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Making it hip to live in a trash bin

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One of the ancillary experiments Jeff Wilson, aka Professor Dumpster, might conduct when he lives in a garbage dumpster for a year?

Wilson, a dean at Huston-Tillotson University who teaches environmental sciences, might move the dumpster to various Austin neighborhoods to see how the neighbors react.

"I mean, what's going to happen in the morning when I crawl out of a dumpster?" Wilson asked.

If he sets up the dumpster in Tarrytown or West Lake Hills, one of the neighbors might lob an empty Dom Pérignon bottle in on top of him. Don't they know that goes in the recycling?

Wilson is one of those energetic college professors who students will remember for the rest of their lives, thanks to his imagination and creativity. Along with thinking outside the box, he'll be living in it. Truth is, students retain what their entertaining teachers tell them.

"Nobody wants to hear another lecture about how the world is going to be destroyed if everybody doesn't drive a Prius," said Wilson, a seventh-generation Texan who did his postdoctoral work at Harvard University. "What we want to do is have a party and have everybody come to the party."

The point of the dumpster experiment is to show that people can live with less. Wilson points out that he will be staying in a space that is a mere 1 percent the size of an average American home.

Some of Wilson's students formed a group called Green Is The New Black and won a green-oriented student competition in Dearborn, Mich., that landed Huston-Tillotson a \$75,000 grant from the Ford Foundation. Most of the money will be used for scholarships, but \$20,000 of it will go to Professor Dumpster's Dumpster Project, dumpster-project.org.

The dumpster, which Wilson hopes to move into by February, will be cozy. When ready, it will be set up on a concrete slab poured for the project on the Huston-Tillotson campus, at East Seventh and Chicon streets.

"It's about the same size as this booth, maybe a little bit smaller," Wilson said, as we ate lunch in a restaurant near downtown. "It's six by six." Forget about stretching out. "I'll fit in there at an angle," Wilson added. Actually, the Dumpster Project will use two dumpsters provided by Texas Disposal Systems — one for Wilson's living arrangements and one to conduct environmental experiments in Wilson's Dumpster 101 lab.

"Somebody said it was a cross between Bill Nye (the Science Guy), Thoreau and Oscar the Grouch," Wilson said.

Wilson's students are pumped. "I think he deserves some sort of plaque or something," said Olivia Sanchez, a Huston-Tillotson senior majoring in biology with a concentration on environmental science.

Wilson's year in a dumpster will run through various stages.

During the first stage, Wilson will rough it. "Dumpster camping," he calls it. It will be him and four metal walls, and that's it. Although he will have the dumpster scrubbed for nasties before he climbs in the side door. The dumpster cleaning will provide another teaching opportunity.

"We're going to show the kids blown-up microscopic images of what was in the dumpster before Professor Dumpster moved into it as a home," he said.

Hey Doc, what's for lunch?

"I want to do an urban forage and not buy anything at H-E-B," said Professor Dumpster, who plans to do a bit of dumpster diving during the early going.

As time goes on, the dumpster will be tricked out with some of the amenities of a middle-class home. Wilson plans to install a solar panel, a little composting toilet, even a shower behind the Dumpster. "All of the stuff to make it a normal American home instead of a trash can," Wilson said.

“I was trying to get a Sleep Number bed,” he added. But when he walked into a mattress store to inquire, he discovered that wouldn’t happen. “There was a long pause, and they said, ‘No, we don’t make dumpster home mattresses.’”

Wilson, who will get his water in a bucket from Lady Bird Lake, wants to involve the campus in the project. “I’m going to try to get the track team to help me bring up the water from Lady Bird Lake as a track exercise,” he said.

Wilson doesn’t look like a ladies’ man. He’s got nerd written all over him. He wears a bow tie, an old Open Road Stetson like the one LBJ wore, black high-top Converse basketball shoes and thick-framed glasses. Still, he must be a charmer.

When Wilson isn’t dumpstering, he’s visiting foreign countries — with no luggage. He met his girlfriend, Austin writer Clara Bensen, last year online through the OkCupid website.

Then, he persuaded her to tour Europe with him — with no bags. Wilson and Bensen visited eight countries in 21 days with little but the clothes on their back.

If you can persuade a woman to tour Europe without bringing a bag the size of a circus tent, your persuasive abilities are spectacular.

“Her friends said, ‘We don’t think you’re crazy for going to Europe with no clothes. We just think you’re crazy for going anywhere with Wilson,’” Wilson said.

OK, so Bensen brought along one carry-on. “She took a purse, because she wanted to take two pairs of underwear,” said Wilson, who brought only the underwear he was wearing.

Wilson explained the laundry regimen he recommends when you’re traveling through Hungary, Turkey and Croatia with only a single pair of boxers.

“On the first day, you wear your underwear under your jeans. On the second day, you go commando. And the third day, you wash clothes,” he said.

Is there a frat rat in America who isn’t familiar with this routine? Except for the wash part.

By the way, Wilson doesn’t figure his girlfriend will spend the year with him in his dumpster home.

“There are visitation hours on campus, so my girlfriend can’t stay overnight,” Wilson said. “I don’t think she’ll appeal that.”

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Huston-Tillotson University dean and professor Jeff Wilson stands near a garbage dumpster similar to the one he will live in for a year. JOHN KELSO / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

