



Female Disruptors: Barbara Butler has shaken up how *luxury playhouses and treehouses are designed*

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I had the pleasure of interviewing Barbara Butler, an artist/builder and founder of Barbara Butler Designs, a luxury playhouse and treehouse design/build company. For over 30 years Butler has created awe-inspiring multi-level treehouses, castles, and woodland forts for clients, including a few you may have heard of like Will and Jada Pinkett-Smith, Robert Redford and Walt Disney Productions.

Thank you for joining us! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

I graduated from college with a degree in political science and no idea what I wanted to do. My mom wanted me to be a lawyer, but I kept putting it off. After college, I moved to NYC and worked as a waitress. I did some construction work with my two brothers, James & Robert, who had a remodeling business in Capitol Hill DC. I learned bricklaying & I loved it! I had always excelled in art and in making things with my hands, but I never thought of it as a way to make a living. I toyed with the idea of being a writer and I went back to graduate school for writing. After grad school, I gave up the idea of getting a “real job” and I moved to San Francisco to be an artist. My family was worried!

Once in SF I started painting- not just canvases but furniture that I would buy at the thrift store. Then I started making my own furniture and painting it. I started building decks with a friend to make money — completely self-taught. I read every book I could find on the subject and jumped in. We called the company Outer Space Design, an artistic design/build company for the family backyard. We landed a big job with singer Bobby McFerrin (“Don’t Worry, Be Happy”). His wife Debbie wanted their steep backyard filled with decks and patios, leading down to an unusual play structure at the bottom of the yard for the kids. I was immediately interested in the play structure idea. I went and played on all the play structures in San Francisco and created a unique design that Debbie loved. I made the swing from my own truck tire and the slide from a sheet of stainless steel. I carved the support poles and I stained them bright earthy colors I mixed myself. I was enthralled by the whole process and after I finished, I told everyone: “this is it! this is what I want to do!” That was 30 years ago & I’m still loving it!

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

In 1996 Architectural Digest contacted me and asked to see my portfolio, a huge opportunity. I sent them my best photos of my furniture and play structures. The editor called to say nice work, but the photos were not good enough and there was no budget for a photographer. Before she hung up, I said, “I was just about to get everything professionally photographed — which pieces are you interested in?” Of course, this wasn’t true, but I made a split-second decision to go all in. The editor gave me a list of nine furniture pieces and nine play structures and two weeks to get it all done. I borrowed a ton of money, hired several photographers and the next two weeks were insane trying to photograph everything. We got it all done and sent off (me running from the photo lab to Fed EX just making the last cut-off.) The May 1996 issue comes out and there is just one photo near the back, of one play structure with just about 100 words. I am so disappointed! And then the phone starts ringing. I get over 750 phone calls and I end up getting work for 5 years. It catapulted me into a whole new level. That helped me learn about trusting my instincts.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I made a big mistake in 2000 that taught me a lot! A certain well-known tech magnate called and hired me to design & build a play structure for his family. We had a great first meeting and the plan was for me to come back in 4 weeks with design options. In the meantime, the Washington Post wanted to do a feature on my business. One of the questions was “any exciting new projects?” I said I was doing a play structure for my client, using his name. Of course, that gets printed and the article also makes it sound like I am keeping him on a waiting list. I remember thinking “uh-oh” when I read it. When I show up at my client’s door with my designs and my paper models, I am chewed out royally for having used his name without his permission and basically, I’m fired. I apologize and try to explain why (my struggling little business, a big opportunity) but I see that he’s right — I should not have used his name without permission. That taught me a lot about protecting client’s privacy and resisting the tug from the media to promote everything.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

When I'm on a project I live sleep eat dream that project. It's that obsession with getting it right that makes my company stand out. "Whatever it takes!" is one of our mottos. Here's an example: We were approached to make a Canal Barge play structure for a New York State Welcome Center on the historic Erie Canal. They wanted the Barge to be somewhat historically accurate and to meet all public playground codes. And they wanted a second play structure — one that would look like a big stack of cargo boxes with a roller slide and cargo nets. I was thrilled! The catch was it had to be delivered and installed in just 8 weeks. While they liked my work, they weren't sure my company could handle this big a job with such a short lead-time. I said, "let me send you a box with samples and materials. We can do this!". And as soon as I hung up the phone, I got everyone working on a deluxe sample box with all our books, stain samples, rope, powder-coated hardware, drawings. We made it look like a cargo container and I carved "Mohawk Welcome Center" on it and we mounted a wooden ship's wheel on top. A mad rush to overnight it! We all pulled together and made this beautiful package in 3 hours. And the result? We got the job!



Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

I'm working on my second Magical Bridge Playground, a new kind of public playground for kids and adults of all abilities. We did the first Magical

Bridge Playground in 2015. I remember we were under the gun to finish in time for the Grand Opening, working right up to the last second. I was so frazzled that I told my business partner we are never doing this again. Then we both turned around and looked at all the kids and adults streaming into the park, with huge smiles on their faces as parents and kids in wheelchairs were delighted to be playing alongside their family members. Everyone could play on all of the equipment — no one was prevented from joining in or separated to a different section of the park. We cried unashamedly when we realized what a wonderful place we were a part of creating.

I'm also building an exciting large custom treehouse/play structure for a family in San Francisco Peninsula area. It's in a large oak tree on a steep slope and we're building a huge deck and modern clubhouse up in it, with a swinging cable bridge over to it.

I thrive on the collaboration with the living tree. Not only do I need to be mindful of the health of the tree, but I want to build something that enhances the grace and beauty of the tree. I enjoy the challenges that a new site, a new tree or a new request brings. I still love it and can't believe I get to build these on a full-time basis! I am about to start my 700th project and I am very thankful to my family for supporting me in my work from the beginning, back when it was a crazy idea to want to build play structures for a living!

What advice would you give to other female leaders to help their team to thrive?

Draw upon your family. My sister Suzanne Butler, my husband Jeff Beal and I are the co-owners. My brother, James, works for us as our AutoCAD drafter. Other family members (sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews) have worked for the company as well. Even my mom & dad, when they were alive, participated in many ways to help make my business thrive. Our family reunions are more like board of director meetings — everyone weighs in! Many of our employees are related to each other too — we have had a husband & wife team, brothers, brothers-in-law and next generation working for us. My experience has been so positive that I would tell other female leaders who are starting their own business to not be afraid of involving family in your business and to treat all of your employees as if they

were family. Yes it takes a little more time but the plus side is your team knows that you deeply care about them and the welfare of their families.

What advice would you give to other female leaders about the best way to manage a large team?

Build to people's strengths — if an employee has an unusual skill, I try to add that in. I hired a new painter/colorist and discovered he had had his own sign painting company for many years. Suddenly we started adding all sorts of whimsical signs!

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

My sister Suzanne Butler joined the company in 1999, taking the business to the next level. Suzanne took over running the office, she incorporated the business, she freed me up to concentrate on the design and production of the work. Suzanne had been supporting my business with advice and capitol since I started in 1987, even when she didn't quite believe in it yet. When I told her in 1987 that I wanted to go around the country building custom play structures for kids, Suzanne tallied up the costs and said it wouldn't work: "no one is ever going to pay \$10,000 for a play structure." I said "yes they will!" And since then, whenever a big check comes in, I'd leave it on her desk with that quote...

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

Since 1999 we have been committed to donating playhouses and kids furniture to charitable auctions that raise money to support the health and welfare of children. We do this in lieu of advertising. This year we are again donating a large play structure to be auctioned on June 1st to raise money for Rebuilding Together Peninsula, a nonprofit that organizes volunteer labor to fix up the homes of low-income families.

What are your “5 Leadership Lessons I Learned From My Experience” and why. (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. Don't be afraid to try new things: In the early nineties, a friend wanted me to make her a custom canopy bed. She wanted to trade for it. I knew she worked in computers (which had no effect on my life at this point), so I was skeptical — what could she trade? She said, “I could build you a website.” And I actually remember saying “what's a website?” She responded, “trust me, they're going to be big.” And so I ended up with an amazing website way ahead of the curve.

2. Don't learn the wrong lesson: My dog Tashee was grazed by a car one night when she followed her nose into the street, despite my objections. She howled but she was fine. The next day I thought, “that will teach her to stay out of the street!” but instead she decided to never go out at night. If something bad, or good, happens, it's easy to blame or credit the wrong thing.

3. Failure is a great teacher: In the beginning, I made sure I had a written contract, but I ended up doing change orders verbally. Then one client took advantage of that and refused to pay, citing no paper trail. And while I was furious in the moment, over the years, I have developed fond memories for that client for teaching me about the importance of getting things in writing.

4. The Huddle: We were part of a big public project in Las Vegas in 2007 and we were in a bit over our heads. We were brought in by the owner as a non-union specialty contractor but advised to keep a low profile. Whenever we would hit a snag, the crew and I would huddle up, literally putting our heads together to solve it. We thought this was low-profile but then one day another sub said, “you're not really union, are you? It's really cute how you guys work together.” To this day, when we hit a problem, we huddle up. I expect everyone to weigh in and present a solution. I get to make the final call, but I know the team appreciates being consulted and a part of the process. Everyone has a voice.

5. Forgive them ahead of time! As a woman & a boss in the male-dominated construction world, I can get a lot of attitude when we first show up on a new site. I think there's an urge to see me as an outsider. I decided long ago

to forgive them ahead of time because I'm not trouble, and I do know what I'm talking about, and by the end of the project, I know they are going to love me, love my work and probably even ask me for a job.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

I'd love to establish a non-profit organization that brings quality play structures to the small independent day cares in low & middle-income neighborhoods. Day cares often struggle to survive and don't have the funds to buy good equipment and safe surfacing. I'd love to help!

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

My mom always said "you have to wear many hats in this world" and as a business owner, you certainly do! If I have to do something new that I don't want to do, I hear my mom telling me that!

Some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

Michelle Obama — we share a commitment to the health and welfare of children, and I'd love to collaborate with her on a project for kids.

Thank you for all of these great insights!