

Kyler Buzalsky on the job during his internship with the Native American Youth and Family Center.

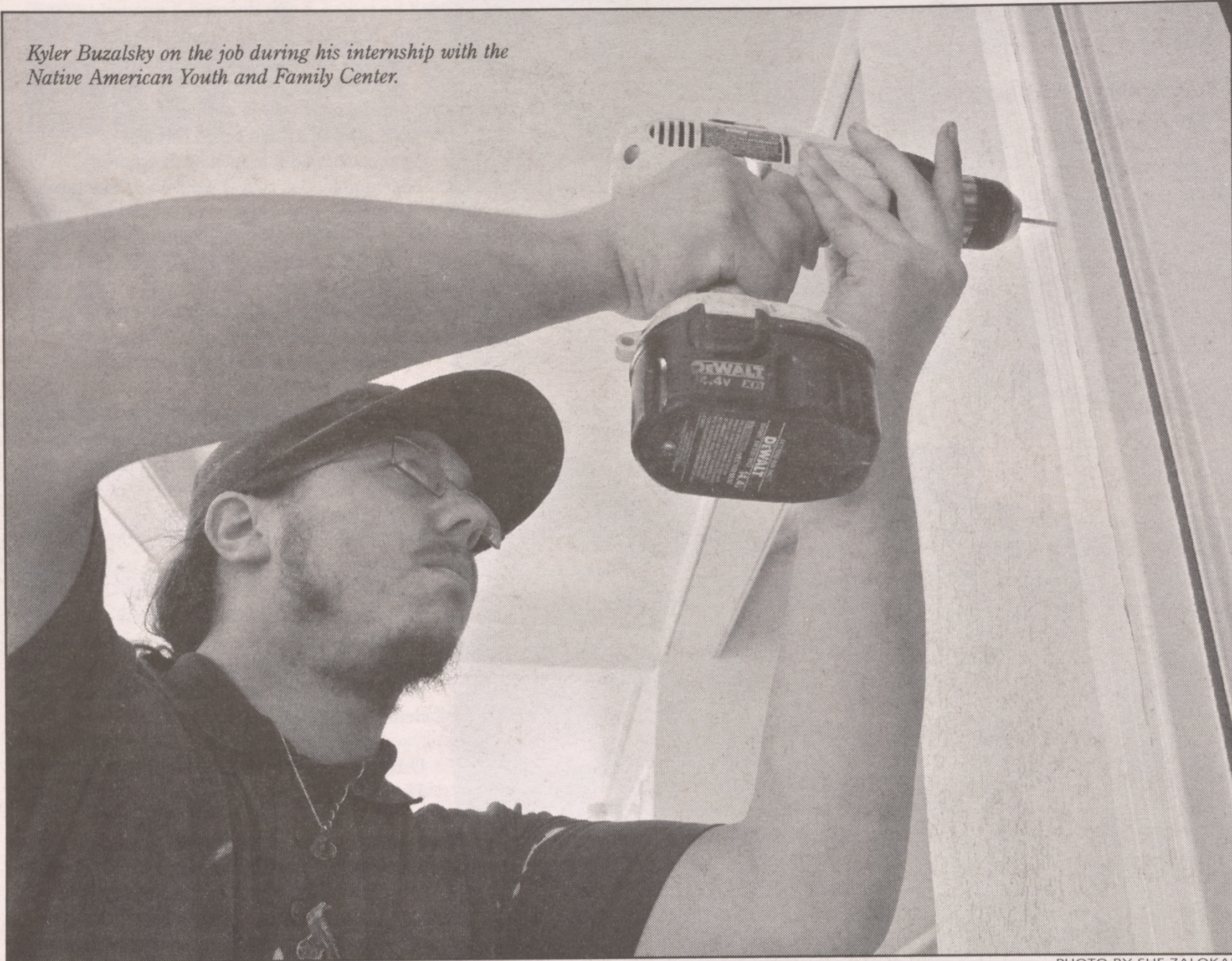


PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

'I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was'

How one man is building a better life from the ground up

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

It was Kyler Buzalsky's nature of acceptance that attracted me to his story. I teach dialectical behavior therapy, among other subjects, and if ever there was a poster child for cool, calm detachment from highly stressful, possible negative behavior triggering circumstances, Kyler is that person.

In the face of impending and eventual homelessness, Kyler was working seemingly nonstop I met him. He had a job as a summer intern and was also trying to secure housing while living in a homeless shelter, and preparing to enter the fall term at Portland Community College. I was struck by this sense that his homelessness, though inconvenient, was not about to stop him from living his life.

This summer, he registered as a Sunrise EAST youth at the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA). In that time, with the help of his skills coach, he has achieved his forklift operator certification and he worked all summer as an intern on the NAYA construction team.

Being homeless adds a whole other layer to the challenges he faces, but he says he is determined to make his way through this. With the help of his NAYA youth advocate, he has completed two of three applications for transitional youth housing opportunities in Portland. He is also moving up the list for temporary housing. He hopes that one day he will have his own place to call home.

He dreams of going to Alaska. He's never been, but he's sure he'd find a friendly face there. He is part Aleut. His tribe is from the Aleutian Islands in Southeast Alaska, and he's sure he has extended family still there, although he's never met them or heard their names. His mother was adopted by non-Native Americans, and his family moved

from Seattle to Portland when he was in kindergarten.

At the time he enrolled in the summer intern program on the NAYA construction crew, he had no carpentry or construction skills. When I first sat down with him, he had spent the past few days roofing and siding a house.

Sue Zalokar: *What did you think going in to this internship?*

Kyler Buzalsky: I just hoped that they would take it easy on me and walk me through it — and they have been. If I ask a question, they'll show me what they're looking for and let me work on it. I was doing some staining on some wood and I was shown how to do the work. I didn't do the best job on the first few boards that I did, but I learned. Later, my boss gave me a compliment saying that I had done good work and that I had picked up a new talent very fast.

S.Z.: *How did that make you feel?*

K.B.: Great! I'll admit I don't really have a lot of self confidence, but this job has really been helping me with that. It has shown me that I can do, really, anything.

S.Z.: *What was a favorite experience from your internship this summer?*

K.B.: My favorite job was this sidewalk job that we did. One of my supervisor's neighbors contracted us to repair the sidewalk because it looked ugly and it was a hazard. It was my first time ever using a jackhammer and it was a lot of fun. The next day we started laying out a layer of quarter inch rock — a quarter inch or less is very good for concrete work. We placed boards

up to line the sidewalk.

One of the problems that we had to deal with was the whole reason it needed to be repaired; there was a big root that was growing underneath (the sidewalk). The neighbor guys said to just pull the root right out of there. It was a big leaf maple. Apparently it would have been fine without that one huge root because it had maybe a dozen others just like it. But our boss wanted us to get the experience to overcome that sort of a challenge. Maybe some other job, some other tree couldn't spare that root. I learned how to make bump in the concrete that isn't a hazard. It flows very smoothly.

If you don't mind lifting 50-pound bags of concrete over and over again, it's great work.

S.Z.: *What has your internship taught you?*

K.B.: My NAYA internship taught me that I am a lot stronger than I thought I was and that I can accomplish goals that I never thought I could.

S.Z.: *Tell me about your situation right now.*

K.B.: Right now I am sleeping in an emergency shelter, Porch Light. I'm on the waiting list for Street Light, which is temporary housing. Basically, it has all the same rules, just a little more responsibility. I'll have to do a chore every night, but I've been carrying heavy pieces of shingles and bags of concrete. I can do dishes or mop a bit.

At Street Light I will be able to keep my stuff at the shelter. I can't do that at Porch Light. I think there is also more personal space at Street Light. It's a little more stable place and a nice stepping stone for

transitional housing.

S.Z.: *Where do keep your possessions?*

K.B.: I have some friends and family who let me keep my stuff at their houses until my situation levels out. I would stay with them if I was able to. I was couch-surfing for a few weeks, but those days were numbered anyway. People were making space for me even though they didn't really have any. Eventually they said they couldn't do it anymore.

S.Z.: *Tell me about your mother.*

K.B.: My mother is an awesome person. I love her to death. She's staying at a place where she's not even sure if she'll be able to stay there very long. But I know that if she could, she would definitely take me in. She doesn't want me out on the streets and she wants to know that I'm safe.

S.Z.: *Is this the first time that you've been homeless?*

K.B.: Technically, yes. It's been over a month now. Back in November, I was at risk of becoming homeless. So I knew it might be coming. I have been trying to have sort of a safety net before I managed to hit rock bottom.

My sister moved to the Portland area and I was able to move in with her, so I didn't become homeless then.

My sister didn't think I was being responsible enough so to help push me to be more responsible, she told me that I had a month to come up with (part of the rent). I wasn't working at the time. When the month was up, I didn't have the money and my sister said I hadn't tried to do anything. I didn't communicate with her about it, and she was sorry, but she had to ask me to leave.

Then I was couch-surfing, now I stay at the shelter.

S.Z.: *Tell me about that.*

K.B.: I still can't sleep comfortably. It is what it is.

S.Z.: *Why can't you sleep comfortably?*

K.B.: I'm uncomfortable with large groups of people and there are usually about 30 people at the shelter every night. Everyone comes from their own background, I don't hold anything against anyone. People make choices, people make mistakes that's just how people are. As long as no one does anything against me, I'm fine with them. I'm just not comfortable.

If I got to know everyone who was there in one night, I might be able to sleep soundly, but I really don't think that is possible.

S.Z.: *And those people change every night, right?*

K.B.: Oh yeah. I've seen some people there one night and then never again. I've seen people who were there three or four nights in a row. I made one friend there. His name is Darren. He actually came in the same night that I did. His first night was the same as my first night. The past couple of nights, he wasn't there so I had no one there that I am friends with. He has been staying at a friend's house. I'm really glad for him. I wish that I could stay the night at a friend's house. But I have to be there in case they call me for Street Light, otherwise, I'm taken off the list.

S.Z.: *You seem very driven to accomplish your goals and I think that is remarkable. Your internship and the search for housing must take up so much of your time.*

K.B.: I'm starting college in September. I'm doing the Gateway to College program at Portland Community College to finish my