



BUILDING by Alicea Jones RELATIONSHIPS, 18 FEET HIGH!

CAMP CHO-YEH'S NEW PINEY WOODS TREEHOUSE

Take 40 young campers who have never met one another. Place them in front of a mammoth treehouse perched high among a thatch of pine trees, complete with suspension bridges, pods at various levels and a crow's nest 18 feet above ground. And they'll be exploring together like lifelong buddies within minutes.

That's exactly what Garret Larsen, president and CEO, and the board at Camp Cho-Yeh (Livingstone, Texas) were aiming for when they decided to construct a fort-sized treehouse on their 600-acre property in the Piney Woods of Texas.

"We wanted a unique way for our campers and guests to engage with God's creation," Larsen says. "A space up in the trees where kids can hang out." ►

Photo courtesy of Camp Cho-Yeh

Camp Cho-Yeh (“the land of tall pines” in Alabama-Coushatta language), is located 75 miles north of Houston. The small town is known for the soaring pine trees that fill its landscape. “We love our pine trees here in Livingston,” Larsen says. “Everything here is tree themed.” So it’s no wonder that Larsen and the board of directors wanted to maintain the tree theme by adding a large treehouse on the property.

The camp’s mission is “to be a place where Jesus Christ transforms lives through meaningful relationships and outdoor adventures.” Committed to fulfilling this mission through its programming, Larsen and the board of this 70-year-old camp wanted campers and guests to experience an awe-inspiring, 360-degree aerial view of the camp’s 600 acres which include a lake, hills and hollows, and, of course, thick clusters of pine trees that dot the camp grounds. Larsen dreamed of a place where kids could play freely and creatively, high in the pines, while building friendships and a closer relationship with God.

As a lifelong camper, Larsen knows the transformative power of spending time outdoors. And the treehouse he built with a neighbor buddy when he

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was 10 is etched in his mind forever. “I grew up playing in treehouses,” Larsen says. He believes that camping and playing in treehouses can help build a child’s sense of creativity and confidence. Treehouses also provide an opportunity for exercise and a respite for young people and adults alike—transcending the rigor and cares of everyday living.

So in 2010, Larsen asked Pete Nelson, owner of Nelson Treehouse and Supply, to take a look at the property and provide design ideas and a bid. “This was before Pete Nelson had his television show, *Treehouse Masters*,” Larsen explains. Larsen also received a bid from a second quality builder, but he had a positive gut feeling about Nelson.

Pete Nelson spent three days at Camp Cho-Yeh, creating a design that was amazingly close to what Larsen had envisioned. However, unlike the treehouse Larsen built in his youth,



Camp Cho-Yeh's treehouse would remain on Larsen's wish list for six years. "We loved the design, but we didn't have the money at the time, so we had to put a pause on it," Larsen says.

A Rewarding Wait

In the six years of waiting and dreaming, the treehouse remained a top priority for Larsen and his board. Larsen stayed in contact with Nelson, building a good rapport with him. The camp eventually raised the \$185,000 required to pay for the treehouse as a part of a larger capital campaign of \$4 million, still in progress.

Construction began in early March 2016. The crew used fresh cut, aromatic Western red cedar from Alaska that had been pulled on tug boats to the Nelson Treehouse and Supply mill in Oso, Wash. It took four days to drive the cedar planks from Washington to East Texas. The craftsmen used century-tested techniques, building the treehouse on-site at the camp using ropes and pulleys instead of heavy machinery. "Our treehouse is unique because it doesn't have all the walls that a normal treehouse would have. It allowed the builders to be very creative," Larsen says. "We are completely ▶

Photos courtesy of Camp Cho-Yeh



Pete Nelson of *Treehouse Masters* show on Animal Planet.



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satisfied. They came in on time and on budget. I've heard nothing but comments of awe."

Staff and visitors watched in growing anticipation as the treehouse took shape. Six men, including some from Pete Nelson's *Treehouse Masters* show on Animal Planet, crafted suspended cable bridges, rock and netted walls, multiple platforms at various levels with several entries and exits including a 4-foot-wide staircase, a fire pole and a hand-crafted wooden slide.

Nelson and his crew were just as excited. "There were a lot of playful elements in this treehouse. We typically build spaces designed for adults. It was fun creating such a kid-friendly structure with adventurous components like nets, a slide and bridges," Nelson says. "A treehouse is a critical part of any camp. It is key to create something that will draw people in. Something that will inspire kids to take their camp spirit home and build something in their own backyard."

The Treehouse Unveiled

Hordes of curious visitors flooded Camp Cho-Yeh on April 10, 2016, for the grand opening and annual Family Fun Day. They were anxious to get an up-close look at the giant treehouse they had been hearing about. Kids and adults alike christened the treehouse by climbing the rock wall, challenging their balance ▶

Photos courtesy of Camp Cho-Yeh







Photo courtesy of Camp Cho-Yeh

EXTRA INFO

TREEHOUSE TIPS

Is a treehouse a good option for your camp? Garret Larsen offers these points to consider:

- Would a treehouse fit the character of your camp? If your camp is water-based, for example, the answer may be no.
- A camp treehouse should be substantial enough in size that kids can interact comfortably with one another.
- Make sure you can allow for good throughput: How many kids can play in the treehouse an hour at a time?



For a closer look at the treehouse, check out videos at www.facebook.com/CampChoYeh



Watch webisodes of the building process at <https://youtu.be/EzJn5coAwF4>

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while shakily traversing the suspension bridge and sliding down the massive slide.

The camp normally draws 600 to 800 people on Family Fun Day. However, because of the social and local media coverage they received about their new treehouse, 1,800 people showed up! “It’s the most people we’ve ever had at Family Fun Day. We had cooked lunch for 1,000 and ran out,” Larsen says. “We wound up cooking everything else we had in the kitchen. And Pete said he’s never had that many people at one of his treehouse events. He was there to sign autographs and take pictures. That was certainly a draw.”

Time will tell whether the buzz and the treehouse itself will contribute to Camp Cho-Yeh’s return on investment. “We will learn more about how our enrollment is affected this summer,” Larsen says. The camp typically hosts about 3,000 summer campers and 12,000 retreat guests. “We expect 3,500 campers this summer,” Larsen says. If the record-breaking grand opening and the excitement of the multitude of children and adults who tried out the slides, bridges and rock wall are any indication, the treehouse will pay for itself. For Camp Cho-Yeh, that payoff will come not only in increased camp enrollment, but in closer connections for campers with nature, each other and Christ. Not to mention tons of treehouse fun. ●



Alicea Jones is an award-winning freelance writer and motivational

speaker who enjoys camping with her family. Find more of her work at www.aliceajoneswriter.com. Email her at aliceajoneswriter@live.com.