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Wheelchair-accessible tree house opens

By **KAITLIN LEARY, Telegraph Staff**

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Courtesy photo

Chaz Freeman, 19, sits in his wheelchair on the ramp that leads up to a 500-square-foot tree house at Crotched Mountain in Greenfield. The structure is the state's first wheelchair-accessible tree house.

GREENFIELD - For many, climbing up the trunk of an old tree to spend a summer afternoon within the serene walls of a tree house is a fond childhood memory. But for many kids with disabilities, it is merely a daydream - until now.

"We get to experience what it is like to be a normal kid," said 19-year-old Chaz Freeman, who uses a wheelchair.

A dream came true for Freeman and other students at Crotched Mountain on Tuesday afternoon. The facility, which annually caters to more than 2,000 people with disabilities, unveiled New Hampshire's first wheelchair-accessible tree house.

The 500-square-foot tree house is the result of more than 3,000 hours of paid and volunteer labor.

The structure, which rests 20 feet off the ground, includes a 150-foot ramp, making it accessible to all of the Crotched Mountain students.

"It's a sense of freedom for everybody," Freeman said.

Building of the tree house, which cost \$97,000, began last fall and took approximately 13 weeks to finish. It was designed and built by Forever Young Treehouses, a Vermont nonprofit organization dedicated to the construction of tree houses that are "universally accessible."

According to its founder, Bill Allen, Forever Young Treehouses hopes to have at least one wheelchair-accessible tree house in every state by 2008.

The Crotched Mountain tree house was the seventh house built by the company, which started in 1999.

"The thing that is brilliant is that you are essentially taking something exclusive and including everybody," said Allen.

Also at the unveiling was actress Dana Reeve, wife of actor Christopher Reeve and director of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. During the event, Reeve presented Crotched Mountain with a \$5,000 Quality of Life Grant, in addition to another \$5,000 grant to the Harry Gregg Foundation, a financial assistance organization named after Crotched Mountain's founder.

According to Reeve, Crotched Mountain was chosen out of thousands of organizations that applied for grants through the foundation.

"We recognized the opportunity to create something outside the realm of the daily possibilities," said Reeve, who referred to the tree house as a place that "breeds fantasy."

"We take being in a tree house for granted," said Forever Young Treehouses designer B'Fer Roth, who called his job "child's play for adult wages."

All of the houses created by Forever Young Treehouses are designed to be ecologically friendly.

The tree house at Crotched Mountain was made, for the most part, with materials found within a 45-minute radius of the facility, according to Roth.

The house uses a series of cables, which keeps the structure internally secure, while allowing it to gently sway in the breeze. It is held to the trees by bolts, which are threaded through the trunks of the supporting trees. The holes made in the trunks will eventually heal around the bolts, too.

Possibly the most creative part of the tree house is the door on the front of the house. It was made by slicing pieces of wood and encasing them in Plexiglas. The door opens and closes by sliding along four Pinnacle golf ball plates on a track beneath it.

Jenny Ventre, 18, a wheelchair user and student at Crotched Mountain, said she likes "the feeling of being so close to the trees," which would normally pose an obstacle to her.

According to Crotched Mountain President Don Shumway, the tree house is just "one of many hopes and dreams."

Among the many projects in the works for the organization is a wheelchair-accessible hiking route along the mountain.

"Part of the dream is when this is no longer a novelty," said Crotched Mountain marketing manager Tracy Messer.

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