

CALEB
ERSKINE '15
IS BUILDING
A DREAM

STORY BY ALISON FRYE



Caleb Erskine '15, center, puts together the roof ring of a yurt kit, shown above after installation.





I've always wanted to build a really nice, tightly insulated yurt that could event of a natural disaster, which would be an interim living situation. The yurt's interior turns into the platform, its contents become the house. And a yurt lends itself to quick construction because of its self-supporting roof." Caleb imagines it. He imagines a lot.

Living Intent Yurt Co. CEO Makita, on the floor, with Caleb Erskine, owner, seated. Right, a finished yurt and a lovely view.

Caleb is the founder of Living Intent Yurt Co., based in Grass Valley, CA. By his senior Putney spring, Caleb had completed a Project Week studying Genghis Kahn and the rich history of the Mongolian people, and their nomadic culture intrigued him. With independent woodworking also under his Putney toolbelt, he launched a senior exhibition to build a Mongolian yurt. And as a Mainer, Caleb also came honestly and naturally to a practical, minimalist ethos. ☒ e yurt idea suited 18-year-old Caleb. Ten years later, at age 28, it continues to.



Caleb lived in the yurt he built at Putney. He traveled the music festival scene and realized a market: without knowing whether he could fulfill the orders he might receive, he offered to sell yurts to music festival organizers. The idea worked. He eventually gave college a try, and attended University of Maine briefly. While he didn't spend much time in class, he took full advantage of its state-of-the-art woodshop, where he could use tools he'd never seen before. He built more yurt frames, and eventually loaded the frames, his second-hand DIY wood-working books, and his bought-at-a-pawn-shop tools into a van and headed west, to the farming and off-grid communities and cash economies of wild northern California. Caleb got a spot at a makerspace for \$50, and started to build yurts for the local community. It was in 2016, just over a year after he finished high school.

How Would You Build a Door?

Despite having built a skiff, a dulcimer, and several yurt frames, Caleb had a lot to learn.

“When I first moved here, I wasn’t very good at woodworking. And I didn’t know anything about business,” he confessed. “I went to the local hardwood supplier and asked for a list of the area’s best woodworkers. For a year, he sought out wisdom from people who knew more than he did. He visited their shops. He humbly asked questions: How would you build a door? And so on. “The best thing I did was to be open. Now I have a broader scope of the ‘right way’ and ‘wrong way’ to do something. But at that time I wanted to hear all of the different things. It was great.”

Talking to Caleb now, his lens has expanded. His company's mission is to empower affordable living. Another dream he's pursuing? Taking people through the process of building a house, soup to nuts: "I'm in school to get my general contractor's license. I'm hoping to create a situation where somebody could find a piece of affordable raw land and, using my license,

get a construction loan from a bank. We could help facilitate the whole process of ground-up roundhouse structure building. It would be an affordable way to get a mortgage☐

Moreover, Caleb has achieved for others the goal he set for himself: you can buy a yurt, put it together yourself, and live in it comfortably. The vision was to sell a home-built to code that's comfortable, energy efficient, and can be assembled out of a box with minimal building experience. For someone who has the gumption to do it, they can do it all. We use CNC (Computer Numerical Control) robot manufacturing to make all the components, all the studs are pre-drilled. Everywhere you put a screw is labeled. It tells you right where to put everything.

Additionally, and rare in these times, the company fabricates everything in-house. Born out of supply-chain complications during Covid, during which they also saw an uptick in demand for their yurts, Caleb brought everything under the same roof. “I think we’re the only yurt company in the U.S. that does all manufacturing in-house—the 3-D CAD design, all of the woodworking, all of the fabric work. Nobody does that anymore.”

Make Something

☒ e future is now. AI can do better than humans in accounting, in reading x-rays, in manufacturing. But robot technology only reaches so far. Caleb believes deeply in the importance of making something, and in managing people. “Somebody who’s professional, shows up on time, and can run a crew can earn a good living. I wish we were pushing more young people to say, ☒ ere’s an opportunity here to be creative. ☒ e creative avenues are probably a good hedge for your future☒ Caleb also emphasizes the importance of knowing how to operate tools. “People who can operate a CNC router, a CNC laser, do 3-D CAD. If somebody graduated from Putney and understood 3D modeling and CAD, and could produce, I would hire that person right out of school to do it. Not many people know those skills☒

Living Intent Yurt Co. occupies an 11,000-square-foot production facility. Caleb is the owner, and he employs ten people,

including a general manager who handles the organization. “I’m good at ideas and can work my tail off. But when it comes to actually creating systems and being more organized, our GM, Sara, is excellent at that.”


Joe, the unofficial CEO, says they have a fabric studio, an assembly room, and a wood shop. It’s the stuff of Putney Project Week dreams.

Caleb credits Putney for broadening his teenage years. Scott Schadler empowered the side of Caleb that had been singularly focused on being a carpenter since Caleb was a child. George Haggerty helped Caleb build a dulcimer. Caleb built a skiff with Rob Guerrina. And advisor Noah Hoskins? "I'll forever love Noah. I was such trouble-maker-ish person, and Noah was the person who told me I was screwing up. It was exactly what I needed, to have a male role model that was not hard on me, but strict and stern."

The Seed and Pursuit of a Dream

Did you, reader, also find yourself captivated by the PBS show that featured a man in Alaska, who built his own cabin, lived off the land, and narrated the experience? Officially called *Alone in the Wilderness*, and featuring Richard Proenneke, it hooked Caleb at an early age. “I saw it as a kid and thought,



 ‘I want to do that.’ And in a modern way, I’m building everything myself, making it. And that’s always been the dream. I loved yurts. I built one and was living in it, dreamed up a product we could manufacture, and now that’s what we sell. So I’m able to play. ☐ at’s the funnest part of the whole thing. I love it☐

As he looks around his office (the first he’s ever had), Caleb marvels at the bravado of his younger self. “I don’t think I could do it again, because I had such blind faith in myself. I thought, ‘Obviously, this is going to work.’ I was working seven days a week for years, traveling all over Oregon, Maine, living in a yurt with a tarp for a floor☐ He threw all of his money into it. Problems arose left and right. He held his course, and he kept the faith: “☐ is all going to work out☐

"I do think about that sometimes. I wonder if I would have the resolve that I had as a naive 23-year-old to do whatever it takes. Whatever it takes. ■