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By: Karli Ratliff | kratliff13@radford.edu

Alternative housing options are becoming more popular among students who are trying to avoid going into debt for a college degree - introduce graduate Clare Ramos.

Ramos was able to pay her way through school and graduate from the University of New Mexico with no [debt](#), "I didn't want to take out loans ... I knew I couldn't afford housing and tuition, and so I just chose tuition."

Ramos's solution? Living in a van - more precisely, a 2000 Ford Windstar Minivan.

So, The Journey Begins

Ramos's van originally belonged to her mom. When she decided she wanted to live in a van, she had to convince her mom to trade cars with her.

Her mom initially said no. Ramos responded, "That's too bad. I already took the seats out."

She also had to convince her parents that living in a van would be safe.

"I sat down every single night for two months straight and had to convince my parents that I was gonna be okay doing what I'm doing," Ramos said.

Ramos only spent about \$250 to make the van a livable space.

"I had a really, really low budget; I had no money at the time," Ramos said. "I was lucky and had pretty much all the materials that I needed to do a basic build-out at our house."

She repurposed her sister's old bunk bed to create a platform bed with about nine or 10-inches underneath.



Photo Credit: (Clare Ramos) JUNE 21, 2019 “golden hour ☐.”

Ramos bought a shelving unit on sale at Target, a mattress, some storage bins for under the bed, carabiners, and eyehooks.

She was left with about 20 inches of space between the bed and the back hatch and a small area behind the passenger seat.

“It’s super simple; there’s no solar, there’s no electricity,” Ramos said. “It’s just as basic as you can basically get it.”

Ramos didn’t even buy a [campus parking](#) pass, saying that “parking passes at UNM are outrageously expensive.”

Ramos mostly parked her van in parks, driveways, and free street parking.

“A lot of the times I would park at this little, itty-bitty park called Netherwood Park, and it was only about a mile and a half from campus,” Ramos said.

The Cost Breakdown

The least expensive housing option at the University of New Mexico during the 2019-2020 school year is a double occupancy dorm room that costs \$4,890 per year.

At Radford University, the least expensive housing option is a traditional dorm room (only offered in Muse Hall), which cost \$4,770 per year during the 2019-2020 school year.

Ramos was able to pay her way through school by working in restaurants.

She was awarded a scholarship that allowed her to pay in-state tuition as an out-of-state student, which she says saved her about \$11,000 per semester.

F-R-E-E-DOM

Living in a vehicle allowed Ramos more freedom than living in traditional housing like a dorm room or [apartment](#).

“If I had a couple days off, I could just pack up and go camping, or I could just travel halfway across the state for a weekend,” Ramos said. “I could have a different backyard every single day.”

Ramos graduated in December of 2019 with a degree in archeology completely debt-free. She was even able to build up a small savings by the time she graduated.

Since graduating, Ramos has continued to live in the van on and off.

She has been taking small breaks from van life by staying with friends and family. She plans to move back into the van full-time in the near future.

“I picked a career that lets me travel and work all over the country,” Ramos said. “I have never really seen myself living in one spot for an extended amount of time.”

Ramos plans to upgrade to a bigger van eventually. She wants to continue living in a van for as long as she can.

“I plan on being in my current van for at least another year,” Ramos said.

Treading Tiny Houses



Photo Credit: (Clare Ramos) JAN. 1, 2019, 2019 “Leaping into the new year like ... HIPPY NEW YEAR EVERYONE.”

Tiny houses are also becoming popular among college students as a way to save money in the long run.

A student can invest in building a tiny house to live in the long-term and avoid paying rent or room and board fees.

Christopher Clerk told [The Washington Post](#) that he spent about \$15,000 to build his tiny house during summer break while attending the University of Michigan.

Radford University got in on the alternative housing trend by offering a special topics class in which students were allowed to design and build a tiny sustainable house.

The tiny house was never completed because it was difficult to find instructors qualified in

design after the original instructor, Nathan Bicak, left Radford.

Dr. Holly Cline, Department of Design Chair, is hopeful that they will be able to offer the class again and complete the house.

Once finished, the Radford University tiny house will be used to collect data on sustainable living, not for student housing, Cline said.

“Teaching other people that there are alternative options to the norm, that’s really important to me,” Ramos said. “I don’t want 18-year-olds to be a hundred thousand dollars in debt.”

Becoming Debt-Free

Ramos said that she would recommend van life to everyone.

“I reached my number one goal of graduating college debt-free,” Ramos said. “I want to share a success story. The van was probably the main reason why I accomplished that.”

Ramos has a YouTube channel called “[College Vanlife](#),” can be found on [Instagram \[at\] claremilyy](#), and reached via email at collegevanlife@gmail.com.