



# A Tree Grows In Slabtown

## Creative reuse means new life for TC trees

By Christal Frost

Nestled on the corner of Carver Street and Woodmere Avenue is a seemingly quiet warehouse. Yet, TC Millworks at lunchtime on a Friday is buzzing with activity.

“There’s nothing like Friday lunches at the mill,” said Tim Pulliam, president of Keen Technical Solutions and one of TC Millworks’ new owners.

The warehouse is bustling, and Keen’s Vice President Bob Underhill is in his element – surrounded by generations of Underhill kids, co-workers, carpenters and their families, customers, and contractors. Laughter, stories, and a smorgasbord of grilled goodies are shared.

According to Underhill, it’s a deliberately new tradition for the mill. “We want to bring our community together,” he said. “Not just our work cultures, but our families, friends, and community partners.”

For nearly 40 years, TC Millworks has been a carpentry mainstay for the Grand Traverse region. Such offerings remain since the mill was purchased by Keen Technical Solutions a year ago, and continuing that legacy was a top priority for new owners Steve Morse, Underhill, and Pulliam.

“Mark Glenn had over 30 years of growing this business organically here in town. (He) serviced all the restoration and renovation projects in the historic districts, doing the right things for these old homes,” Underhill said. “Steve, Tim and I agreed that we would preserve what this company had been doing.”



While preserving the culture and history of TC Millworks was important to the team, creativity and innovation are tenets of Keen Technical Solutions. Those are the principles leading TC Millworks to new endeavors, like the collaborative Urban Wood Rescue project aimed at finding new and creative reuse for urban trees that need to be felled.

“I think that these trees have enough value to them,” he said. “In some regards, they were kind of like members of our community for 200 years. So, let’s turn them into something beautiful.”

Disease, damage, and public safety top the list of reasons urban trees face removal. While makers across the world have found new uses for felled urban trees for decades, TC Millworks’ collaborative partnership with SEEDS and the City of Traverse City, which has mapped its urban forest – is one of only six organized urban wood rescue programs in Michigan. Each program is a member of Michigan State Chapter of the Urbanwood Network, a nationwide collaborative of wood industry professionals and stakeholders developed in 2017.

Maple slabs from a felled tree in Slabtown.

For Pulliam and Underhill, creating an urban wood reuse collaborative came about naturally.

“We started talking to SEEDS about how we can grow what we already have and integrate that with our community. The work they do and the work we do just felt like a natural fit,” said Pulliam.

Underhill says that sourcing the wood locally is an environmentally sound practice that saves money.

“We want to honor these trees, but at the end of the day, most decisions are made because of the black ink at the end of the spreadsheet,” he said.

The process of urban wood rescue includes felling, slabbing and drying the wood before bringing the tree new life in creative reuse. According to Pulliam, TC Millworks had most of the infrastructure in place to make urban wood rescue and reuse happen.

“We have the shop, we have the craft, and we have the partnerships,” he said.



However, creating drying kilns for 10-foot slabs can be both a challenge and an expense. To solve this issue, Pulliam conceptualized creating a low-energy-use drying kiln by repurposing a large shipping container and vacuum system.



Underhill says the inaugural urban wood project began with a single maple tree in Slabtown.

“Working with SEEDS and the City, we received a beautiful maple tree that had to come down,” he said. “It just so happens that we were finishing up a project for NoBo Mrkt and the general manager asked about creating a piece of furniture with a story.”

That's when Underhill mentioned the maple.

"I said, 'I can actually put the footprint of where this tree actually came from in Slabtown and have the whole history – how old it was, the diameter and what we did with it,'" he said.

Soon, the Slabtown tree will have new life as a community table.

While the partnership with the City of Traverse City is a crucial component, reuse projects don't have to come solely from trees removed on city property. Pulliam says private landowners in the area who have trees that need to come down can now explore new life options that fit their needs.



**MILLWORKS**

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