

Atypical higher learning

Car-dwelling students get crash course on simple joys of life

By Eleanor Yang

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It's a cold December night, and UC San Diego senior Erik Borowitz is huddled in his home of the moment: a 1973 Dodge Commander.

Tealight candles provide dim lighting in the ramshackle 23-foot recreational vehicle. Cars speed by on the busy La Jolla street where he's parked, about a half-mile south of the University of California San Diego campus – and a world apart from the typical college student's dwelling.

For Borowitz, 21, living in the Commander is not dictated by finances. His parents pay his tuition and cell phone bill, and have offered to provide more.

But Borowitz wanted to try something different, even reckless.

Three months ago, Borowitz shovelled his life savings of \$1,600 into the motor home, and since then, it's been a rough, yet exciting ride.

Nothing in the Commander works. The ceiling is warped and peeled. The floor is slanted. With each passing car, it shudders, as if trembling through tiny earthquakes.

"It's an old piece of crap," Borowitz says smiling, "but it's liberating. With most apartments, you can't even paint the walls. But with a motor home, you can do anything."

Roughly one in 100 college students has spent at least a night camped in cars, estimates A.J. Heim, an author of two books on what he terms "car-living."

Unlike the vast majority of such students, Borowitz's motives are not economic but philosophical. He belongs to a subset of a subset: car dwellers who are passionate about its simplicity and monk-like asceticism.

In an age of designer dorm rooms and ever-growing student consumerism, they are seeking the modern-day Walden Pond.

Fighting "the system"

So why exactly, would one trade a warm, well-lit apartment for a metal shell without plumbing or a kitchen?

For Luke Janes, 23, it was a calculated rejection of convention. Janes wanted to show others that car-living could be clean and sustainable.

Janes, a graduate student at UCSD, bought his Volkswagen camper van as a sophomore. He slept in it for three years, even though he received money for tuition and housing from the prestigious Regents Scholarship.

Janes' van could be placed in a museum as a study in space efficiency. Though no longer than a full-sized sedan, the dark yellow van contains a back seat that converts into a bed, a sink, water filter, ice chest and a closet for hanging clothes. The car smells of musky incense.

Giving a tour of his van, Luke is at times proud to show off his ingenuity, if not always pleased by its makeshift look. He smiles when one notices the homemade yellow polka-dot curtains hanging from safety pins. Then, pointing to a scattering of wires fanning out from a boat battery he installed for electricity, he says sheepishly, "This is pretty ghetto."



SANDY HUFFAKER / Union-Tribune
"It's liberating," Erik Borowitz said about his ramshackle, 23-foot Dodge Commander. Rejecting designer dorm rooms and ever-growing student consumerism, the UC San Diego senior lives out of this motor home on a La Jolla street near campus.

To Janes, living in the van was about fighting "the system."

The system, as Janes sees it, pushes students to work in corporate jobs to pay off inevitable college loans. He fears that college learning has shifted from fostering independent and critical thinking toward a singular focus on getting A's.

In a recent sociology class, Janes challenged classmates who prepared to leave minutes before the end of class. When professor Bud Mehan posed a question, Luke raised his hand and said, "I couldn't hear the question, and I'd like to ask the class to consider how rude it is to pack up before the end of class."

The room of 130 students immediately grew silent.

"It's unusual for someone to do what he did," Mehan reflected afterward. "He asks intelligent questions."

Janes took his undergraduate studies seriously, double majoring in biology and cognitive science, and graduating cum laude. While most students take four or five classes a quarter, Janes built slowly to 11 classes one quarter. Now, as he prepares to be a high school teacher, he has opted for apartment life again, but it's not all that different. His room, in a shared apartment on campus, is a 10-foot square, and contains a queen-sized mattress and three musical instruments. The closet is half-empty.

To Janes, the room overflows with possessions.

Lots of logistics

Blend in.

That's the cardinal rule of car-living, according to author Heim, who has talked with dozens of college students living in cars.

While Borowitz and Janes keep their cars in the background, their own appearances are striking. Borowitz's stained and rumpled clothes and Janes' occasional preference to walk barefoot are a testament to how they couldn't care less about what others think.

To Borowitz, daily showering is not "time-efficient." He washes his hair once a month at the campus gym. He changes his clothes weekly.

Some co-workers at the campus Food Co-op, a collective selling organic food, have noticed Borowitz's body odor.

"Is it offensive?" UCSD senior Pat McGarraugh says, smiling. "Erik makes up for it in his personality."

For Borowitz, living in the RV has been a long learning process.

When the October rains hit, he sped to Home Depot to repair the leaky roof. He tried various candles before finding the brightest.

Borowitz has changed his eating habits to rely less on refrigeration. His cabinets are stocked with soy milk, cereal, peanut butter and beans. He eats bagels and salads that have outlasted their expiration dates at the Food Co-op.

Borowitz stays in touch with friends through his cell phone. His mail is sent to friends' homes. When nature calls late at night, he uses a Port-O-Potty on an empty lot, a few minutes' walk from the Commander.

It seems to be working. Borowitz estimates spending \$100 per month maintaining and fixing up the RV. He no longer stresses about making the monthly rent.

Finding an accepting neighborhood

Nathan Rosecrans lived in a van for 18 months while studying for his bachelor's degree at UCSD, which he finished last year. In time, he said, he found a "nice, accepting" neighborhood near campus to park his van.

When hosting friends in his Dodge extended van, he avoided the neighborhood. He never played his music loudly there.

"We tried to be respectful," said Rosecrans, 25, who is working on a Ph.D. at the University of Rochester. "They knew we were there, but they never called the cops on us."

Some neighbors of those living just south of campus, a popular place for those parking their RVs, are more concerned than others.

"It increases the anxiety level in the neighborhood," said Penelope Bourke, who has lived in her home 10 years. The problem, Bourke said, is because drug dealers also park their vans and RVs there.

Others, like Rodolfo Ramos, a Mesa College student who lives with his grandmother in the same neighborhood, consider car dwellers "harmless."

While both San Diego City and UCSD campus police prohibit camping in a vehicle on public streets or university property, neither believe college students pose a significant problem.

Campus Police Cpl. Doug O'Dell said the university is concerned for the safety of the car dwellers and its own liability. In his 20 years working at UCSD, O'Dell said he has only encountered a couple of students living in cars, usually over the summer.

"If we do have it," he said, "they're not causing a problem or drawing attention to themselves."

Lessons learned

At first, car-living may seem like a contradiction.

How can living in an metal box with insufficient heat and light make life simpler?

Borowitz, Janes and Rosecrans insist it's easier to focus.

With fewer possessions, they say, come fewer worries. Fewer bills, no TV, and no video games.

"I was living well," Rosecrans said. "To call myself homeless would not have been accurate. I had a job, I had food to eat and a warm place to sleep."

Car-living has shielded Borowitz from much of today's consumerism.

On a recent afternoon in the middle of campus, Borowitz sat on a bench engaged in conversation as a stream of students walked by. His stained clothing looks oddly juxtaposed next to the designer boots, faux fur-lined jackets and meticulously styled hair of other students.

"Most of the time, I think I fit in," Borowitz said. "Then I realize I don't at all."

As soon as friends bring up TV shows or movies, both of which he hasn't watched since June, Borowitz is lost.

He may not be brimming with pop culture. And he may have fewer possessions.

But in many ways, Borowitz's untraditional lifestyle defines the college experience. He's putting himself in new situations and learning about himself, every day.

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