



TRUE STORY

PAYING FOR COLLEGE, ONE CRUSHED BEER CAN AT A TIME



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because money isn't funny.

By Bobbi Dempsey

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It takes 21,000 aluminum cans to pay for a calculus textbook.

I know that from firsthand experience. And it takes a hell of a lot of time — and work — to gather up 21,000 aluminum cans.

My husband, Jack, and I both grew up in **poverty**. In my case, I moved roughly 70 times before graduating high school. Neither of us came from families that could afford to send us to college. We were determined to give our kids a better opportunity.

At the urging of our oldest son's public school teachers, in the sixth grade we enrolled him in a private prep school with a challenging academic curriculum. It was a true fish-out-of-water scenario: Our son came from a firmly blue-collar family — my husband worked as a maintenance man at an apartment building for the elderly and disabled next door to the school — while most of the other kids were from very well-off families. Our son was literally the poorest kid in his school.

The school was way out of our budget, so Jack and I worked several jobs to be able to afford it. We stuck with it, sure that this would pay off in the long run in the form of big **college** scholarships. And those would be needed, as our kids' medical bills from an assortment of surgeries and health crises had wiped out what meager savings we attempted to accumulate.

WHEN A STORM RIPPED A FEW SECTIONS OF SIDING OFF OUR HOUSE, IT WAS A LITERAL WINDFALL THAT QUICKLY BOOSTED OUR SCRAP PILE FOR THAT WEEK.

When those elusive scholarships failed to appear, Jack and I once again had to scramble and come up with creative solutions to cover not only tuition but also all of the extra incidental costs. The money was going out faster than we could earn it. At one point, I looked into selling my plasma until I realized my health conditions, and the medications I was taking to treat them, probably ruled me out as an ideal donor.

There's also a crazy catch-22 for college students and their parents hoping to get financial aid. You cannot earn too much or you will find yourself ineligible for aid. This is especially true for those hovering near the bubble of eligibility. As one financial aid officer told us, "You're poor — just not quite poor enough." So while you're scraping to come up with enough funds to pay the tuition bills and bookstore tabs, you have to be careful not to earn a little too much or you'll kill your chances for any aid the following year.

As a **maintenance man**, Jack had access to a lot of trash — which included plenty of cans. It really is true that one man's trash is another man's treasure. One tenant had a raging Pabst Blue Ribbon habit, so he was good for several bags' worth of cans each month. Another preferred Coors NA. Their tastes didn't matter — an empty can was an empty can, and they all weighed about the same.

Many of the tenants admired our resourcefulness and started collecting cans from other people to add to their own bags of empties that they would pass along to us. It reached a point where Jack was bringing home bags full of cans every day.



Doing what you have to do.

SOURCE COURTESY OF BOBBI DEMPSEY

As a bonus, we lived on a busy road where lots of people dumped trash, so I could often fill at least a bag or two just walking around my neighborhood.

Jack and I were already working long hours, but in our “spare time” at night, we spent hours crushing cans with a special contraption Jack had rigged together on the back porch. It was long, tedious work, but didn’t require much brain power — which was a good thing, since we didn’t have much mental energy in our sleep-deprived state. Then we loaded the crushed cans into 55-gallon barrels. We had an old tan pickup truck — the kids had nicknamed it “Big Brown” — with a passenger door so noisy you could hear it a block away. It wasn’t pretty, but it could hold six to eight full barrels.

The price of aluminum fluctuates wildly, so we’d wait until it hit at least 50 cents a pound. Then we’d load up the barrels and head to the scrapyards. An average haul would be about 600 pounds — roughly enough to pay for the \$320 textbook our son needed. For just one of his classes, for just one semester.

It was slow going. Definitely not the speediest or most efficient way to pay for textbooks. But desperate times call for desperate measures. And occasionally we’d get an unexpected bonus. When a storm ripped a few sections of siding off our house, it was a literal windfall that quickly boosted our scrap pile for that week.

After the first semester, we settled into a routine where we’d set aside certain times each week for the can-collecting and crushing tasks. With each trip to the scrapyards, we’d add to our textbook fund for the upcoming semester.

We joked that we wished we could eliminate the middleman and just drop the barrels of cans off at the bookstore. Unfortunately, that wasn’t a form of currency we could convince them to accept. They took plastic, but not metal.

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