

“The Giving Tree” inspires BSU grad’s award-winning street bench

By Nick Werner, '03

At 4:30 a.m. on August 1, a sense of imminent failure overcame Kyle Trulen.

He and his wife, Alyssa, had poured their hearts into an international design contest for an outdoor bench. Their fifth day of construction merged into a sixth as the couple worked overnight to finish.

The deadline was a little more than 12 hours away. They had been working 16-hour days. They were exhausted and, somehow, still behind schedule.

“I don’t know how this is going to happen,” Kyle thought.

Kyle, BLA '06, is a landscape architect with the firm Lango Hansen in Portland, Oregon. That morning, he and Alyssa, a communications manager and editor, took a 90-minute nap. After they woke, they collected their thoughts. They had come too far, they had overcome too much already. They were going to finish.

The bench they completed in the nick of time won the “Street Seats: Urban Benches for Vibrant Cities” competition through Design Museum Foundation in Portland. The Trulens’ bench was one of 200 submissions from 24 countries and 22 states.

The couple called their bench “A Quiet Place to Sit and Rest.” It is inspired by the children’s book “The Giving Tree” by Shel Silverstein. In the book, a boy becomes friends with an apple tree. As the boy grows, the tree gives him fruit to sell, branches to build a house, and his trunk to build a ship. By the time the boy is an old man, only a trunk remains for the man to sit on.

“Both my wife and I read that book as kids,” Kyle said. “It was my wife’s idea to sort of parallel the story. We were talking about how trees do so much for us as humans and we do so little to protect them, especially in urban environments.”

The Trulens had help from another Ball State graduate, Mike Perso, BArch and BS '06, who is an architect in Portland. Mike and Kyle were college roommates but they also have known each other since infancy. They grew up in the same Milwaukee, Wisconsin, duplex.

The bench was their first professional project together.

“The last night was like a studio project in school,” Perso said. “Kyle was up all night. I stayed until 2 a.m. Mostly I was just moral support to help them power through.”

Perso described the Trulens as underdogs. With almost no construction experience, the couple built the bench in a church basement in their personal time. They considered paying a builder. One quoted them \$10,000 to \$15,000 because the project, while relatively small, was so complex.

“I’m so proud of him,” Perso said. “He and Alyssa were up against whole teams from firms.”

The bench now surrounds a honey locust tree on the grounds of the Portland World Trade Center. It uses a concentric design that mirrors growth rings on a tree stump. Kyle said the design represents a hope for a healthier urban environment for both people and trees.

Malcolm Cairns, professor and past chair of landscape architecture, described Kyle as an outstanding student at Ball State, admired by faculty.

“His accomplishments, and those of all our alumni, are incredibly valuable for our current students to find out about,” Cairns said.

In addition to his Ball State degree, Kyle has a master’s in landscape architecture from Harvard University. Alyssa has a bachelor’s in communications and media studies from Bethel University and a master’s of business management from Azusa Pacific University.

The Trulens built the bench with weather-resistant thermally modified ash and pine donated by HDG Building Materials.

The bench that almost didn’t make it should last 25 to 30 years, maybe longer.

“It’s pretty special to see it in use,” Kyle said.