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Mission: Lean-to Rehab

Volunteers fix up shelters in western Adirondacks

By David Figura, Outdoors editor

Paul DeLucia smiles when he recalls the time a canoe loaded with more than 400 pounds of shingles slid down an embankment and sunk in the Oswegatchie River.

He's proud of the time he and his friends loaded a couple of canoes on wheel carts with hundreds of pounds of logs, cement and other supplies and pushed them nine miles up hills, through a swamp and over numerous downed trees — all the time shooing away hordes of deer flies and mosquitoes.

He said he got worried, though, when he sliced his left hand open with a small pruning saw out in the woods nine miles from the nearest road. A friend sewed him up with six stitches so he could keep working.

It was all part of the adventures and tribulations experienced during the recently completed Lean2 Rescue project.

Led by DeLucia, 52, of Baldwinsville, a group of determined volunteers during the past 3½ years — with assists from DEC staff and a Skaneateles Boy Scout troop — renovated 33 crumbling lean-tos in wilderness and wild forest areas of the western Adirondack Park. That effort included donations of more than \$5,000 in materials.

“It just got sort of addictive. It's not something everyone would do,” said DeLucia, an electrical engineer at Welch Allyn in Skaneateles.

It was work the volunteers kept quiet about until now. Despite working closely with the DEC, DeLucia said, he and his friends shied away from publicity and didn't want to take the chance of attracting the attention of certain Adirondack park preservationist groups or individuals who might raise “a stink” that would stall or derail their efforts.

With that in mind, the volunteers tried their best to keep within the strict rules governing construction in the Adirondacks while renovating the open-faced, three-sided, slanted-roof structures found throughout the park and used by hikers, campers or anyone else in need of shelter. They worked mostly without the use of motorized tools or vehicles. In many cases, they hauled heavy loads such as shingles on their backs. The DEC forestry workers who helped the group can't say enough about Lean2 Rescue. Other organizations, such as the Adirondack Mountain Club, have adopted and renovated lean-tos in the Adirondacks, they said, but not to the extent of DeLucia and his crew.

“The people who use these resources owe them a great deal of thanks,” said DEC forester John Gibbs, who noted that the Lean2 Rescue effort sparked enthusiasm within his department and relearning of certain skills such as how to “scribe” logs so they fit together.

DeLucia, a veteran camper and hiker, got involved during the summer of 2004 after he noticed his favorite lean-to in the St. Regis Canoe Area was falling apart. During the course of the summer, DeLucia and his wife, Cynthia, with the help of a few friends, took it upon themselves to renovate it. They didn’t stop there.

“We also redug the outhouse, moved it, put a new roof on it and we hung a door,” he said.

After DEC staff found out what the DeLucia group had done, they convinced him to sign up with the state’s Adopt a Natural Resource Program so he could work closely with DEC forestry staff. That move gave DeLucia and his friends legitimacy, in addition to providing workmen’s compensation and liability coverage in the event of an injury.

As he continued to gather volunteers, DeLucia first set his sights on the Five Ponds Wilderness Area. Finishing that up, the group moved to the Haderondah and Pigeon Lake wilderness areas, the Black River Wild Forest, Watson’s East Triangle and the Cranberry Lake Wild Forest. Everyone they met was supportive.

“People we met out there treated us like rock stars,” DeLucia said. “They caught fish and fed us ... gave us beer. However, we didn’t drink it until the work was done each day.”

DeLucia said Lean2 Rescue has a core group of about 20 to 25 individuals, with more than 50 others who’ve helped at one time or another. He said there’s a “disproportionate number” of Welch Allyn engineers in the group (about nine), with a variety of other men and women of various ages and professions from throughout the state — all sharing a love for the Adirondacks.

Pete Davis, 42, a Welch Allyn mechanical engineer, is the group’s photographer and lean-to “foundation man.” Being a marathon runner and in great shape, Davis was often counted on to help with transporting supplies in and out of work areas.

Davis said the group’s last work detail was in November at Chub Lake in Hamilton County, a detail that involved moving supplies over some rugged terrain. The weekend before, he said, he ran a marathon in Fulton, finishing second in about 3 hours.

“The marathon was easier,” Davis said.

George Dickover, 43, of Skaneateles, an insurance adjuster, recalls how he was on a camping trip and stayed at a lean-to at Fish Pond. He noticed the structure had recently been fixed up.

“This place was six to seven miles away from the road. Who the hell did this ... and why?” he remembers asking himself.

He read the lean-to's notebook log and discovered it mentioned Lean2 Rescue and an e-mail address. When Dickover got home he sent an e-mail requesting more information. Within a few hours he got a phone call from DeLucia and learned that the Lean2 Rescue coordinator lived in his neighborhood. He's been a member of the “core group” ever since.

One volunteer, Jeff Perkins, of Owasco, once refused to yield to prickles “just on principle” while pushing and pulling a canoe on a cart through the woods, DeLucia said.

“He just kept marching through,” he said. “By the time he was 4½ miles in, his arms were covered in blood and sores. It looked like a remake of the movie, ‘The Passion (of the Christ).’”

Among those who offered to help was Skaneateles Scout Master Bob Sheppard, who brought Scouts from Troop 61 four times to help with lean-to projects in the Stillwater Reservoir, Middle Branch Lake, Middle Settlement Lake and Queer Lake areas.

“Each time, we hiked in about five miles, bringing in tools, equipment, food,” he said. Working in the Adirondack Park is different, though, than say volunteering at the local county park or nature area. All development and construction in the Adirondacks is governed by an overall state Master Plan, with the needs of specific areas addressed by “unit management plans.”

DeLucia became familiar with the Unit Management Plan in the areas he was working, he said, and also with the wilderness area ban on “motorized vehicles and tools.” These were measures put in place to protect wildlife and the habitat. The DEC is allowed to use motorized tools and vehicles, but only in emergency situations or when given special permission.

“Everybody involved respects and cherishes the character of the wilderness areas,” DeLucia said. “We endured indescribable hardship to avoid motorized transport.”

However, work last winter in the Haderondah and Pigeon Lake wilderness areas resulted in a concerned DeLucia asking for the DEC's help in transporting supplies into and out of some remote sites. DeLucia said he was worried some of his volunteers might get hurt doing it themselves. DEC staff put a helicopter down on frozen lakes near the lean-tos that were being worked on, helped carry the supplies to shore and left.

“Had there been a measurable risk to the environment, we never would have asked,” DeLucia said.

The DEC's actions, according to John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, a non-profit watchdog group, would appear to violate the terms of a 1997 lawsuit settlement his agency and several other non-profit groups had with the state.

"Part of the problem before was that the DEC wasn't telling anyone when they were going in the woods. This appears to be a similar situation. They're supposed to make (such excursions public). They didn't. These trips for Lean2 Rescue are news to us." David Smith, the DEC's head forester in Region 6, disagreed with Sheehan's stance, saying he did get permission from superiors and noted that the helicopters flew in the dead of winter when animals and people would least be affected.

"It's something we'll do once every 10 to 20 years," he said. "In that sense, it was very efficient and very infrequent."

With all the lean-tos in Region 6 completed, DeLucia said his role in Lean2 Rescue is being phased out. He has some serious chronic back problems and hopes someone else will step forward to organize the work and continue what he started.

"We were never going to finish the whole Adirondack Park," he said. "If I would try to do that, it would break me."

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