Excerpts from

Tiny House Decisions
Everything I wish I knew when I built my tiny house

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Part 1: Big Decisions
Should you build it yourself or with help?

To build, or not to build? That is the question. The answer depends on you. Yes, you.

The mantra of the tiny house movement is that you can build your own house, and it doesn’t have to be expensive, and it doesn’t have to be huge! Many companies run workshops all around the country that promise to show you how. There are even online courses where you can build a tiny house along with someone from start to finish.

When I set out to build my house, I had absolutely no idea how much work it was going to take. Learning how to build had been on my bucket list for as long as I could remember, so it seemed like a good opportunity. Whenever I presented my idea of building a tiny house to people, I would add: “Plus, I’ve always wanted to learn how to build, so even if I don’t live there forever, it will be an awesome learning experience!” I had also seen so many examples of inspiring people like Evan and Gabby, Ella Jenkins, Chris and Malissa, and countless others do it themselves.

But deep down, I was scared that I wouldn’t be able to do it all. I’ve always wanted to be the kind of person who could be completely self-taught and figure everything out on his own. Building my tiny house helped me realize that I am not that person. I am a fast learner, and I can figure out a lot on my own, but I do need a teacher.
A friend who used to work construction offered to help and told me we could probably finish the house up in three or four months. Hah! I think three months into it I had a trailer with a subfloor and some walls framed in a pile behind my parents’ barn.

I started in June of 2012, working on my house two to three days per week for the summer. Each week, my friend would tell me that he was coming to help, but he kept not showing up. I offered to pay him, but he refused. I think he saw the writing on the wall: that this project was going to be a lot of work, and he just couldn’t commit to it.

I soldiered on as best I could. People who know me know that I talk about a lot of projects, start many of them, and finish few of them. When I was four months into the tiny house with not a whole lot of progress, I realized that I risked reaching burnout on the project before I ever finished it. And since I had already sunk in $9,000 and only had a brand-new trailer and a pile of lumber to show for it, I knew I needed to change course. Luckily for me, I had a savings account, and I decided it was time to hire some help.
Here’s what I posted on Craigslist:

*Carpentry Help for Tiny House*

I'm currently building a tiny house on wheels:

I'm looking for 1–2 days per week of carpentry help. The ideal person would be someone who would be willing to work with me. I'm really enjoying the project and want to learn as much as I can. I'm not looking for someone to turn the project over to and sit back.

Please email me and introduce yourself, or call and leave a message.

Thanks,

Ethan

I would not be lying if I told you I received over 10 calls and emails within 24 hours. It really made me stop and consider how lucky I was to be gainfully self-employed.

I spoke to a few people before I received this message from Jason:

Hello,

I'm a Carpenter who lives here in Morrisville. This sounds like a very interesting project. Exactly the kind of thing that I enjoy building. I worked in a shipyard doing wooden boat repair and I’d imagine many of the engineering problems are found in your situation. I actually prefer working for people that are involved in
their projects and are at least on site to help make decisions so that final product represents them and not just me. If you want to work all the better. I’m a great problem solver and excel at out-of-the-box solutions and off-label usage of building materials.

Would love to come see your rolling house!

What set Jason’s reply apart is that it showed he had actually taken time to read what I had written. One phone conversation later, Jason was going to come the following week to help me put down the subfloor. The rest, as they say, is history.

When you look into it, everyone who builds a tiny house “themselves” has help. It’s either a parent or family member with construction experience, a handy spouse, or a group of dedicated friends. I had none of the above, so I went with a hired hand.

Now, here’s the decision:

**Pros of Building It Yourself**

**You’ll save money.**
It’s true that building yourself can save a lot of money. After all, you don’t have to pay yourself. Even considering that you’ll likely make some beginner mistakes and need to redo some work, you’ll never be able to beat the cost savings of free labor provided by you.

**You’ll learn everything (because you have to do it all).**
There’s nothing like getting thrown into the water to learn how to swim. You can learn everything you need to do in and on your tiny house from
library books, the wealth of how-to videos on YouTube, and other resources.

**You’ll get serious DIY cred.**
Let’s face it: Building your own house is an amazing accomplishment. I can’t tell you how proud I feel that I was personally involved in putting my tiny house together, board by board. And it’s pretty impressive to other people, too.

**Cons of Building It Yourself**

*Solo construction is very difficult.*
Whether or not you are an amateur builder, solo building has its own set of challenges. There are a lot of times when you just physically won’t be strong enough to hold something in place with one hand while you attach it with the other. At a minimum, having a helper to provide physical support will be really helpful.

*You’ll probably make more mistakes.*
If you’re an amateur, you’ll essentially need to learn everything as you go along. And learning things takes time. You won’t have someone to show you the “right” way to do things. At best, you’ll spend more time on each task than it really should take. At worst, you’ll make mistakes that need to be ripped out and redone.

*You’ll invest a lot of time.*
In my interview with Chris and Malissa, which I’ll share in Part 2, I learned that a tiny house takes on average 800 people-hours of work to complete. In other words, that’s one person working alone for 800 hours or two people working simultaneously for 400 hours. You can do the
math, but no matter how you divide the time, you’re going to need to put in those hours. If you make more per hour than a builder would charge, well, you may be better off hiring someone to do the work for you while you do whatever work you do.

**Pros of Hiring Help**

*You’ll get it done faster.*

There is no question that if you hire help, you’ll get your house done faster. My house still took me over a year with hired help, because our arrangement was that Jason would work a day and show me how to do things, and then he’d leave me for a few days until I was done or needed more help. He wasn’t really ever a full-time employee except during a few times when we were pushing to hit a deadline.

*You can avoid burnout.*

There were several times throughout my build that I felt ready to give the whole thing up. Having someone to whom I was accountable and who was working for me really helped pick me back up when things felt slow. And of course, if there was a task that I simply didn’t want to do myself, I could just hire Jason to do it.

*You’ll do less rework.*

Having a professional around reduces the number of mistakes made and ensures that you’re doing things according to standards. People have been building houses in a similar manner for at least the last 75 years, so a lot of the “tricks of the trade” are well known by professionals.
Cons of Hiring Help

The only con I can see to hiring help is that you’ll definitely spend more money on your project. According to my records, between August 2012 and October 2013 I paid Jason $13,780.67. That includes the time he spent helping me get the house set up and hooked into utilities at its current site. He frequently stopped at the lumber yard and added the cost onto his invoices, but a solid $12,000 of that covered building time.

Before You Decide

Now, I don’t want you to think that this is a black-and-white decision, because it’s not. I still proudly tell people that I built my own house, and I believe it to be true. Every single hour that Jason worked, I worked with him, and sometimes many more. I had a hand on every single piece of that house, so I do not in any way think that hiring help cheapened the experience or took anything away from me. On the contrary, there was actually someone around who instinctively knew the right way to do things and could teach me as we went.

So when you’re building your tiny house, factor this in. Do you REALLY think you can do it yourself? If so, how are you going to learn the skills that you don’t know? If not, no big deal. Just budget for it and make sure you can afford to hire help if you need it.

My Decision

You’ve probably figured out by now that I have no regrets about hiring help. Jason worked for $25 per hour and invoiced me every single week.
Is that $13,780.67 a lot of money? Yes. Would I do it any differently if I could go back in time? Hell no.

Whenever anyone questions me on this, I tell them with one hundred percent confidence that if I hadn’t hired Jason to work with me, my tiny house would not be done today. And I’m writing this in February of 2014. We’re coming up on two years from the start date.