



• HUNTER SESSOMS

Kevin Baker built this treehouse in Bon Air for his son, Hunter. But he and his wife, Angela, are the ones using it the most.



HUNTER SESSOMS

Hannah Keller, 3, enjoys playing golf with her father, Paul, in the family's North Side treehouse.

Living it **UP**

Families go out on a limb to find fun and relaxation in their treehouse retreats

BY JANET CAGGIANO

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

The spiral staircase winds around a huge oak tree in Bon Air.

It was supposed to lead 7-year-old Hunter Baker on a daily adventure, up along the tree's branches and into a small cottage-style treehouse. There, his parents imagined, Hunter would read comic books or daydream about tomorrow.

But Kevin and Angela Baker are the ones kicking up their heels in this shady retreat.

"As sad as that sounds, we spend more time up there than he does," Angela said. "What was the perfect thing for Hunter turned out to be the perfect thing for us. It gives us the chance to unwind and relax after a long day."

Treehouses, made famous by "The Swiss Family Robinson," offer an escape from the hassles of everyday life. Young and old climb inside the branches of sturdy trees to commune with nature, relax with a novel or take a nap.

The Bakers enjoy sitting in chairs on the small porch and sipping a glass of wine after work. Kevin sometimes plays the harmonica to unwind.

"We can sit up there and complain about our day," Kevin said. "It's great relaxation."

Other families, too, are discovering the magic of treehouses. For some, they are the perfect hideout, a chance to be alone with one's thoughts. Others see them as a way to bring loved ones together and put down strong family roots. Still others view them as works of art.

"There's something about a treehouse that is so comforting," said Pete Nelson of Seattle, one of a handful of professional treehouse builders across the country and the author of three treehouse books. "There's no one on this Earth who doesn't get a



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

To escape the summer heat, Caleb Shortridge swings on ropes from the banks under the family's Powhatan treehouse into a three-acre pond.

smile from a cool treehouse. It's a great place to express your own imagination."

Since Nelson hasn't ventured into Richmond, the projects here are left in the hands of local moms and dads. Some are blessed with a background in construction. Others are not.



Bob Shortridge is one of the lucky ones. The owner of Dreaming Creek Timber Frame Homes Inc. in Powhatan County, he definitely knows his way around a workshop. Two years ago, he constructed a two-story treehouse for his son, Caleb, now 14,

Be kind to your tree

Treehouse expert Pete Nelson offers these tips when constructing your own treehouse.

- **Selecting a tree:** A healthy, sturdy tree with solid branches is the best choice.
- **Don't nail it:** Use bolts, not nails.
- **Make each bolt count:** Don't pepper your tree with holes.
- **Supersize:** If you think a 4-by-12 beam will do, make it a 6-by-12.
- **The root of the problem:** Don't drive over a tree's roots during the construction process.

on the property of his home and business.

Overlooking a three-acre pond, the rustic retreat can be mistaken for a house from a distance. But without walls, its main purpose is providing endless hours of fun for Caleb and his friends, who enjoy swinging from ropes into the water.

"It's important for kids to have a place to play," said Sandy Shortridge, Caleb's mother. "I hope they always come to my house and play so I know what they are up to."

While great for forming friendships, treehouses can strengthen family relationships too, said Caleb's father.

"So many kids don't have anything in common with their parents," Bob Shortridge said. "This was a way to get the kids together and not worry about where they were. Right now, we are all best friends."

The family treehouse cost next to nothing to build, since Shortridge provided the labor and materials. He set out 20 years ago to build something similar for his older son, Bobby Jr., but failed. He tried twice to bolt the structure to trees, but both times it fell apart.

When Caleb began asking for a treehouse in 2002, Shortridge decided this time he'd take a different approach, building it on stilts in the middle of the woods. One level quickly became two large platforms, which

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means there's room to cook out, take a nap on sleeping bags or just hang out with friends.

A roof provides some protection from the elements, with future plans calling for the fort, which measures about 800 square feet, to be enclosed.

"I didn't think it would be so big," Caleb said. "But since my dad is in construction, he went all out. It was cool watching it go up."

While Bobby Jr. didn't have the chance to enjoy such a setup when he was a kid, he's enjoying it now. To cool off in the summer, he'll take off on a rope from the first level of the treehouse and splash down in the middle of the pond.

"You can get all caught up in the daily grind," Bobby Jr. said. "Everyone needs an escape. You have to make time for that."



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

Bob Shortridge used his experience in construction to build a large treehouse on stilts in Powhatan County. The project, he says, has brought the family closer together.