

Students construct house for children at Pittsburgh Botanic Garden

June 27, 2013 8:17 am
By Bob Podurgiel /

Deep in the forest of the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden sits a sturdy children's playhouse sheathed in rough, cedar shake shingles and topped by a green, four-cornered roof.

The playhouse, which sits next to a winding, crushed-gravel path, has an air of mystery about it.

One might think that hobbits or dwarfs built the house among the trees so children would have a place to play in the cool forest shade. But the builders actually were students from the Carpenters' Joint Apprenticeship and Training Program on Ridge Road in Collier.

The playhouse is in the Woodlands of the World, a 60-acre tract of the Botanic Garden. The Garden lies on 460 acres in Settler's Cabin Park that span parts of Robinson, Collier and North Fayette. The land has been leased from Allegheny County.

Carpentry instructor Dave Plutt of Bethel Park directed the students in assembling the structure about a half-mile deep in the Eastern European woodlands, one of the five woodland areas being developed into a regional attraction by the Botanic Garden.

"I'll take being in the woods any day," said Drew Belski of Ellwood City, as he took a break from assembling the playhouse last Thursday with five other second-year commercial carpentry students from the training center.

The students assembled the 8-foot-by-8-foot, 320-square-foot building from prebuilt sections weighing about 350 pounds each. The sections were carefully transported on motorized carts along a trail to the construction site.

Fourth-year students in the commercial building program -- Seth Greenier from the South Hills, Michael Howard from Irwin, Daniel Nill from West Mifflin and Brian Kovacs from Robinson -- constructed the playhouse in four identical sections at the Carpenter's Training Center as part of its annual open house and building contest.

The windows, doors and jams were built in the mill cabinet-making division under the direction of architect Wayne Babjack.

Architect and carpenter Brian Bylstone designed the playhouse based on the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden's concept.

After it was constructed, the students disassembled the playhouse so it could be trucked to the site. Students reassembled it entirely last Thursday.

Kitty Vagley, the gardens development director, said the playhouse is called the The Story Book House and is the focal point for the Bookworm Glen.

It is one of a series of interactive displays for children being built along the trails constructed in the Garden.

Others include a huge bird's nest constructed from twigs and branches woven together to give youngsters an idea of what it's like to be a fledgling bird.

Another is called, Root of the Matter, where children can walk beside two uprooted trees and see what lives below the forest floor.

The Story Book Playhouse pays homage to traditional fairy tales, many of which originated in Eastern Europe, Ms. Vagley said.

"This whole area was clear-cut in the 1920s when the area was mined for coal," Ms. Vagley said.

"All the trees were cut down, except for one oak tree, which she estimated to be more than 200 years old.

"We think they left that tree so the miners could have some shade," she said.

The whole Bookworm Glen is now in shade thanks to the trees that have grown back since the 1920s; the Botanic Garden staff is helping that process along by planting more native trees.

"I love carpentry, and building this interesting little house for the kids," said Stephanie Green from Wilksburg, one of the second-year students working on the project.

Plans for the house include having volunteers from the Botanic Garden read children's stories at the site.

One volunteer, Linda Romito of Mars, made the trip to the Botanic Garden to see the playhouse being constructed, and she came equipped with a book of Eastern European fairy tales tucked under her arm.

"I'm brushing up on the stories, and can't wait to see the house finished," she said.

Tom Nicola, training coordinator for the apprentice carpenters, helped the students and several Botanic Garden interns guide the prefabricated roof sections around rocks and under tree branches to the work site.

Ms. Vagley said people interested in seeing the playhouse can sign up for periodic "Peek and Preview" tours at the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden website, or the Botanic Garden staff can arrange a tour for groups. Call 412-444-4464.

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First Published June 27, 2013 4:57 am