

Barbara Butler's tree houses hold quality, fun

By Sam Whiting



Barbara Butler designs and builds custom tree houses and play structures for kids. If in need of a tree house, you can climb up and try to build it, at risk of killing either yourself or the tree, leaving the job unfinished and blighting the yard. Or you can call Barbara Butler, who will get the job done in a week flat. Butler, 54, works out of a studio in South San Francisco.

On job description: I call myself an artist-builder. I am a general contractor, but there is no specific license required to build tree houses, although I am a certified playground safety inspector.

On clientele: We make play structures for kids. It's not that I'm opposed to tree houses for adults. It's just that I'm more interested in kids and play and getting kids out of the house and into the backyard.

On definition: A tree fort has no roof and no windows, and a tree house has roof and windows. We build both.

On price: It is hard to do anything in a tree for less than \$15,000, and they go up from there. Ground structures start at \$4,000.

On house calls: Most people find us through our Web site, www.barbarabutler.com, or somebody tells them that we're the tree house people. They might send a picture of their tree. If it is local, I go over and see them, and we look at the tree and we talk about possibilities.

On staff: We are the merry band of play professionals. Most of my family works here: My sister, my husband, my brother, my niece. Those are the full timers. I have seven brothers and sisters and eight nieces and nephews who help out when I'm in a jam. We're all from way upstate New York, Watertown. I moved out here 25 years ago, and everybody slowly followed.

On process: All our play structures are built with redwood. The lumber comes in, then we grind it to get the splinter out, then the tree house gets built, then stained, then detailed. Then we take it apart and put it on the truck. If it is in the United States, my husband, Jeff Beal, drives it. I've built them in France and Korea.

On production: We all fly in and rent a house for a week. We stock it full of food and beer and work 12- to 14-hour days. If it's in the Bay Area, we don't tend to have dinner and sleep over at each other's houses. We always get the installations done in one week. It's kind of a loose network of artists that work with me.

On quality: We make all our own rope. Our welder retired, so we bought all his equipment and we do all the metalwork. Our color guy retired, so we bought all his equipment and make our own colors. We don't have a forest to grow the trees yet.

On quantity: I have over 500 original designs out there, play structures and tree houses. I don't really distinguish between them. I like the designs to go with the character of the house and the property, but I am not into matching them.

On charity: We donated a play structure, and these very nice people bought it at an auction. They asked us to build a kids' garden shed for the Boys & Girls Club in east Menlo Park. It is used like crazy, and they can store stuff in it and lock it up at night.

On pedigree: I have noticed in real estate listings that it says, 'Has a Barbara Butler playhouse in it.' The first time I saw that, I was a little excited.

On home: I've lived in the same apartment in the Mission for 23 years. I have a back deck about the size of this conference table. You couldn't build a tree house on it. That's why I borrow everyone else's yards - to amuse myself.

- Sam Whiting

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