and Gentry's requirements that the treehouse be wheelchair accessible, be hidden in the trees, have enclosed and screened areas, and incorporate some of the campers' ideas, like fans to keep them cool, a swirly slide and hidden trap doors.

"Most important was that the treehouse be magical and give the kids a sense of wonder," Gentry said.

A panel of judges, including some campers, selected a treehouse concept created by Amy Leathers, a senior associate whose everyday job at Lord, Aeck & Sargent is designing science research buildings on college and university campuses.

“Amy’s design really captured what we envisioned,” Gentry said. “It was organic and rustic, made of wood with textures. It disappeared into the trees and didn’t overpower the environment; it *became* a part of the environment.”

With a gift to the camp of \$250,000, construction on the treehouse and nature trail began in spring 2008. While the trail was being built, Gentry added a new aspect to the project. As their end-of-semester project, students in an introductory sculpture class at the [Savannah College of Art and Design](#)’s Atlanta campus were given the assignment to create totem pole inspired sculptures to place along the nature trail leading to the Wild Side. Each totem pole represents an animal and element of nature watching over and caring for the campers. Two totem poles create gateways at each of the two entrances to the nature trail, signifying the crossover to and from the Wild Side. (For detailed information about the Totem Pole project, see the accompanying press document titled, “SCAD’s sculpture department enhances the “wild side” of Camp Twin Lakes with twelve totem pole-inspired sculptures.”)

Wheelchair accessible treehouse designed to be part of nature

The treehouse is sited on a sloping area of land near the end of the nature trail. All campers enter via a curved wooden boardwalk and find themselves on the treehouse deck about 15 feet above ground overlooking one of the camp’s lakes.

“Because the treehouse accommodates groups of 15-20 children, some in wheelchairs, we couldn’t physically build the treehouse in a tree, so it’s designed instead to be part of nature, with lots of trees around the edges and coming up through the deck and roof overlook,” Leathers said. “The sloping site allowed me to achieve one of Cynthia’s design goals, which

was for the structure to hover, to feel like it's floating. It also allowed for a play space with swings below the treehouse floor.”

The treehouse foundation consists of a series of wooden telephone poles connected to a system of below-grade concrete beams that stabilize the poles. The multi-sided treehouse and deck are made of Southern yellow pine coated with clear sealer to keep the wood from turning gray.

The treehouse design includes one octagonal shaped main space in the center – used primarily for environmental arts and crafts – with a series of four smaller multi-sided spaces. One of the spaces, which has built-in wood bench seating, forms an arc of about 270 degrees and is used for the camp's drumming program. A smaller space is used for storytelling and small group activities. The other two spaces, which flank the doorway to the main space, are a utility room and a staff / storage room. Combined, the main interior room and four smaller spaces, along with an upper level overlook, known as the “bird's nest” because it is located amid the boughs of a large oak tree, comprise 1,200 square feet of enclosed space surrounded by a 600-square-foot covered deck. The enclosed area has bench-to-ceiling screens on the lake sides of the treehouse, providing panoramic views and cross-breezes.

In the main room's center is an acrylic “floor window” to allow views of campers playing below. A steel spiral staircase leads to the bird's nest, where campers can view the lake through the branches of the oak tree and see the 1,700-square-foot planted green roof of the main level. The “roof garden,” as the children call it, is intended to replace the forest floor that the building occupies, providing homes for insects. Three domed skylights in the roof garden – one aligned with the floor window below – provide natural light and allow the campers to study the tree canopy and its animal inhabitants from inside the treehouse.

Once campers have reached the deck via the boardwalk, there are plenty of kid-friendly ways to experience the treehouse. A ladder under the structure leads to a trap door in the

treehouse floor. A climbing net allows the campers to reach the deck and then take a twisting slide back down to the ground / water level. Or, campers can reach the deck the old fashioned way via stairs, which are surrounded by a wood platform for reading or play. For additional exercise, near the treehouse are a climbing tower, a pamper pole and a zip-line.

“One of the neat things about the treehouse design is its cooling system for our hot Georgia summers,” Leathers noted. “The kids told Cynthia they really wanted fans to keep them cool, so we combined ceiling fans in the main, drumming and storytelling rooms with a misting system. A pump below the main floor pressurizes water in a small line that runs around the entire length of the treehouse eaves. The pump forces the water through the line’s tiny nozzles, which are spaced about 18 inches apart. It makes the air in and around the treehouse noticeably cooler by at least 8 degrees, and the mist makes the treehouse look as though it’s hovering in a fog.”

A green scene

In addition to the misting system and the planted roof, which helps keep the treehouse cool by reducing high surface temperatures associated with conventional roofs, there are other opportunities for the campers to learn about water- and energy-saving sustainability options, among them:

- A 1.4-kilowatt, eight-module photovoltaic solar array is mounted on a nearby pole and supplies the treehouse fans and misting system pump with DC power. Unused power is fed back into the Morgan County, Georgia, power grid.
- Two dry composting toilets are located in the woods close to the treehouse
- A copper rain chain near the main entry to the treehouse helps divert the rainwater coming from a copper gutter over the door. Rain chains, which are alternatives to traditional

downspouts, help to keep rainwater from flooding the ground and damaging the landscape and a structure's foundation.

A place to learn and play

Camp Twin Lakes began using the treehouse in the summer of 2009. During the summer, the camp is used by its more than 40 partners, which are camping programs in Georgia for children with serious illnesses, disabilities and other life challenges.

In addition to the overnight summer program, Camp Twin Lakes offers year-round weekend family camping programs, where the treehouse is also used.

“The wild side, treehouse, nature trail and totem poles have added a wonderful component to our camp,” Robbins said. “Now we have this very large, very green, wheelchair accessible treehouse for educational nature-based programs in an undeveloped area of the camp. It’s a perfect educational tool for children and adults to learn about sustainability options.”

Added Gentry, “These kids, so much of their lives are focused on what they *can't* do. For them, the treehouse is so wonder-filled and unexpected. It’s accessible to everybody, it’s comforting and it’s a special, healing, almost spiritual place for the children. The treehouse is the embodiment of everything that Camp Twin Lakes is about.”

The project team

The Camp Twin Lakes treehouse, nature trail and totem pole project team included:

- Lord, Aeck & Sargent (Atlanta office), architect for the treehouse, nature trail and master plan
- Perkins+ Will (Atlanta office), co-architect for the nature trail and sundial
- Decatur Roofing (Norcross), landscape architect for treehouse green roof
- Cynthia Gentry (Atlanta), creative director
- Penta Engineering Group, Inc.. (Atlanta office), treehouse structural engineer
- Merit Construction Co. (Atlanta), treehouse general contractor
- Arborguard Tree Specialists (Atlanta), arborist
- Savannah College of Art and Design, Sculpture Department (Atlanta campus), totem poles

About Lord, Aeck & Sargent

Lord, Aeck & Sargent is an award-winning architectural firm serving clients in scientific, academic, historic preservation, arts and cultural, and multi-family housing and mixed-use markets. The firm's core values are responsive design, technological expertise and exceptional service. In 2003, The Construction Specifications Institute awarded Lord, Aeck & Sargent its Environmental Sensitivity Award for showing exceptional devotion to the use of sustainable and environmentally friendly materials, and for striving to create functional, sensitive and healthy buildings for clients. In 2007, Lord, Aeck & Sargent was one of the first architecture firms to adopt The 2030 Challenge, an initiative whose ultimate goal is the design of carbon-neutral buildings, or buildings that use no fossil-fuel greenhouse gas-emitting energy to operate, by the year 2030. Lord, Aeck & Sargent has offices in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For more information, visit the firm at www.lordaecksargent.com.

About Camp Twin Lakes

Camp Twin Lakes is a nonprofit organization that offers year-round recreational, therapeutic, and educational programs for children and young adults facing serious illnesses, disabilities and challenges. With its network of Partners, Camp Twin Lakes provides life-changing experiences at its state-of-the-art, fully accessible camps in Rutledge, Georgia; Camp Will-A-Way in Winder, Georgia; and other locations throughout the state. Camp Twin Lakes is accredited by the American Camp Association. For more information, visit www.camptwinlakes.org.

About SCAD

The Savannah College of Art and Design is the most comprehensive art and design university in the world, offering more degree programs and specializations than any other art and design university. SCAD is a private, nonprofit, accredited institution conferring bachelor's and master's degrees in distinctive locations and online to prepare talented students for professional careers. SCAD offers students a choice of degree programs in 46 majors and more than 50 minors at locations in Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia; in Lacoste, France; online through SCAD eLearning; and in Hong Kong beginning Fall 2010.

SCAD offers an exceptional education and unparalleled career preparation. The diverse student body of more than 9,900 comes from all 50 United States and nearly 100 countries worldwide. Each student is nurtured and motivated by a faculty of more than 650 professors with extraordinary academic credentials and valuable professional experience. These faculty emphasize learning through individual attention in an inspiring university environment. SCAD provides an innovative curriculum enhanced by advanced, professional-level technology, equipment and learning resources. SCAD has garnered acclaim from respected organizations and publications, including *BusinessWeek*, American Institute of Architects, *DesignIntelligence*, *U.S. News & World Report* and *Los Angeles Times*.

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