

By Mary Allen, Monitor Staff

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We learned a lot about ourselves while putting up a kit house on a Maine island as Hurricane Bob approached

Building a house is the best thing our family's done

When friends ask what activity we've enjoyed most as a family, the answer isn't what they expect. It's not something lighthearted like camping out, bowling or watching videos together. No, those are all fine, but what we say is this: The best thing we've done as a family is to build a house from a kit—a real, honest-to-God cottage, not a playhouse—on a windswept island on the Maine coast during the summer that Hurricane Bob visited New England.

And oh, by the way, our sons were just 9 and 13, we had only 32 days to finish the project and no one in the family is a carpenter.

Were we nuts? Well, maybe. But the cottage is still the most meaningful, challenging, fun thing we have ever tackled as a family. And the whole adventure taught us quite a few lessons.

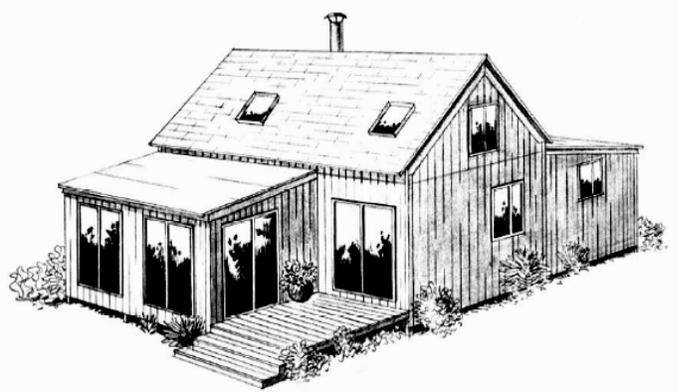
A bit of background is needed. In the mid-1980s, we were one of six families that joined together to buy a 40-acre island off Small Point, Maine. We had spent summer vacations camping along the Maine coast, and we couldn't believe our luck falling into this deal. Each of the families got a deed for a 1-acre building lot, and the rest of the land is held in common. There's no fresh water on the island, no dock and no electricity. It's not a place for the faint-hearted.

After camping on the island for a few seasons, we were bone-weary of battling the infamous Small Point mosquitoes, chasing tents that blew away in the constant wind and hunkering down during the wild thunderstorms that brewed up suddenly over Casco Bay. We needed a real shelter if we were going to enjoy this place. We needed a roof over our heads.

My husband, Gordon, is one of those people who reads all the ads in magazines. Somewhere he read about the Shelter-Kit firm in Tilton, N.H., and called them. The kids were excited about the idea. The next thing I knew we were sitting in Andy Prokosch's office, and Gordon

was chatting enthusiastically about where to place the doors and windows.

I was a brooding Doubting Thomas during that visit. "This is insane," I thought to myself. "We can't build this thing."



The litany went on: The kids are too young; Gordon has a bit of experience with woodworking, but he's never built a house; I've done a little wallpapering and painting, but nothing like this. This is folly; it isn't going to work.

Lesson No. 1: The majority rules in a family of four, and the majority has the momentum. If three people are wildly enthusiastic about something, the fourth person had better get with the program.

On August 2, 1991, we pulled up to the Shelter-Kit office in a rented Ryder truck and went out for a bite to eat while Prokosch and a helper loaded a 16-foot Lofthouse on board. According to the plans, our island home would have three large sliding glass doors to capture the ocean view, four additional windows on the main floor and an open staircase to a second-floor sleeping area. Prokosch ceremoniously handed us the black binder that contained the instruction manual. Read every word, he said, it's all there. Just follow the instructions step-by-step and you'll be fine.

Shelter-Kit Incorporated

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Less than 12 hours later—at 4:30 a.m. to be exact—we met our first major hurdle. We had spent the night in Ashland and planned to hit the road by 4 a.m. with Gordon driving the truck and me following with the boys in a van loaded with gear and food for the month. The wharf-side spot where we planned to unload the house kit could be reached only by a narrow, winding dirt road that went straight through a campground. We were trying to time our arrival before most of the campers woke up.

At 4:03 the transmission on the truck froze. Frantic phone calls followed; the truck rental people were wonderful, even if they couldn't find the town on the map at first. By 6 a.m. a huge wrecker arrived and we were towed to Manchester, where a new transmission was installed. This was not a good omen for any project, but it was too late to back out of it now.

A day late, we arrived at the wharf and carefully unloaded the house kit, trying to keep some order to the pieces. Just as the last board hit the ground, it started to rain.

No big deal, we figured. What's a little rain? But it wasn't a shower; it was the start of a month that dropped 14 inches of rain on the Maine coast, including a hurricane.

Lesson No. 2: A little adversity is good in any family project. If you can overcome the challenge, you have something to laugh about at family gatherings.

Lesson No. 2a: The more time that elapses between the event and the family gathering, the funnier it all seems.

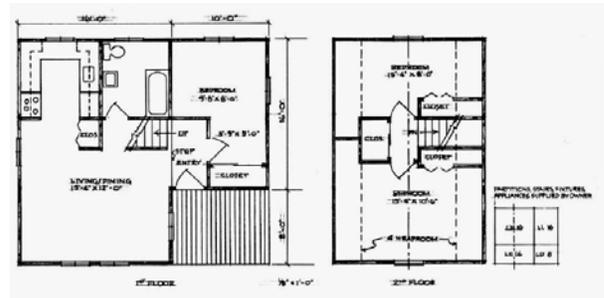
We lugged each truss, building stud, piece of plywood, window and door down a narrow ramp to one of the odd flotilla of boats we had in the water that summer—a 14-foot aluminum outboard, a borrowed flat-bottomed barge, an inflatable raft-type boat and an old wooden cabin cruiser. Then we lugged each piece up over seaweed and rocks and then up a tiny footpath to the building site.

The work forced us to assume roles that were different from our everyday life. I became the keeper of the binder: the one who read every word of the manual and the only one who could figure out how to put the doors together. Gordon became the one who wanted to deviate from the rules and forge his own methods, an outlook we needed when the unexpected occurred.

Jonathan, the 13-year-old, stunned us with his skill with a hammer and his calm reasoning when we hit a problem. Jesse, then 9, was surprisingly good at carrying the lumber up the hill and measuring things. He would patiently hold the end of the tape or the string as we directed him "a little to the left, honey, a little more. Stop right there!" I thought about sending a thank-you

card to the preschool teacher who taught him left from right.

Slowly—magically, it seemed—the pieces went together. The house was growing from a pile of lumber before our eyes.



Modular post-and-beam design makes it easy to customize the Lighthouse's design; the detailed construction manual ensures that even beginners can put it together successfully.

We felt confident. We felt powerful. We felt great.

Lesson No. 3: Working together brings out talents that you might never see in normal family life.

Lesson No. 3a: Kids can do more than you think, and they are stronger than they look.

Lesson No. 3b: Never get cocky.

The news that Hurricane Bob was heading up the coast came as a surprise. We were taking a day's break from the construction and were sunbathing on the campground beach when we heard the forecast. We figured the storm would come onshore at some point south of us: Delaware, maybe, or Long Island. It wouldn't reach Maine, we said. We were wrong. And the timing couldn't have been worse.

The day before our break we had taken advantage of calm seas to haul all the windows and glass doors to the island. All the pieces were piled on the shore just above the high-tide mark. If the hurricane hit, the glass would be smashed and the frames washed out to sea.

We had been using the campground on the mainland as our base, working on the island during the day and returning to our campground tents each night. There was talk of evacuating the campground if the storm hit, but our only thoughts were the doors and windows out on the island.

The seas were already kicking up from another weather system when we started packing up food and clothing. The plan was to have Gordon try to get out to the island, move the windows and doors to higher ground, and then try to make it back that day. If he couldn't make it back, he would have to seek shelter in a friend's house on the island and ride the storm out.

Things worked out. Gordon made it safely back after lashing the doors and windows to the house frame; meanwhile all our camping gear except a tent and four sleeping bags had been loaded in the van.

No one whined; the boys worked quickly and without much parental direction. When the evacuation order came the next morning, we left the campground quickly.

Lesson No. 4: Fear can motivate a family like nothing else. It's a tool that Mother Nature uses, but in normal family life, avoid it if at all possible.

After two days in a motel, we headed back to the campground. The storm had dumped several inches of rain, trees were down everywhere and the electricity was knocked out. We couldn't see the island building site from the mainland and we had no idea how bad the storm had been out there. The seas were too rough for our boats.

And so we waited. And waited.

After five days, we took a white-knuckle boat ride out to the island with all our gear on board. If we were going to finish this project, we would have to work double-time now and live in the unfinished structure. We couldn't risk losing any more time to rough seas.

Our fingers were crossed as we pulled into the cove. Our luck held. The house frame was swollen with moisture but undamaged. Not a single window frame or door panel was broken.

Now the pace really picked up. Jonathan moved into a new role when the rafters went up and the roof went on. My fear of high places kicked in, and my son took my place doing the second-story work. Jesse and I put the windows and doors together on the main floor. As each blue tarp that had covered an opening was replaced with a door, we had a little celebration. It was "juice boxes for all" and then back to work.

Jesse proved to be the most diligent of the painting crew—another surprise. I was the one who figured out how to install the staircase when Gordon and Jonathan threw up their hands in frustration.

Gordon was the one who packed the 10-pound sledgehammer that hadn't been on the tool list. "The Persuader," as we nicknamed it, was the tool of choice when you needed to get some of the rain-soaked pieces into place.

The calendar flipped to September. With just two days to go before school opened, we were on a tight schedule. The last door went into place just before dusk on Sept. 2,

and we spent an hour that night teasing at the mosquitoes that swarmed on the *outside* of the screen.

At 11:07 a.m. on Sept. 3, the final piece of siding was nailed into place. We just stood there and stared at each other and the finished cottage. We didn't say a word, and then the boys started yelling. We grabbed a camera and took lots of pictures.

That afternoon, we packed up and got ready to leave. School opened the next day.

Lesson No. 5: The old saying that the sweetest victories in life are the hardest won is an absolute.

Lesson No. 5a: Deadlines aren't absolute, but they are part of real life.

It's been nine summers since we built the cottage. We don't sit around as a family and talk about how great it was to build it or what lessons we learned. That wasn't the point. We needed a shelter on an island and we built it. It's as simple as that.

But that summer's work did change us. The little gray cottage on the island has become a gathering place for a family that is growing up starting to scatter, as all families do. The cottage has a hold on its builders like no other place on this planet. This is where we go to be together—just the four of us—the measurer, the door-maker, the hammer-kid and the rule-breaker.

And so, for a week or so each summer, the schedules get cleared. Without prodding, the 22-year-old college graduate and the 18-year-old college freshman tell friends they won't be around for a week. The door-maker and the rule-breaker tell co-workers they will be out of the phone's reach. We leave it all behind and head to a place where we know every nail, every board and every pane of glass.

We buy a new deck of playing cards, some ice for the cooler and more kerosene for the lamps. We read books, play cribbage, swim in the cove's frigid waters and walk at least once completely around the island.

But, mainly, we catch up on everything we let slip during the rest of the year. It won't always be like this. Families morph (already there have been one or two girlfriends brought out for short visits), and our schedules are getting tighter.

But the cottage beckons us back, and each summer we heed the call. We created a shelter in more than one sense of the word. ◻

Mary Allen is the Monitor's community editor and editor of Neighbors. She and Gordon live in Antrim. Jonathan graduated in May from Colby College in Maine and lives in Boston. Jesse is a freshman at Bard College in New York.