



OUT ON A LIMB

A Treehouse for children gets off the ground at Jowonio School

By Josh Breeden
Photos by Michael Davis



Dozens of people gathered last month along a nature path nestled within the wooded hillside that backs Jowonio School, a not-for-profit preschool serving young children with a wide range of abilities, where typical children and children with special needs can learn in the same classrooms.

Parents, children and Jowonio personnel mingled with pupils and instructors from Syracuse University's School of Architecture. Local television stations conducted interviews; photographers captured smiling faces and firm handshakes.

At the center of this activity stood a floating, trapezoidal structure shuttered in steel panels and topped with Plexiglas. A purple ribbon extended across its wood-framed threshold. The crowd gathered around the entrance in anticipation; soon, the ribbon would be cut. What had been a

mere concept a year earlier would be open for business, an outdoor learning space built upon one hyphenated phrase: all-inclusive.

The project, called Play Perch, began in spring 2012 when Jowonio reached out to the SU architecture school. Jowonio, founded 42 years ago, wanted to act on a long-discussed idea, and it needed some help.

"We'd been talking about building a treehouse for years," says Kristen Antonacci, Jowonio's development associate and building manager. "We've had parents that own construction companies or were contractors. They all wanted to help, but we just couldn't get it off the ground."

The SU architecture school's chapter of the American Institute of Architecture Students, a student-run nonprofit that provides a collaborative platform for both architecture students and educators, fields pitches from the Syracuse community annually. The organization then chooses to build one of the proposed projects. This process, from pitch to finished structure, happens under a volunteer program called Freedom by Design, or FBD. Jowonio's proposal was selected.

Since its start four years ago, FBD has produced some acclaimed structures, all of which have been additions to private residences: decks and ramps for single-family homes. Play Perch marks a change in the program's direction.

"Previously, FBD was ad hoc. Students worked on a volunteer basis," says Larry Bowne, one of the two professors overseeing Play Perch. "We began talking to the students about embedding FBD initiatives into the course curriculum, because the loose framework in which the work used to happen constrained architectural ambitions—bigger projects."

After a meeting with SU Architecture's associate dean, Jonathan Solomon, a three-credit independent study course was established.

"The course filled up in a day," says Bowne. "There's an incredible desire on the part of the students to use their architectural skill and training to build things that improve the lives of other people."

Bowne and Sinéad Mac Namara, another SU Architecture faculty member, are the

course instructors, on paper. In reality, though, they function as advisers.

"The students need to design, fabricate, and manage," says Bowne. "It's like teaching a child how to ride a bike. We've sort of taken a mentoring role."

Last September, the project began in earnest. The FBD team quickly established an online Play Perch brand. The marketing arm designed a logo, thought up the tagline, "Students Elevating Students," and produced a snappy stop-motion video explaining Play Perch. Interested parties could track the project through its Facebook page and Twitter account. During the fall, the FBD team hosted an "ask-me-anything" session on Reddit, a popular social media network.

"Because of our age and our connection with digital media, we were more inclined to market this project that way," says Sally Morrow, the team's public relations manager. "We were trying to get creative and encourage people to learn about Play Perch in any way we could."

A large portion of the money was generated by way of the internet, as well. Play Perch had its own account on Indiegogo, an



online crowd-funding platform that allows donors to both contribute to and comment on prospective projects. The Indiegogo profile generated \$3,495.

A single donor—Todd Denny, of Baldwinsville—paid for the remainder of the project, a total of \$10,000. Denny's son Jack, who suffers from autism, attended Jowonio when he was in preschool.

Soon after his son's graduation, Denny, along with his wife and parents, created the Building Bridges Foundation. The nonprofit charity raises money through an annual golf tournament; proceeds go to Autism Speaks

and Jowonio. The foundation hosted its seventh Building Bridges Open in August.

"They built my son into the person he is today," says Denny. "We just wanted to do something for the school. It's an incredible place."

In 2007, Jack Denny's former teacher, occupational therapist Sarah McManus, died unexpectedly. The nature trail around the new structure was built in her honor. "Sarah's Path," it's called.

The treehouse bears a dedication, as well: "Denny Family Play Perch" is etched into the steel wall that lines its wheelchair ramp.

Unveiling: Pupils from the Jowonio School, parents and siblings, staff and architecture students from Syracuse University gathered in May for a ribbon-cutting to open Play Perch, a special educational treehouse. At left, some of the children help with construction earlier in the spring.

According to Morrow, the project cost about \$35,000, a price tag that includes Web and word-of-mouth-generated donations, Denny's contribution and a healthy contribution from SU Chancellor Nancy Cantor. Local companies, including BBD Coaters Inc. and Powell Electric, donated labor and materials, as well.

Jowonio, at 3049 E. Genesee St., emphasizes outdoor interaction. The school has an extensive play area that includes a huge playground—the bow of a ship juts out from a mulched hill on its western boundary—and a tricycle track complete with child-size houses and a tunnel.

"We already have lesson plans focused on outdoor curriculum," says Anita Freezman, a faculty member at Jowonio. "So [the treehouse] will be a place where we can imple-

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Ready for play: The Play Perch is a trapezoidal structure shuttered in steel panels and topped with plexiglass. The outdoor learning space includes a small auditorium space and a wheelchair-accessible ramp. Below, a youngster helps build it.



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ment what we've already been doing in a different way."

Musical lessons and outdoor activities are hallmarks of Freezman's teaching style. Her classroom, which features a small wooden platform, a sandbox, and nature-themed decor, is called the "Treehouse Room."

The Freedom by Design team conceived a treehouse tailored to Jowonio's educational goals, all the way down to the siding. Sheets of laser-cut weathering steel were used to clad the exterior of the treehouse. As the steel weathers, it turns a vibrant orange, and the rust that accumulates acts as a sealant, protecting the cladding from further decay. It's basically a science lesson in itself.

"One of our goals was to design something that would teach kids about natural phenomena: light, air, wind, water, rain," explains Steven Thomas O'Hara, the project's foreman. "We liked the idea of this COR-TEN steel because it meshed with this type of natural education."

The image of a bird's feather has been etched into the siding, as well. "It was the driving concept behind this design," says O'Hara. "It's like having a bird perched in the tree. It allows the kids to get the sensation of being in that realm."

The treehouse also features lights, a transparent Plexiglas roof, a small auditorium space and a wheelchair-accessible ramp.

"The idea is for it to be an inclusive play area, regardless of your physical condition," says Kristen Antonacci.

"We have a child that is affected by temperature," says Anita Freezman. "It's

in the woods, so it will be cooler, and it's accessible so we can bring somebody in a wheelchair down there."

Jowonio's students affected the building process. In fact, the FBD team spent the initial stages of Play Perch observing the kids at play to anticipate their needs.

"We learned that they like small spaces; they like getting a sense of their own scale," says O'Hara. "So, we incorporated lower ceilings. We tried to form concrete relationships with the kids so we could translate that knowledge into the design. It's essential to making a good product."

Some of the kids were present for part of the treehouse's construction. O'Hara says that a few of the pupils watched the FBD team dig footers and pour concrete. Most of the treehouse's structure was prefabricated at SU Architecture's facilities in Slocum Hall on the campus.

The project was set to be finished in December. Due to adverse weather and other unforeseen roadblocks, that date was pushed back several times. In fact, the construction team worked into the early-morning hours of May 10 to complete the structure in time for the 10 a.m. ribbon-cutting ceremony. Some finishing touches— soldering, the placement of a few blue, rubber floor tiles— remained undone when a pair of scissors finally cleaved the paper barrier.

Antonacci, Bowne, Mac Namara, O'Hara, Jack Denny and George Guarino III, president of the SU chapter of AIAS, performed the ceremonial snip. Moments later, excited pupils rushed the entrance, and the Play Perch team went for the coffee that sat atop a table further down "Sarah's Path." □



Roger Hubeli, an assistant professor at Syracuse University's School of Architecture, designed a smaller, grounded structure to accompany the Play Perch. The "Mouse House" is an alternative for children who may be uncomfortable within the Play Perch's elevated confines.