

Out on a Limb

by Stacey Enesey Klemenc

AMERICAN Patriot Getaways in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, is one of the companies that rents cabins to vacationers who want to stay in “tree houses” in the Smoky Mountains. These cabins, many of which are built on platforms elevated above the rocky terrain, are surrounded by trees but none — up until recently — were nestled in the branches of a tree.

But thanks to the creativity of Eugenia Almeida, owner of A New Hue in Knoxville, and her helpers, Tabitha Queen and Juan Almeida, there are now four “tree houses” that look like they are supported by trees — and big ones at that. The trees have trunk diameters between 10 and 13 feet and long sprawling branches that embrace the 650-square-foot cabins from front to back.

Eugenia Almeida says she was approached by Matt Naas, owner of Big Sky Construction, after Gregg Rothberg with Farrell-Calhoun Paint recommended her for the tree work. When she heard what Naas had in mind — building giant trees out of concrete — “I was so much on board,” she says. “The project sounded fantastic.” She asked him to give her 24 hours to solidify a plan.

Almeida brainstormed with her crew



and a couple of local welders. They assured her a welder could make metal frames for the tree trunks and branches that could be wrapped with mesh. She knew she could apply a faux bois (that’s French for false wood) finish to make it look like wood. The project was a go, with Troy Dixon, a local welder with Dixon Fabrications, on board.

Almeida and her helpers got started on the first tree in January, a time when “the weather didn’t cooperate” as it was snowy and very cold. At press time, in a much milder clime, they were carving their fourth.

“Each tree weighs about 3,000 pounds,” Almeida says. “And each part of the tree is carved and stained.” They used stains and a faux bois mix from EZChem, as well as paint from Farrell-Calhoun. “I like to mix my techniques

and always push the envelope with my work.”

She says Big Sky’s Naas gave her the go-ahead to do whatever she felt necessary to get the project done right. “When they give you freedom, you can create without being worried,” she says. She credits this free rein, for example, to be able to incorporate small cans in the trees’ frames to form holes where birds can build their nests.

Almeida, originally a plasterer by trade, says she fell in love with concrete 13 years ago when she met Cindee Lundin at an IDAL convention and decided she wanted to do what Lundin did. “She is not only my teacher,” Almeida says, “she’s my inspiration.”

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