

BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY JEFF TAMARKIN

When you look at that FreshDirect or Dell carton sitting by the curb in front of your building, you probably see a cardboard box on its way to the recycling center. Alex Truesdell sees a chair.

Truesdell is the founder and executive director of the Adaptive Design Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that disabled children get the customized equipment they need to help them function at home, at school and in the world at large.

That isn't always as easy as it might seem: Individual children often need specialized furniture or aids that aren't readily available through catalogues or other commercial sources. Adaptive Design operates a workshop where occupational and physical therapists, teachers, community volunteers, engineers, architects and others work directly with the families of disabled kids to ascertain precisely what the child needs.

Then, whether it's a bench, a chair, steps or shelves, they build it.

"We had one little boy," says Truesdell, 50, "whose physical therapist said his arms were strong but he sat in his chair all day. Would it be possible to make a set of steps that he could use to get himself down to the floor and back up into his chair? It was as simple as her saying, 'Is it possible?' Our theory here is that it's all possible."

Adaptive Design's trained craftspeople utilize several different materials in creating the custom-made adaptive items, including wood, plastic and fabric. But one of the most surprising — and also one of the most durable and affordable — is cardboard. Cardboard carpentry, as the art is called, is at the heart of Adaptive Design's mission.

"Cardboard is an enormously interesting and versatile material," says Truesdell, who is single and lives on the upper West Side. "It's very strong and we are always fascinated by what we can turn it into."

Adaptive Design offers a number of courses in which, among other disciplines, trainees learn the basics of transforming a discarded packaging container into an item that can greatly benefit a handicapped child.

"We teach people to play and experiment," Truesdell says. "The first night, you use a box cutter, a steak knife and Elmer's glue. We include a lot of tool safety and supervision. We teach power tools when people come back for the two-night class and in the advanced classes we turn people into skilled cardboard engineers."

Truesdell traces the start of her unusual vocation to 1991. She had earned a master's degree in teaching the visually impaired, with a specialization in early childhood, and was working in the Boston area at the Perkins School for the Blind when, she says, "Two things happened: the babies on my caseload had more severe disabilities than I'd been trained to anticipate, and a few months after that my aunt had a spinal cord injury



Alex Truesdell teaches cardboard carpentry at Adaptive Design's midtown HQ.

MAYITA MENDEZ

Adaptive Design spent several years housed in a basement on the upper West Side until recently relocating to a much larger storefront location on W. 36th St. "Now that we're in this bigger space and are centrally located," says Truesdell, "we're encouraging people to come for a variety of disciplines and to think first about themselves, because in a sense we all have to take care of our needs first."

"Typically, we're looking for people who will become sensitized to the Adaptive Design application and will be making something specifically for someone they know.

that paralyzed her fingers and thumbs. The babies and my aunt suddenly needed adaptations that they didn't have."

Like most of us, Truesdell hadn't given much thought to something that was missing until she personally knew someone who needed it.

We even had one person who made a set of steps for his aging cat, so it could jump up on the sofa or the bed."

Walking around Adaptive Design's workshop one is struck not only by the practicality but the beauty of some of the items created there. The uninitiated would never guess that, once painted and coated with polyurethane, a brightly colored chair might emerge from a pile of Amazon.com boxes.

One of Adaptive Design's regular volunteers, Marianne Petit, is an associate arts professor in the interactive telecommunications program at New York University. Her department was already familiar with the concepts utilized by Adaptive Design when Truesdell visited. "Alex has a remarkable vision. She was so inspirational," Petit says. "I brought the students to [Adaptive Design] and then I decided I wanted to keep coming back. She is completely compelling because she lives it and believes it. She brings out the best of people in that regard. Alex makes the individual's situation the most important thing at that moment."

"My background is as an artist," Petit adds. "I make things. And I just loved everything about [Adaptive Design's] approach in terms of working with materials. You can come up with a rapid prototype cheaply and effectively, and I was blown away that in one day I had done something that I knew would completely change a family's life."

For more information about Adaptive Design Association Inc. visit www.adaptivedesign.org or call (212) 904-1200.

Do you know a New Yorker who makes a difference? E-mail Big Town Editor Dawn Eden: bigtown@nydailynews.com.

BOXY LADY

Alex Truesdell recycles cardboard into tools for disabled kids

"Unless you walk it or live it or someone you love is experiencing it, you don't realize," she says. "I think we typically assume that someone is taking care of it. We have children here that we've made adaptations for that spend all day long in a wheelchair because no one thinks maybe they don't have to sit in a wheelchair. They can sit in the classroom chair or on the floor with everyone."

"One boy had very limited function of his legs but he needed to go up to the nurse's table twice a day. Now he's able to transfer himself out of his chair and scoot up the five steps onto the nurse's table, and get back down. It's a point of great pride for him. After he got good at it he said, 'Even my little brother can't do this!' We want to combat any helplessness."

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