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GREG ZANIS

What A Dive!

Dumpster Divers Know There’s A Lot In Garbage Cans That Really Isn’t Garbage At All

BY ELANA DURE
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Greg Zanis has been “looking for gold” since 1955. Of course, “gold” is a very loose term. The treasure may appear in the form of a television set, mannequin or moped, but Zanis doesn’t discriminate. If the find has value, he is satisfied. After all, not everyone has such luck looking inside a dumpster.

A carpenter by day and scavenger by night, Zanis, 64, spends a lot of his free time searching area dumpsters and garbage routes for neglected items he can pluck and sell to junkyards or individuals. He learned the skills of scrapping from his father and passed down the family trade to his children. The unofficial business is not only exciting, but also profitable — Zanis said he earns \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year selling other people’s trash.

HAVE GRILL, WILL SCAVENGE

“You can’t believe the treasures you get,” said Zanis, an Aurora, Ill., resident. He posts videos of his excursions to his YouTube channel, TheDreamCar. “It’s not just about garbage. ... (People are) making a living of this.”

The diving world is a sort of underground, dark-of-night kind of culture. It’s secretive, potentially dangerous and not for germophobes or the easily frightened. Outsiders rarely know the world exists, but those who join it — usually alone or with a partner — know to follow the fragmented community’s list of unwritten rules, publicized by Jeremy Seifert’s film “Dive!”

Among them:

- The first one to the dumpster that day gets first dibs. Never encroach on another diver’s territory.
- Leave the dumpster cleaner than you found it. The worst thing you can do is make a mess.
- Never take more than you need. It’s just common courtesy.

Zanis lives by these rules, especially the first: If he sees another scavenger en route, he’ll ask where the seeker plans to dive and avoid those spots. He doesn’t want to step on anyone’s toes.

What many don’t realize is that diving is legal everywhere in the United States except where explicitly prohibited. As long as a person does not trespass on private property to reach a dumpster, diving is a welcome sport. There are, however, certain communities that are less accepting than others. Ordinances in Chicago and



Greg Zanis, 64, unloads crates from the bed of his truck for scrap at S&S Metal Recyclers II in Aurora, Ill. Zanis has been scrapping since he was four years old with his father, where he would go into the dumpster and throw out the “goodies.” “It’s a way of life,” said Zanis.

Naperville, Ill., for example, state that commercial scavengers must obtain a license before rummaging through trash.

ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT

Zanis finds everything from bicycles to dinette sets. He even found a full set of patio furniture once. Typically he will scout the Aurora area three or four times a week with his two sons. When the pick is good, they may even fill their truck a fifth time. On weekdays, they stick to garbage routes and look for the goodies people leave out on the curb. On weekends, however, they go for a dive and dig around store dumpsters in search of hidden treasure. This is when Zanis usually hits the jackpot.

“My life might seem overwhelmed by this, but I keep a spotless shop,” said Zanis, who piles his metallic finds into his garage and waits to sell them in bulk. He often rips apart products and recycles their scraps — gold from VCRs and computers, copper from TVs — to bring the metal to different junkyards. Zanis said he watches the market closely and

only sells his scraps at the most profitable of times.

“We are like squirrels,” he said. “We hang on to our stuff until the price is right.”

Dumpster diving is a hobby for some, a lifestyle for others. For Zanis, it’s a mixture of both. Not only does the pastime provide him with extra income, it also gives him an adrenaline rush — the element of surprise and suspense, the challenge of rushing to claim his turf. And it’s all close to home.

Unlike Zanis, Chana Zakroff, 21, never saw herself as anything more than a self-described “casual picker-upper or receiver.” The West Ridge resident went on her first Chicago dumpster-diving excursion with a friend about two years ago. She was fascinated by the amount of food her friend obtained from the dumpster and decided to join the game after tasting a salad made with freshly picked produce from a local grocery store’s trash bins.

During her first trip, Zakroff said she was stunned to see the amount of food in the dumpster. Boxes of lettuce just past their expiration dates, bags of freshly baked bread that won’t sell the next morning,

cans of tomato sauce too dented to be marketable. She said some stores donate food to shelters. But even so, the surplus of leftover food is overwhelming, and some things are bound to be thrown away. (Divers are obviously willing to risk eating spoiled food if it means they might save something edible in the process.)

There are several reasons someone may dive for food, Zakroff said. Some enjoy the hunt, others want to save money and some, of course, can’t afford to eat any other way. A select few — freegans, who minimally participate in the conventional economy and consumption of resources — feel a moral obligation to reduce and recover the amount of food wasted in this profit-driven economy.

Approximately 40 percent, or the equivalent of \$165 billion worth, of edible and available food goes uneaten in the United States each year, according to a 2012 report from the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Zakroff doesn’t consider herself a freegan, but dumpster diving for food has helped her understand

their beliefs, to minimize the impact of wastefulness. She said her main motivation comes from the convenience and price tag. “I thought it was fun,” she said. “It felt like we were shopping, but instead of going to the front, we went to the back, and everything was free.”

BATTLING THE STIGMA

Both Zakroff and Zanis have had to defend their diving. Zakroff said she uses discretion before telling people she occasionally dumpster dives.

“Not everyone is cool about it,” she said.

Zanis said he received similar reactions when he has mentioned diving.

“There is a connotation that people look down at us,” he said. However, instead of getting offended, Zanis said he just smiles and tells people how much money he makes a year from his hobby. After that, judgment subsides, and everyone laughs.

“Anybody can do it; you just have to swallow your pride,” Zanis said. “A lot of people don’t have the nerve to do what I’m doing. ... Dumpster diving is a free-for-all. Ninety percent of the people think it’s illegal or are scared to do it.”

DIGITAL DIVES

Of course, there are opportunities to collect people’s junk without sticking a hand in a dumpster. Zanis frequently goes on house cleanups and scans Craigslist for free offers. And although Zakroff’s hobby is scoring food, she occasionally searches for giveaways (the nonedible kind) on the Freecycle website (a nonprofit movement to encourage reuse and recycling).

Zakroff said she enjoys using the site because it allows her to get free goodies without the worry of stumbling across, say, furry animals. In addition, she appreciates the fact that she can ask about the quality of an item before she goes to pick it up. With dumpster diving, everything is a gamble.

Zanis also likes the digital diving world, but he still prefers tangible dumpsters and garbage routes. Not only is it more exciting and suspenseful, but it is also more convenient. With Craigslist, Zanis must follow another person’s schedule.

Old-fashioned scavenging enables him to hunt whenever he wants. All he has to do, he said, is “dress in some smelly clothes, go out and get accustomed to (the) territory.”

YARDS OF THE MONTH

Yankton Town and Country Garden Club announce their Yard of the Month for August:

BRIAN AND KOLLEEN WANT, 711 FOURTH STREET

This over a hundred-year-old home is the background for a marvelous garden experience. Curb appeal strikes you as you take in the front yard. Day lilies, purple-leaved veronica, coreopsis and miniature coneflowers line the beautiful block wall. As you walk through the arbor completely covered with purple morning glories, both American flags, a tribute to all veterans, policemen and firemen, wave in the breeze.

A block planter with various annuals surrounding a beautiful gazing ball covers the house front. On the right side of the yard stands a Minnesota strain red bud tree with two beautiful metal flamingos gracefully standing. To the left of the front door is a welcoming small table with chairs. Whimsical items, including hanging bird houses, a bird bath and a bench with a small statue, are strategically placed in the yard. To the left of the house is an old metal bicycle with baskets full of annual flowers. Tall grasses wave gently in front of several bushes.

On the left side of the home a patio area with a grill, table and chairs provides a comfortable seating area that invites you to sit and relax. Wherever possible various hanging baskets loaded with begonias decorate the entire area. On the side of the garage Brian also showed a wooden feed bunk planted with strawberries, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplant. Kolleen and Brian have every reason to be extremely proud of the all the work that has been completed during the last two summers.

SHANE AND DONELLE GERLACH, 617 LOCUST STREET

Approaching the front deck the sidewalk is lined with marigolds. Shane and Donelle love the festive colors and easy care of the flowers so line their walk with them every year. Follow the marigolds to a newly constructed deck covered with pots and baskets of annuals.

Donelle plants the pots to match climate and colors. Shane has contributed one pot of succulents on a homemade folding table made by his late Grandfather Palmer. In front of the deck and south side are two water features between the two evergreens — one is a 300 gallon Koi pond with five frolicking fish and ever-blooming water hyacinth. In front of the pond is a blooming liatris, red fountain grass and a legacy Yucca from Pine Ridge—a gift from the Berklands when Shane worked for them at the Broadway Inn. The other is a 150-gallon pond with waterfall spilling to create a peaceful sound. Guarded by sedum and two ever vigilant boy and girl fishermen these two ponds will eventually be connected

with a recirculating stream. North of the deck is a small bird sanctuary protected by splits of the yucca and Russian sage. A number of ornamental frogs and a very LIVE and LARGE garter snake greets you near their front door!

Orange day lilies, the only plants that existed on the property when the Gerlachs bought the home 7 years ago, have been accentuated with Bleeding hearts, legacy ferns and some of Shane’s pot designs. A wash basin from Donelle’s step-grandmother has cheerful Gerbera Daisies rising up with vinca vine spills down. Every year you will find a beautiful basket hanging from Donelle’s heart shaped display courtesy of her 7 year old son Derek who buys her a basket every year for Mothers day. Pots of spikes and begonias sit in the shade of the 125+ year old black walnut trees that line their property on the north. Cream separators are used as pots with flowing lobelia and begonia. A rusty trike holds a pot of osteospermum flanked on either side by bright green pots of Marguerite. Another small bird sanctuary is protected by more bleeding hearts and hosta.

The late afternoon sun beats down on a cement patio adorned by pots filled with ornamental peppers, gerbera daisies, oregano, purple and green basil, parsley, gazania, petunia, geranium and dahlias. Welcoming wind chimes hang from the rafters over the patio.

The driveway is lined by large Cannas. We started with one bulb in a planter... now hundreds of Canna plant generations are shared with friends and family throughout the state. Each year they are dug out, separated after the first frost, and stored in the original root cellar beneath this 1870’s home.

The showcase for the Gerlachs is their triangle garden. When they moved here it was a rock covered camper pad, but hard work, planning and legacy plants has evolved into a beautiful perennial garden. Legacy day lilies (gifted Shane’s late father Jim), a friend’s peonies, roses having lived over two decades in a friend’s garden, and gigantic Lavender (gifted Donelle’s mother, Janell). Moving plants like black eyed Susan, purple coneflower, irises and Asiatic lilies from their former property enhanced this garden. Over the last few years additional plants: bearded tongue, astilbe, pinks, daisies, garlic chives, ground phlox, salvia, mums, zinnia, sunflower and annuals including their beloved marigolds are edging the garden. Exploding along their fence line and alley are beautiful multi colored Hollyhocks that have grown wild, the seeds carrying from their neighbors property.

Another old rotting deck was torn off to create a secret garden of shade plants like Hosta, coleus, and clematis which provides a sanctuary for the master bedroom. The birds enjoy the planters and water. The owners added lighted fountain beneath their bedroom window so they enjoy the

sounds of birds and bubbles creating a peaceful space. Pots of begonia, fuchsia, calla lily, impatiens, and bergenia fill in around to the back of the waterfall and into the pond

ANGIE WORMERS, 1108 PENINAH STREET

On this corner lot you will discover a perennial display of ‘come again’ annual petunias, moss roses and holly hocks!! Angie has a knack of arranging pots, flowers, rocks, old bricks, shrubs and grassy areas for a personal quiet space. She is able to sit in her swing with a glass of iced tea and enjoy the sights and sounds of the neighborhood ... or listen to the birds...

To provide some privacy and a sound barrier a wonderful eight-foot natural cedar fence separates her garden from Whiting Drive ... using reclaimed salvaged red brick from a property on Broadway she has designed a walkway through the rock, homemade bricks and plants. All laid to enhance an area connecting spaces to the hot tub on the backside of her property. Homemade cement pots sit next to and within a snapdragon garden. Her large deck is filled with pots and homemade containers full of various annuals including zinnias and petunias. Angie has created another peaceful spot to relax with friends. She has a ‘crazy’ terra cotta pot holder leaning up against the fence that makes me laugh!

Angie has honeysuckle and other vines growing up the fence which adds a lovely scented area not far from the deck. She has a shed to use for gardening tools and ‘stuff’ waiting to be reclaimed. She has a pile of rock that has yet to be determined ... it may become mulch for another bed or moved for more grass. Along the neighbor’s property line are a row of newly planted hydrangea bushes full of blooms so large they may need to be staked!!

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