

New Life for Old Wood

From the title of this article one may think I am writing about the ecological process of decomposition: nature's efficient recycling system. This story *is* about recycling, but more in tune with the human aspect of wise use of materials. In fact this story is more or less about one family's effort to follow those general pillars of sustainability, the three R's: reuse, recycle and reduce. In doing so, I think we came up with two products that benefit the community we live in.

For some of my readers, perhaps those my age or older, you may remember the backyard playground of yesteryear. It consisted of a sturdy tree, a rope or two, a small board and maybe even an old tire. Sometimes, if the yard was large, in a rural area, or hidden enough in the new suburban sprawl, a few boards would be nailed into the tree and a ladder, possibly a platform or walls would sprout into a fabulous tree fort. Hundreds of memories would find their humble beginnings climbing and exploring the tree or swinging high into the clear blue skies, imagining taking flight in an airplane to an exotic locale or even a space craft zooming across the universe.

Probably about ten to fifteen years ago a neighbor was looking for a family to take his backyard play set that his children had outgrown. Little did I realize then that his 'getting rid of' the large back yard wooden and plastic play set, was more likely his desire to see the set reused by others. I had two young boys at the time so I thought, 'sure, why not?' I was already into recycling, you know, bottles, cans, newspapers but this was more or less one man's junk is another man's treasure, right? I'd like to say I did this is the name of recycling (and reducing landfill materials, reusing our natural resources and being sustainable) but it was probably more monetary in nature (i.e. free!) and the gratification for my children.

My three sons used the two swings, and the ropes and ladders to the elevated fort for years. Being boys and into pirates, soldiers and science fiction, I know that the play set provided hours of entertainment. But times had certainly changed since my childhood days. Getting the boys to go 'outside' to play in the fresh air on their imaginary wooden pirate ship was much more difficult with a wide screen color television and game controllers just a few feet inside. This was especially true with the never ending explosion of vivid digital graphics ranging from Peter Pan to Alien Invasions! Like the underlying theme of Woody, Buzz and friends in the endearing Toy Story movies, the once bold and giant wooden pirate ship in the backyard was shrinking and deteriorating in the elements outside while life continued forward, mainly inside the house.

I remember several conversations with the boys about 'what should we do with the old play set'. The older boys, being much too mature now to sit on the cramped wooden platform, really didn't know. I imagined them trying to sit up there, somewhat entombed by the diminutive space that miraculously once had been the deck of a thriving seafaring vessel! Boy, talk about imagination, you can tell this middle-aged man still remembers those childhood adventures in his own backyard!

My youngest son, was on the fence about dismantling the play set, and 'why shouldn't he be?' I thought. He had not had the same number of years to fully enjoy this old set of wood and ropes. Was I going to diminish his opportunities of childhood fantasies by removing this aging structure?

In my mind, I began to think about how we can recycle and reuse the play set. It had weathered over the years, but was still structurally sound. Being an active volunteer at the nature center, and seeing the need for wooden boardwalks within Drexel Woods, we considered making a section of boardwalk for the nature center. But there was too little wood to make a significant portion of boardwalk. The set was dismantled piece by piece, rusty bolts removed with difficulty, screws and nails removed or broken during the process. Eventually, large piles of varying dimensions of lumber were scattered about the yard. For nearly six months it just sat there as life's hectic schedule prohibited their use (or reuse).

During some vacation time on Long Beach Island this summer, we realized that we truly enjoyed biking as a family to our favorite barrier island locales. We would bike to Barnegat Lighthouse State Park and walk the jetty and nature trail, or climb the 216 steps to the top of the lighthouse. We would bike to Viking Village for antique or craft shows, or to pick up fresh fish and clams from the seafood market or restaurant. We would bike to the gardens behind the Barnegat Light museum or venture out to the secluded High Bar beaches to beachcomb and bird watch. Nearly everywhere we went, there was a bike rack filled with bikes.

Our youngest son really enjoyed biking this summer. It was a great way to spend some family time together, but at times also gave him the chance to explore some places he probably would not have walked to. As the summer came to an end and we looked outside at the pile of wood that once was a pirate ship, we collectively came to a conclusion; we should make a bicycle rack for the nature center.

In late November and early December, two of my sons and I began designing the bike rack based upon those we had seen at LBI. We measured and cut the lumber to the specifications taken in the summer, with some modifications made to compensate for what wood was available from the old play set. My oldest son got home from college just in time to help us temporarily piece together the prototype. In mid-December we met with several students from the Lawrence High School environmental club S.A.V.E. (Students against Violating the Earth) and constructed the new 'recycled' wooden bike rack for the nature center. Each piece of the bike rack was reused from the play set that was used by two families over the past two decades.

I talked to the students about sustainability, and the benefit of reusing materials as opposed to discarding them and putting them into a landfill. For me, the concept of sustainability is something that starts in the home and can be practiced in just about any fathomable manner. I won't go into details now but in context to this story, I remember the days in the early 1970s when I got into my parent's station wagon with numerous buckets or boxes of pre-sorted brown, green and clear bottles, and drove to an abandoned railroad right of way in Hopewell Township near the Hunterdon County line to drop off the glass in large containers. Wow, my parents were environmentally sensitive way back then! Most people just threw the jars and bottles in the trash. Of course, now we have curbside recycling. I still seek out and find places to take items that cannot go into the curbside buckets, such as #5 plastic

containers and corks (Whole Foods), snack bags (Terracycle), plastic bags (just about any grocery store), rechargeable batteries (Township), food scraps (compost), etc., but there is so much more we can do today to be sustainable. There are so many simple, little things one can do that take very little effort at all. But now back to the play set scenario, and its reuse. My oldest son took one of the ladders for his bunk at college. The platform floor was cut in half and reconstructed to traverse a wet, slippery depression in Drexel Woods.

My youngest son and I biked over to the nature center today (shortly after I finished this article) and placed our bicycles in the new 'recycled' bike rack. I snapped this photograph and then we walked into the Drexel Woods for an exploration, as father and son. We talked about the play set, its use by two families for over two decades and how we are using it once again but in a different form. In fact, many people will likely use it for years to come! It was a nice feeling for both of us and in particular for me knowing that my sons will be thinking about the small steps we can all take to protect our environment.