just playin' around!

This impresario of play envisions backyards through the eyes of a child.

By Ken Wysocky, Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin

It took a while, but Barbara Butler finally figured out what she wanted to be when she grows up—a kid at heart.

Using her inner child as her muse, Butler has fashioned a nationwide business that's the envy of many an adult: designing and building grandly imaginative, high-end playhouses.

But to say that Butler builds playhouses is akin to noting that Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses. We're not talking about your typical tree house here, with a ladder fashioned from two-by-fours nailed onto a tree trunk and a crudely lettered "No Girls Allowed" sign on a sagging plywood door.

PHOTOS, THIS PAGE AND PORTRAIT ABOVE: TEENA ALBERT

> "I hope my designs influence people to create fun places for their own kids—places that combine imaginative play with physical play...where they can roughhouse, climb, get dirty and deal with spiders."
>
> BARBARA BUTLER

Nope. Butler creates whimsical structures that redefine the term "flights of fancy." Think Tom Sawyer, channel the Swiss Family Robinson and then toss in Peter Pan, just for good measure.

"I like to tap into the kid in me," Barbara explains. "Kids are fascinated with castles, forts, pirate ships, lighthouses, tree houses and all the games that go with them.

"Kids are interested in being rough-and-tumble," she adds. "I want them to get away from the computer for a bit—give them a place to run around outside and be wild."

Childhood-Inspired

Barbara is inspired by her childhood years, in Watertown, New York, where she grew up with seven brothers and sisters in an old house with a huge backyard.

"The house had lots of hiding places," she recalls fondly. "In the backyard, there was a huge tree with a rope swing. But there was no playhouse. Actually, the garage was our playhouse!"

The path that led this kid-at-heart to become a playhouse maven is almost as rambling as the array of walkways, staircases, catwalks, ramps, tube slides, trapdoors, peepholes and fire poles that can be found in her largest custom creations.

Unsure of what she wanted to do after graduating from the State University of New York College at Cortland, she headed to Washington, D.C. to help two brothers rehab brownstone buildings.

She then went back to school to earn a master's degree while dabbling in painting and designing furniture. Her dream job came closer to fruition when she moved to San Francisco to start a business called Outer Space Design. The company eventually dissolved, but not before singer Bobby McFerrin asked the firm to design his backyard—including an unusual playhouse.

"To get ideas, I went and played on every playground I could," she remembers. "It was a difficult job—I probably earned about $2 an hour when all was said and done. But when I was finished, I knew what I wanted to do: build play structures."

Growing by Leaps and Bounds

That was in 1988, and largely by word of mouth and media publicity, things mushroomed from there. Now Barbara Butler Artist-Builder, Inc., has designed and built 400 play structures for a client list that includes A-list celebrities, such as Robert Redford, Kevin Kline and Will Smith. The structures range in price from $6,200 for standard playhouse designs to $70,000 and up for upscale, custom creations.

All the structures, which can take anywhere from 8 to 16 weeks to complete, are built in modular sections in a company facility in San Francisco, then assembled on-site. There are usually about 12 projects in various stages of the design-construction-installation pipeline, Barbara says.

She's aware her structures are costly, but Barbara works within clients' budgets.

"It doesn't have to be expensive to be fun," she emphasizes. "At the least, I hope my designs influence people to create fun places for their own kids—places that combine imaginative play with physical play...where they can roughhouse, climb, get dirty and deal with spiders. That's what I had as a kid. That's what I'm all about."

No matter what Barbara designs—from swashbuckling pirate ships to enchanting fairy-tale castles—one thing is certain: She makes it look like child's play.

Inspired to Build Your Own?

Follow These Safety Tips...

Keep in mind that more than 50,000 children injure themselves annually on home playgrounds, mostly by falling off equipment, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Here are some basic safety tips to follow, as recommended by the CPSC:

- Provide a protective surface to cushion falls. Shredded bark mulch and wood chips should be 6 inches deep for any surface that's 6 feet high, 9 inches deep for a 10-foot-high surface, and 1 foot deep for an 11-foot-high surface.
- Extend protective surfaces at least 6 feet around the perimeter of all equipment.
- Install handrails on any platform more than 30 inches high.
- To avoid head entrapment, any openings that are closed on all sides—such as the spaces between railing slats—should either be less than 3-1/2 inches or more than 9 inches wide.
- Place swings at least 8 inches apart from each other, as well as from any support frame.
- "S" hooks must be closed tightly so they can't entangle clothing.
- Moving parts should be enclosed to avoid pinching.

web plus Join the fun! Access our playhouse-building plans by visiting *BackyardLivingmagazine.com/plus*.