



THE HOUSE THAT DAN BUILT

MADISONIAN DAN BAKER WENT TO WASHINGTON ISLAND IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY. HE FOUND WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR—AND THEN SOME

BY BOB JACOBSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY LUTERMAN

IN MARCH 1995, Dan Baker, a social worker for Dane County Family Court in Madison, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The year before, he and his wife, Carroll, a nurse, had bought a small piece of land on Washington Island, about six miles off the tip of the Door County peninsula. Dan and Carroll had been visiting Washington Island since 1982, when they snuck off together for the tryst that Dan says “sealed the deal” between them.

When I first met Dan in the fall of 2000, it was as a fellow soccer dad; our sons were teammates on the Tigers. During their first season, Dan would hobble from his car to the field with the aid of a cane. Until we’d had a few conversations, I took him for somebody recovering from a knee injury. Over the next couple seasons, he started showing up on a motorized scooter. When it became harder for him to negotiate stairs, the Bakers left their longtime home on Madison’s near east side and moved into a less vertical dwelling on the other side of town.

As his mobility decreased, Dan became consumed with the notion of building a house on the Washington Island property, a permanent retreat where he and his family—which also includes daughter Jane, now a student at UW-Eau Claire, and son Sam, a sixth-grader—could insulate themselves from life’s vicissitudes, and where he could better cope with his physical decline.

Completing the house while he still could physically became the organizing principle of Dan’s life. But the story of Dan’s transformation from Madisonian to Washington Islander is about more than the process of erecting a quirkily beautiful house. It is equally about relearning how to participate in community.

Madison is a city of well over 200,000 people, and while it’s easy to be part of many different groups in a city of that size, it’s simply impossible to establish the kinds of bonds you find in a town with a population of almost 700. When Dan was younger, he liked to hitchhike around the country, and was proud of his ability to adapt to whatever environment he happened to find himself in. But now he’d come to feel that he needed a more predictable, controllable, and supportive environment. And so he coupled the invention of his house with the reinvention of Dan Baker.

The distance between Washington Island and the Door County peninsula can be covered in 30 minutes by ferry. The cultural distance, by contrast, is vast. Stepping off the *Eyrbakkki* (one of the six vessels in the Washington Island Ferry's fleet) onto the island is more like stepping into Mayberry than into Sturgeon Bay. Where much of Door County has become an upscale playground for summer people, Washington Island remains, as Dan says, a "real place." Sure, it's full of vacationers during Wisconsin's fleeting warm season. But unlike the mainland, the island has not reconfigured itself to meet the consumer demands of these outsiders. Instead, the summer people end up conforming to the island's down-home ambience.

When Dan was diagnosed with MS, Carroll fulfilled one of his fantasies by buying him an Airstream trailer. Dan towed it up to the island, where it became the headquarters from which he would launch his quixotic home-building project. The Airstream made it possible for Dan to spend more time on the island. But he didn't feel like a permanent resident, and the locals didn't really accept him as one. Airstream trailers, Dan will tell you, are really cool, but they are by their very nature a temporary form of shelter. To be a true islander, you need a true house.

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So Dan prepared to start building one. The biggest obstacle he faced was the fact that he had absolutely no idea how to build a house. He was totally lacking in handyman skills. What he did know how to do was scavenge stuff. He began collecting free and cheap materials wherever he could find them—junk sales, Delaney's Surplus Sales in Sauk City, Habitat for Humanity of Dane County's ReStore in Madison. For more than a year he hauled the items to his Madison home, stuck them in the garage, and threw a tarp over the whole mess. He had no clue how to turn this motley heap of windows and glass bricks into a habitable dwelling. But it was a start.

The other obstacle was that Dan had very little money; he was, after all, a retired social worker. He started researching methods and designs for building a house on the cheap.

"I'd always been a sucker for these articles in publications like *Mother Earth News* that told you how to build your own 5,000-square-foot house out of old tractor tires for \$200," he explains. He investigated everything from yurts to tepees to modular homes, and found that they were all prohibitively expensive.

Driving down Fordem Avenue in Madison one day, Dan spotted a children's play structure that consisted of two modular sections connected by an enclosed bridge. He knew instantly that this was what he wanted his new house to look like, only bigger. He was able to trace the design and construction to a band of "fallen Amish guys," as he describes them, in Richland Center. These talented carpenters specialize in gazebos, small barns, and other such structures. Armed with design ideas scrawled on napkins and scraps of paper, Dan paid a visit to Amos, the head of the crew. After examining Dan's "plans," Amos said yes, they could build Dan's dream house, and do it pretty cheaply.

The plan was to assemble the house's component pieces in Amos' barn, cart them nearly 300 miles plus a ferry ride to Washington Island, and reassemble them there. Dan didn't concern himself with the fact that he knew nothing about septic systems, foundation slabs, or any of the zillion

other details a real home builder deals with every day. He readily admits that it was, by any reasonable standard, a half-baked plan.

"This could have gone really, really badly in so many ways," he admits. But it didn't.

By November 2000, the first section of the house, a 12-by-24-foot structure with a 4-foot porch, was ready for delivery. Dan and his Richland Center crew, with half a house in tow, arrived on the island on a bone-chilling day with several inches of fresh snow on the ground. Out of nowhere, about a dozen islanders showed up to help plunk the houselet into place. What would Dan have done had this instant team of reinforcements not materialized? He has no idea.



VIEW OF THE WASHINGTON ISLAND HARBOR FROM THE FERRY

It was at this point that Dan began to realize that he had stumbled upon something special: a community that simply would not let its members fall.

The second chunk of house, measuring 14 by 32 feet, made it up to the island the following spring. Then Amos and company came up for a week to build the connector between the two structures, add on the porches, and generally finish the exterior. Dan was still left with the task of creating the interior—bathrooms, kitchen, flooring, a loft, etc.—and he was just as ignorant about the inside of a house as he had been about the outside.

“I thought some of these jobs were just something you could do in an afternoon,” Dan recalls. “It was a degree of naiveté that has gotten me through all kinds of things.” He saw finishing the house as a race against time; it had to be done while he was still physically able to contribute. He may have been lacking in construction know-how, but the house was his obsession; he could not leave key decisions about the final product to anybody else. He hired a local handyman, Mike Randolph, and together they laid tile, built a loft, put fixtures in place. Others chipped in as needed. A friend dropped by to install a pump in the well, a device Dan had no idea you needed—he thought well water just kind of pumped itself.

By the fall of 2001, the house was habitable, in a spartan sort of way. The essentials, like power and water, were in place, but there were no frills. Around the same time, Dan’s daughter Jane, then a high school sophomore, was feeling unhappy at Madison East High School. The solution was to enroll her in the tiny Washington Island school system (student body 109, including 38 high schoolers), Wisconsin’s smallest public school district, for her junior and senior years. Dan lived on the island with Jane every other week; during the weeks he wasn’t there, she stayed with a teacher who was a family friend. By the time Jane graduated in 2003, she had morphed into a full-blown island kid, having left behind the styles and sensibilities generally displayed by Madison youth.

The completion of the house and of Jane’s schooling “sealed the deal” between Dan and his new community. Dan now spends as much time as possible on the island, and considers himself more islander than Madisonian. While walking is no longer something Dan takes for granted—he needs a cane almost all the time, and when in Madison relies on his motorized scooter—he still gets around the island pretty well. He has won the race against time to build his retreat. He has constructed for himself both a physical and emotional space on the island from which he feels

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capable of staring down whatever the winds of fate, or of icy northern Lake Michigan, blow his way.

As for the house that Dan built: In a place where many new homes are half-million-dollar palaces, Dan's little sanctuary of scrap was the consensus favorite on the island's 2003 annual tour of notable homes. The grounds boast a number of Dan's original sculptures, made, appropriately, of junk and scrap. Like the house itself, they are oddly appealing.

Washington Island is isolated, especially in winter. This isolation has a bonding effect among residents (notwithstanding unavoidable mental images of an ax-wielding Jack Nicholson), which is not to say that all islanders agree about everything. Any full-time resident will tell you there's a great divide between old-time natives and more recent transplants like Dan. The old-timers tend to congregate at KK Fiske, a popular brew and fish-boil kind of joint, or Nelsen's Hall, a tavern that's been operating on the island since 1899. (Nelsen's has a colorful history of its own: Its original proprietor, Tom Nelsen, survived Prohibition by getting a pharmacist's license, which allowed him to serve 90-proof Angostura bitters as a tonic for stomach ailments. Needless to say, a lot of islanders complained of bellyaches in those days.)

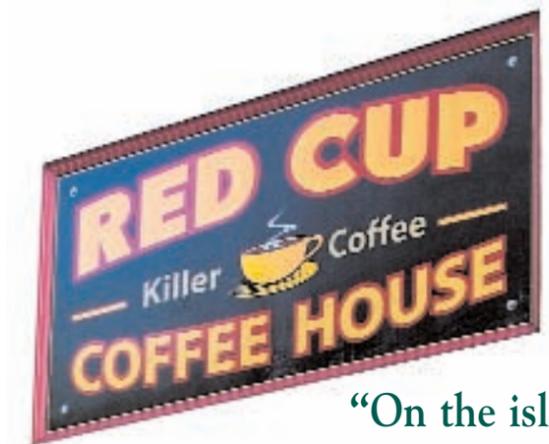
The social nerve center of Washington Island among Dan's crowd is the island's only coffeehouse, the Red Cup, which opened around the time Dan was in his Airstream phase, working to establish his own island identity. Walking into the Red Cup with Dan these days, as I did on a beautiful late-April morning, is a little like walking into Cheers with Norm. The room lights up, not at all subtly, as if somebody has just changed a blown fuse. People stop conversations in mid-sentence to greet him. Now, Dan's a likable guy, and when he showed up at a Tigers soccer game in Madison, people were glad to see him. But not like this.

Dan's popularity extends well beyond the Red Cup crowd. He hangs out with the island's retirees, shopkeepers, artists, and every other segment of this minisociety. According to Dan, he's made a conscious decision to weave himself into the fabric of the community in a way that's nearly impossible to pull off in a place the size of Madison. He jokes about having to be nice to people so they'll be willing to deliver his meals-on-wheels should he become incapacitated—a very real possibility. He is painfully conscious of what folks in the medical community call “secondary gain,” the idea that having a disability or chronic illness brings with it certain rewards in the form of sym-

thetic attention or favorable treatment. He compensates by giving back to the community as much as, or more than, he receives. He's an exceptionally good listener—maybe it's a social worker thing—and has made his ears available on demand to his many friends on the island.

“I find myself writing notes to people if the occasion warrants, which I've never done in a more anonymous culture,” Dan explains. “I'm interpersonally lazy in Madison. On the island, I participate in things—a book discussion group, community theater, storytelling events. I go out of my way to try to contribute. I think this is how the world ought to be.”

He concedes that there is just as much bickering, political infighting, gossip, and other social nasties on the island as anywhere else. But it doesn't change things for him. “There's probably a nifty psychological explanation you could construct for why I'm as enamored with the place as I am,” he says. “But if I never got back on that ferry again, I'd be fine.”



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Most people would say the purpose of building a wall is to create a barrier between people. A house is made out of walls. And yet in the act of building a house, and inserting that house into a collection of other houses, sometimes something magical takes place. Instead of creating barriers, these collections of walls break them down. We call this magic “community.” The house that Dan built seems to emanate that kind of magic. ■

Bob Jacobson is a freelance writer based in Madison. He thinks small towns are nice places to visit, but he wouldn't want to live there.