

Waqaa prospective KYUK reporter,

If you are thinking about moving to Bethel, Alaska to report for KYUK, you are probably filled with curiosity, thrill, and perhaps a little bit of fear. Not many people outside the state know about what it's like to live in rural Alaska or what it's like to report for a predominantly Alaska Native region. I sure didn't. I grew up and lived in Seattle, WA for most of my life. But from 2019 to 2022, I was a reporter for KYUK in Bethel, the regional hub of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, a region the size of Oregon in Western Alaska, home to 48 remote Alaska Native villages. This is my attempt to share what that experience was like.

It's March when I'm writing this. The days are quickly overtaking nights, a welcome respite after the long winter. Snow and ice still cover the landscape, allowing snowmachines free reign of the open tundra and for trucks to travel between communities on the frozen Kuskokwim River, also called "The Ice Road." The previous weekend, I mushed sled dogs on the tundra, chased flocks of ptarmigan around on snowmachines, and caught pike below the frozen river ice.

This is a place where life revolves around the seasons, and what the land provides within those seasons.

In the summer, I learned to catch salmon in the mighty Kuskokwim River in the boat I learned to drive! In the fall, I harvested a greater white fronted goose, also called a "yellow legger." I gave the bird away to a community member, as is part of Yup'ik custom for your "first catch."

I grew up in a large city, where I'd never touched a gun, driven a boat, or thought about obtaining food in any other way than going to the grocery store. Living in Bethel, I've gone on adventures I never thought I'd be capable of. But more importantly, I've learned a different way of existing. I've only been able to do these things because people in the community have shown me these ways that the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people, indigenous to this region, have been living for thousands of years.

One of my favorite memories is being invited to someone's fish camp, which are cabins along the river where families process fish together that they catch in the summer. The host had invited family and guests to eat "stink heads," appropriately named fermented salmon heads. The host showed me how he buried the heads in a bag underground and covered them with cardboard, dirt, and grass for weeks. He explained every family had their own method and recipe, often passed down for generations. Another guest from another village had traveled two hours by boat because the host's stinkheads are the best. I can attest they were absolutely delicious.

I believe the most important determinant in whether a reporter succeeds at KYUK is whether they actively seek out and learn about the people who reside in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. What is important to people in the region? What is colonialism's history here? How have people kept their culture, language, and values strong?

The community helped me to learn the answers to these questions. I also learned that when people were willing to share their history and their stories, the best thing I could do was to listen, without asking questions.

Part of my effort to understand the people in my community better was taking a Yup'ik language class at the local college in Bethel. Yup'ik, or Yugtun, is still the primary language for many people in the region. Among the many things I learned was that the word "neqa" can mean either fish or food in general, underscoring how important fish are to Yup'ik people.

Reporting for KYUK, your stories are complex because they must be based on an understanding of the region's history, culture and values. Your stories are also essential. KYUK is the region's only source of daily, local news. If KYUK doesn't cover something, likely no outlet will.

KYUK is often the Y-K Delta's megaphone to reach people outside the region who have access to power and resources, like politicians and government agencies. The stories that KYUK tells, or doesn't tell, can affect where those power and resources go.

If KYUK didn't exist, perhaps state officials would have ignored the fact that a community [didn't get the opportunity to vote](#). Perhaps a school district wouldn't have to confront its role in a principal's [abuse](#) of a former student. Perhaps people who take running water for granted wouldn't hear how much life changes for people who are [granted access for the first time](#).

KYUK is an amazing place to build a career in journalism. There are so many rich stories to tell here that it can sometimes feel like drinking from a fire hose. At the same time, KYUK invests the time and resources to report the depth and complexity of stories that matter. KYUK has also encouraged me to share the stories of our region with national audiences. My work has appeared on NPR, ProPublica, and The Washington Post Magazine. You can easily build five-years-worth of a robust portfolio at KYUK within two years. Our alumni have gone on to work at places like NPR, WBEZ, KQED, and High Country News; I'll be returning to my hometown to report for The Seattle Times.

But if you are considering being a reporter at KYUK, you will need to know it can be challenging. It can feel isolating, being a plane or boat ride from any other community. In a place with high rates of accidents and violent crime, I have had to report stories that hurt to listen to and to tell. On top of that, basic living requires diligence. At times, I've run out of water and had to go to the gym to take a shower.

The winter can be the most daunting aspect of moving to Bethel. Temperatures can dip below -50 degrees with wind chill, and the length of daylight can shrink to under six hours a day. Is this bearable? Yes, it is. But only if you lean into trying to enjoy the Alaska winter instead of merely surviving it. Many people here love the winter; it's a time when you can go ice fishing, dog mushing, and moose hunting. My favorite part of the winter is how I can go practically anywhere by fat-tire bike.

There's also a sense of "we're all in this together" in the community. Everyone feels the same biting cold wind on their cheeks. Everyone shovels the same two feet of snow out of their driveways. And it might sound cliché, but people really do look out for each other. I'm not sure what I would have done if a stranger hadn't towed my truck out of a ditch I had driven into during a blizzard.

The joys are shared, too. When you're tasting salmon for the first time in the summer, everyone is. When Bethel's hometown hero wins the nearly 1000 mile Iditarod sled dog race, the entire Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta is [celebrating](#).

Your hobbies will probably need to change. For example, it would be an understatement to say that the selection of restaurants and bars in Bethel are limited. Instead, people more often invite friends into their homes to cook them a meal. Because of this, it can be easier to forge deep relationships faster in Bethel, where you see more of people's lives early into a friendship.

I'm from the Pacific Northwest, but Bethel is where I learned to love being outside. The natural beauty of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta really opens up with the right tools. With a boat or a snowmachine, you can explore the entire vast landscape of the region (for a cheaper price, make friends who have those things). Or join the legion of Bethel fat-tire bikers or cross-country skiers. Adopt a dog through Bethel Friends of Canines like I did for the perfect adventure companion. There are also recreation sports leagues like ultimate frisbee, volleyball, water polo, and softball, where few participants are good at those activities and all are welcome.

I can't promise being a reporter and living in Bethel would be easy. But I can promise that you would hear and tell stories that exist nowhere else. You'd go on adventures that you'd never dreamed of. You would bear witness to events that completely transform people's lives. You'd be part of a community of amazing people all doing their part, and you'd be playing a meaningful role. I loved every moment of my time in beautiful Bethel, Alaska.

Best of luck,
Greg Kim
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