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This student's housing short on comfort

Ilgunas wants to leave Duke with a degree, not debt, so he lives in a van.

By Eric Ferreri

eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com

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DURHAM

It's a good thing Duke student Ken Ilgunas has a strong bladder because his van has no bathroom.

Ilgunas, 26, is living out of a 1994 Ford Econoline to get through his liberal studies graduate program debt-free. Parked in a lot on the edge of campus, he cooks with camping equipment and subsists largely on peanut butter.

But the Niagara Falls native doesn't think he's really roughing it. He showers in the campus gym and knows all the 24-hour buildings where he can keep warm and connected to the Internet.

"I'm rarely in the van. Just to eat and sleep," he said this week. "Generally it's not the most convenient place. The closest bathroom is a quarter-mile away, and there's no source of water nearby. But with that said, I live pretty comfortably. I bring a water jug to campus and fill it up. And I have no problem 'holding it in' at night."

Ilgunas isn't doing this out of necessity. Rather, it's a self-test of sorts after graduating from the University at Buffalo (N.Y.) with \$32,000 in debt. He paid that off working full-time for 2 1/2 years and swore never to be similarly saddled again.

His Duke courses are \$3,000 each, but financial aid – grants, not loans – cuts it to \$1,000 per course. Between money he makes working part-time and the summers he spends as a park ranger, he gets by.

Ilgunas' adventure was largely unknown until this week, when he wrote about it on [Salon.com](#), an online magazine. Now he figures it's only a matter of time before the campus cops come knocking. Until then, though, he's not saying exactly where he parks.

He bought the van for \$1,500 this spring and tore out some seats. He sleeps on the converted back seat, using a sleeping bag for cold nights. It's comfortable enough, though the heat is no picnic. He's reluctant to run the air conditioning because it could blow his cover.

"I got here and it was 95 degrees and 75 percent humidity," he said. "It was like a greenhouse. I'd be in there a minute and my clothes would be totally saturated."

An aspiring writer and devotee of "Walden," Henry David Thoreau's classic tale of solitude and self-discovery, Ilgunas has another year or two of schooling ahead of him and hopes to remain in his van.

He need not worry. A Duke official said that while the university doesn't encourage Ilgunas' method of housing, he doesn't appear to be violating any campus rules.

"Our first concern is for his health and safety, and we offer guidance and counsel to help him transition to a new home," said Duke spokesman Michael Schoenfeld. "That said, it is certainly a creative part of his education, though I don't think Thoreau had to worry about parking tickets at Walden."

Ilgunas was raised in a suburban, middle-class family. Mom's a nurse, dad's a factory worker. It was a good life, but left Ilgunas unsettled.

Now, he buys food in bulk and eats, on average, for \$4.34 a day.

"I felt there was something vapid about the suburban lifestyle," he said. "People work 40 hours a week and come home and watch TV. There's no beauty or poetry or adventure in that sort of life. I recognized I wasn't getting something out of that lifestyle."



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