

Big House to Vanlife

Our Journey of going from a
3 story house to van living



Tim & Cheryl Galyean

Big House to Vanlife

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Helpful Internet Links

Online Album of Pictures Password is **Save**

<https://timgalyeanphotography.zenfolio.com/p226141880/776219503/apps tart.html> Album pictures can also be viewed on your phone with the Photo Moments free app.

Dedication page

To our family and friends who had our backs and opened their homes and driveways to us across the country and here at home.

To the van builders that came before us that have shared their wisdom. To the RV/Van dwellers that shared their stories and answered many RV/Van related questions. We thank you all and dedicate this book to you because without you we would not have been able to have such and enjoyable journey.

Foreword/Introduction

Our story, an adventure of going from living well in a big home, to living well, in a lot smaller home, without losing our sanity. Some of this is written by Tim, some by Cheryl, and some by both of us. We don't have college degrees and we aren't professional writers so do your best to follow along.

See how we deal with having a great income to not a great income. From living in a custom built big house to a custom do it yourself, 84 square feet of living space house. We share how we got rid of most of our stuff, and we had lots of stuff.

How we built the van insides, mostly in our apartment garage. See how we've lived the last year surviving 100 degree weather and 10 below zero weather. And most importantly, how to live in a van with your spouse.

There are some pictures in the book and we also have a online album that you can view a few hundred more pictures. Lots of them detail how we built things. Also included are Internet links to some of the helpful sites that we used in building our van and RV life tips. Some of the items and parts we used to build our van our listed on our website or contact us if you want the links.

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Chapter 1. Life is Good

In 2000, life was good, we had a nice house in a nice neighborhood that had really good schools for our kids. Our photography business that we had struggled and worked hard on for 10 plus years was finally very profitable. We had so much business we we're referring customers to other photographers. We had a couple people working for us and everything was great financially.

A couple of the girls started horseback riding lessons and really loved it just like Cheryl did when she was a kid. Eventually we got a horse and then another one. We also learned that horses cost a lot of money. Lessons and boarding add up plus the necessary riding gear etc.

Both of us always liked camping since we were kids so we took many camping trips to the beach and mountains with our kids when we lived in California. After we moved to Kansas in September of 1993 we found an older 1983 full size Chevy conversion van that we bought for \$1200. We fixed it up for camping and took lots of family road trip vacations with it. It was a great van and we got lots of use out of it but there were lots of repairs, engine, transmission and other little things.

We looked at Roadtrek camper vans in the past thinking that would be way cool, having 4 kids and not having to stop for bathroom breaks. On the way back from a trip to Florida, our 83 van started making funny noises, again. After we got back home we went out and bought a new Roadtrek with some money we had saved up. A 2002 Versatile model. We owned 2 Coleman pop up campers in the past but this was our first real RV.

Life is Good

We now had a home away from home where we could go camping and hit the road without stopping at hotels or unplanned bathroom stops. If someone was hungry there was the kitchen right there. Generator, shower, bathroom, life is good.

Another interest we both had were sports cars and car racing, we each had Chevy Camaros in our younger days before we met. I have been a race car photographer since I was 16 and have always been around fast cars.

A NASCAR driver friend of mine mentioned how his favorite sports car was the Dodge Viper. I started checking them out and thought they were pretty cool, even the kids thought it would be way cool to have a Dodge Viper. And a few months later in June of 2003 we are in the van on the way to Arkansas to pick up a 2001 yellow with black racing stripes Dodge Viper. We were not disappointed.

It made a great photo prop for the studio and the high school seniors we photographed loved posing with it. We joined the Kansas City Viper Club and met lots of really great people.

We quit doing the local race track photos that we had done for many years and started photographing Dodge Viper racing events around the country, traveling in the Roadtrek. It made a good portable studio and we printed the pictures while we were at the tracks in the van. We then became the official photographer at the National Dodge Viper convention held every 2 years. We traveled from Daytona, Florida to Salt Lake City, Utah to cover races and Viper events. We met amazing people along the way wherever we went and are still friends with them today thanks to the Internet we keep in touch. Life was good.

Life is Good

The Winter months are typically slow for photographers especially portrait and race car photographers. We were living in a pretty small house and our studio was in a strip mall so between the two of them we were paying more than \$2000 a month for studio rent and house payment.

In December 2003 we had some spare time and thought it would be fun to look for a bigger house towards the outside of town. We could maybe combine the studio and house into one, and have an outdoor portrait park where we could make our own portrait settings right outside the back door. As a bonus we could maybe find a place to put our horses on instead of paying for stable rent. We really liked the house we were living in so we really didn't need to move.

There was a real estate agent in the Viper club so we ran our idea across her. No rush just whenever she got around to it if she found something to let us know. The first thing we did was to make a list of all the things we wanted in the new house. She picked out 4 houses for us to look at that fit our list of things we wanted.

The first 3 houses we looked at were okay but not what we really wanted. We were on the way to look at the 4th house and she called us to not even bother as it was a mess. It was a bank repossession we eventually found out. We said we were half way there so we will go ahead and stop by. It was perfect. A good sized house on 2 acres, wood fenced, back yard, grass area, wooded area and a stream going through the wooded area. The basement lower floor was finished with a bathroom, 2 large rooms that would work perfect for our studio.

Life is Good

The back yard was big enough for our horses and right behind our place was 30 acres of pasture and trees.

After 6 stressful weeks of trying to find out what all expenses would be involved in fixing it up it was ours and we moved in at the end of January. We now lived in our dream house. Life was perfect.

Chapter 2 Big house living

The house layout was exactly what we wanted with our family space upstairs in the 2 upper levels and room for our studio in the large finished basement. The studio had it's own entrance so we didn't have to have customers going through our home upstairs. It was the perfect studio set up that we always dreamed of both inside and out.

The backyard was amazing, with a larger fenced grass area. Part of the property was forest with trees and a stream running through it with a wooden bridge going over the stream.

The studio area in the basement needed so remodeling. The walls had to have all the wall paper removed and that was time consuming but all the kids pitched in so that made it easier. We decided on a high tech theme for the studio look. The furniture was all silver, chrome and glass, even the chairs were all chrome. For displays instead of having traditional portrait prints on the walls we had 4 computer displays running digital slideshows. We made self ordering stations so customers could choose their favorite images from. It looked very modern and cool.

When it started warming up in the spring we started working on the outside portrait park. The swimming pool was a nasty shade of green and had about 6 inches of leaves in the bottom so it took a chunk of money and effort to get it looking like new. It worked as a cool prop for the high school seniors.

With the help of our kids and some of their guy friends we dug out a miniature lake and built a dock for it. We built a running waterfall by the stream and it became a popular photo setting. The barn setting and the graffiti wall that we put up in the forest were some of the seniors favorite settings. We put up several posing

Big house living

split rail fences, a rope swing and tire swing at different locations around the property. The driveway was long and curved so it made a great place to park cars on for people wanting to bring their cars for props. It was the perfect studio set up for indoor and outdoor portrait photography.

Living in the big house meant we could have all the big family gatherings. 4th of July was awesome with the pool, big bon fire and fireworks in our own backyard. The backyard was even used for a wedding, we set up chairs along the shaded tree area and the bride walked right out of the studio to the beautiful arch where they said their vows. It was just perfect and so beautiful!

The inside was amazing with the open layout of the kitchen, living room and dining room. Perfect for family get together's. We had an annual family Christmas dinner, party and a gift exchange that became a fun family tradition. Lots of great memories.

The Dodge Viper club that we joined had a progressive dinner with one of the stops at our place. Lots of fun as we had 13 Vipers parked in the backyard.

One Easter the girls went to get horse feed and returned with 3 tiny colored chicks and a couple of ducklings. We were thinking OH NO! But it turned out that the cute little playhouse in the backyard made a great chicken house. We eventually put up a fence and expanded the chicken area. At one point we had up to 20 chickens, even sold some of the extra eggs. We bought an incubator and it was fun and a learning experience watching the eggs hatch and raising them from babies.

Big house living

There was screened in back porch that made thunderstorm watching great. Being on the outskirts of town hot air balloons would sometimes fly over us and land in the field behind the house. Lots of wildlife out back also, a bald eagle, lots of deer coming through the yard, coyotes, and of course snakes, skunks and lots of raccoons. When it snowed the property looked like a painting especially in the forest area that the stream went through. We couldn't have asked for a better house, property and location.

Chapter 3 Photography market crash (Life is not good)

At the end of 2004 we noticed our photography portrait business had taken a big drop in sales, down 25% from 2003. Our business had grown a bunch from 1994 to 2002, 2002 being our most profitable year. A new trend was starting, with the new digital DSLR cameras dropping in price, lots and lots of people were starting to be photographers.

By the end of 2005 our business had dropped by 50% in just 3 years. More and more people were advertising that they were professional photographers and doing their friends pictures for free, next to nothing or even a case of beer. With the Internet some pro photographers figured out they could make lots more money teaching all these new photographers how to be photographers, than actually taking pictures.

Photography forums started popping up everywhere and workshops of how to make big money in photography were advertised all over the Internet. The logic was we need to teach the new photographers properly, and there is plenty of business for everyone. They were wrong, very wrong. By 2007 established studios were starting to close their doors and the amount of new photographers with no overhead grew like weeds.

New photographers were usually part time with other household income so they just worked out of their houses without paying all the taxes and overhead as the established studios. The perfect storm for the photo industry. Some studios were still doing really good and I tried to share what was happening in our area but it fell on deaf ears. As time went on, 75% or more of the current ones in business in 2003 had closed their traditional studios.

Photography market crash

I went outside the photo industry to research other businesses like the music industry to see how the Internet impacted them. I looked at successful companies like Apple's iTunes, Southwest Airlines and a few other companies to see what they were doing. I adapted many of their ways of doing things which broke pretty much all of the traditional ways of how you were supposed to run a photography business.

The changes I made were helping as the big drops in our business from 2003 to 2005 had stopped. Sales were lower but with other business expense cutting methods, automating and simplifying processes, profits were remaining good and level. We still maintained a decent profit through 2012, way after many photographers had gone out of business.

Our sales and profit were still dropping however, we had done everything we could think of to increase business. It was obvious the dwindling income wouldn't be able to support the big house and all the expenses involved in running a 2 acre portrait park for much longer.

What grew into a great business from nothing, was now headed back to nothing or a photo business that could not support our household without going out and finding other ways to make a living.

To stretch things out we started selling things that we no longer used. Having owned a photography studio since 1985 we had lots and lots of photography related equipment and stuff. Drastic changes were on the way.

Chapter 4 Selling the big house

We finally decided to put our house up for sale in 2012 and try selling it ourselves. We listed it on For sale by owner, and we put a for sale sign out front. It was bad timing to sell a house as the market was still down, way down from 2008 home values.

We bought our place in 2003 for \$319,000. Back then things in the housing market in our area were going good and there were lots of new building coming to our rural area. A new hospital being built right up the street, a new high school down the road, new neighborhoods and shopping areas, and then 2008 hit.

Some of the houses in our area lost half of their value, \$600,000 houses dropped in value to \$300,000. Some of the high paying jobs in the area had disappeared. With the loans way over what the houses were worth the owners had no choice but to let them get foreclosed on.

Much of the building in our area stopped or slowed way down, even the hospital was put on hold. We had always hoped a big shopping center or hotel would someday buy our property and we would make a nice profit for our investment and we would be able to retire. Well that plan didn't happen.

We listed it for \$399,000 in June which is our busy portrait season just to see if we would get any bites. Nothing, just a few people called or inquired and most if not all of them were real estate agents wanting to list our house. We left it at that price for a year and then in July 2013 we dropped the price to \$349,000. Again, just a few lookers and lots real estate agents wanting to list it.

One person looked at it but just liked the excellent location of the property so they could tear down our house to put their dream

Selling the big house

house up. Again they didn't want to pay the price we were asking.

In August 2013 we decided to give a real estate agent a try. The agent made lots of promises like open houses and to help us make it look more saleable. Once the agent got our listing we didn't hear much from him again. There was no open house, no one even came to come look at it. The agent did send one person to us, someone who wanted to buy it for nothing to flip it. We then fired the agent and listed it with For Sale by Owner in October 2013 for \$325k.

We got a couple more people to look at it but most wanted a completely modernized house, in perfect condition or drop the price a bunch. Ours needed some work, we had it painted but it still needed some siding work and other items fixed or replaced, and some upgrades. The roof was getting old but never leaked. The air conditioner and furnace were getting old but still worked fine. For our taste it was in good condition just how it was. It had a country look and feel to it, and it was out in the country with an amazing property and location.

In January 2014 we lowered the price to \$300,000, and completely changed the ad around. Changing the ad around, making it a very non traditional ad. The market turn around at the same time we lowered the price and changed the ad. The ad if you want to view it is on this link, it's a little bit long so I won't post it all here. <http://tgfoto.com/houseforsale.html>

By February it got kind of interesting. We had at least 4 people who wanted to buy it. The first one who contacted us after I changed the ad sent an email saying they were in South Africa.

Selling the big house

They were really interested in our home as it was just what they were looking for. The voices in my head said, South Africa, sure, so I played along waiting for the “send us a check and we will send you twice as much for it”. Then after a couple of emails it was a real family that were originally from the Kansas City area but working overseas for a few years.

We made the whole deal through emails, with their parents coming to look at it and give feedback. They were moving back in June but I needed to sell it now, so they paid for it the first of March and we stayed in their house until they got back to the states. It was kind of weird giving them a tour of their new house. I was thinking, we hope you like it, and should I be giving you a tour of your own house. They are an amazing family and we still go to visit them to see all the amazing improvements they have done. Zillow says the market value is close to \$600,000 now in 2018.

Chapter 5 When in doubt throw it out

After the decision was made in 2012 to sell the the big house, we started to get rid of stuff and declutter so we could show the house. Our new motto was, when in doubt, throw it out. We started going through everything. If we picked up something and didn't have to have it, then it was gone.

We sorted stuff into 3 piles, a pile for trash, a pile for Goodwill and a pile to give away to friends or family. The stuff we thought we needed to keep we boxed up. We had a few garage sales but they seemed like more of a hassle than what they were worth. It seemed like we made weekly trips to Goodwill. The boxes of stuff to keep we put in an upstairs room and labeled them on the side and end. Then we stacked them so we could easily find the box we needed no matter if the side or end was showing.

When we originally moved to the big house, we had our home and studio in separate locations. The studio in a strip center type shopping mall and our regular house. We had a home office in our house also so we had duplicate and triplicate of everything office related. Staplers, tape dispensers, calculators, pens and pencils, printers, computers, desks, cabinets and phones to name a few items. It seemed silly why we would have kept all this stuff we never used for 10 years.

Whenever one of our kids or family members would stop by to visit we would have them go through the give away pile and have them take as much stuff as they wanted. It ended up being a really good feeling. We were getting rid of our stuff to our kids, while we were still alive to enjoy seeing them using it. Instead of having the kids go through our years and years of collecting stuff after we croak.

When in doubt throw it out

We started upstairs where the bedrooms were and went thru all the kids rooms. When they moved out they just happened to leave closets full of stuff they really didn't need immediately. Come to find out, they really didn't want much of the stuff they had left behind period. Yearbooks, dance dresses, stuffed animals, extra clothes and other random stuff. Much of it went to Goodwill as it just didn't have a value to them anymore and they didn't seem to be into, owning stuff, like their parents and grandparents were.

As we were going thru things we found some things that we thought were valuable items. Like an old Japanese horse statue valued at \$2000.00 and our 6 ft tall Mickey Mouse valued at \$1000.00. We tried to sell them close to what they were selling for on E-Bay. We soon found out that they might be priced high on E-Bay but that doesn't mean people actually pay those prices. So off to Goodwill they went. We found out that most things that we bought that were priceless for us, were worth about 10 cents on the dollar when trying to sell them to someone else.

Cheryl loves to cook, and we had a big kitchen with lots of cabinets for storage. And the cabinets were full, many gadgets she had 3 of the same things. It was cool to share all the fun kitchen gadgets with our daughters and daughter in law. We left the basics in the kitchen that we were using, and packed up into boxes the stuff she wanted to keep. After the kitchen we went through the rest of the downstairs, middle level and cleared out the clutter in the same way, 3 piles, trash, goodwill or giveaway.

When in doubt throw it out

Next to clear out was our big garage, it held a lot of stuff also. We had 3 huge gardens and a big yard so we had lots and lots of gardening related tools. Weed whackers, chain saws for tree trimming, rototiller, garden tractor with snow plow, and lots more garden and yard related stuff. We even had a cement mixer to use when fixing photo studio props and settings.

Then there were all the car related tools, engine puller, engine stand, jacks, tool boxes. Anything that wouldn't fit with our two cars in the apartment garage had to go. The yard and back deck also had lots that had to go. Bottom line, we had lots of crap. Maybe even borderline hoarders, we liked buying stuff and we liked our stuff.

The photography studio took over our whole finished basement and it also held lots of stuff. We were good at keeping stuff for later because "if we threw it out then we would need it". Boxes of stuff we hadn't used in years filled up the back storage area.

Our supplies of frames, folders, albums and outdoor props all went up for sale, sometimes Facebook sometimes Craig's list. My favorite old film cameras and lenses that had sentimental value all were going. We got rid of anything we hadn't used recently or that would never sell because digital had replaced the traditional albums and viewing habits. Old negatives, and customer pictures shredded. Those old negatives were kept and stored for years in the hopes of customers would need more prints some day, that some day never came. On several occasions I would fill the garage floor full of photo related items and put a one price takes it all. They might have only wanted 1 thing in the pile but the deal was they had to take it all.

When in doubt throw it out

I took some of the stuff to the last remaining local camera store and they said would give me a little money for some of the stuff they could resell. Lots of stuff like albums and props I ended up just throwing away as nobody wanted them. Education material that I had paid thousands of dollars for were pretty much worthless. People could now go online and get information on how to run a photography business for free.

The fun cars also had to go. Cheryl wouldn't go for keeping the cool cars and selling the house instead, besides where would we keep the cars with no house. Our 2001 Dodge Viper held it's value really well and sold quickly. Replaced with a 2001 used Saturn, followed by 3 months of depression counseling for going from a Dodge Viper to a grandpa car. Only kidding, my new motto became...sometimes you just gotta laugh.

Next to go was the 2002 Roadtrek RV. The value on the Roadtrek didn't hold up as well even though it was in excellent condition and well maintained. We still owed a few thousand more than the market value and the Big Bank wouldn't work with us to pay off the difference so they came and picked it up. Sold it at an auction for peanuts then sent us a bill for lots more thousands.

And then the horses, trying to tell your teenage daughters we had to sell their pets because the money tree had died didn't go over to well. We donated one horse to Girl Scouts and sold the younger one to a nice family.

After several years of getting rid of stuff, we had narrowed it down enough to fit into our new apartment. 1200 sq ft in the apartment, we still had lots of stuff but we made it fit. We filled the closets full, filled the wall behind the bunk beds with a boxes

When in doubt throw it out

Stacked to the ceiling and a line of boxes against the wall down the hallway.

When in doubt, throw it out 2.0, THE APARTMENT CLEAN OUT, Winter and Spring of 2017. Anything that won't fit in our rented storage unit or our Camper van has to go. Our daughters took the two sets of bunk beds, the treadmill, exercise equipment and our really nice large wooden kitchen table.

There were lots and lots of boxes of family pictures from over the last 30 years that needed to be condensed. We looked at each picture and got rid of the blurry ones and duplicates. While going through the pictures it was fun remembering all the great times we had as the kids were growing up.

We got rid of our old favorite studio sample albums and pictures, some going back to the early 1980's. It was hard but they really didn't have any value to our kids or even the people in the photos as they already had their own copies.

Condensing old studio paperwork was easier because most of the information was on the computer so we did a ton of shredding. Old outdated business receipts and tax stuff that we didn't need to keep anymore got shredded. We took out bag after bag of shredded papers and pictures. We made a game out of it when the grand kids would come over and let them run the little shredder machine.

We made the final cuts of clothes that we were going to keep, many brand new things like t-shirts we gave away. Many clothes, shoes and boots even though we really liked, we really didn't wear them so they went bye bye. We went through the food cabinets and through out stuff that was old or we would never use.

When in doubt throw it out

Then we started going through all the boxes of personal items, both the kids and ours. We found old yearbooks and school memorabilia and decided that we hadn't looked at them in years so why keep them? When we asked the kids if they wanted their yearbooks and old school stuff the answer was no, so all of them went to the trash. Sort of like when we moved from the big house, we packed, labeled and put the boxes in a stack so when moving day came it would be organized and not take too long.

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Chapter 6 Apartment living

In June 2014 we moved out of the big house and into a 2 bedroom 2 ½ bath luxury type apartment with a 2 car garage and fireplace. We have never had an apartment since we were married so we weren't sure how well we would like it. It actually turned out much better than expected and we ended up staying there for 3 years.

It cut our expenses from the big house by at least \$1200 a month and lowered our stress level from having to make the big mortgage payments. It also cut the amount of time we spent fixing things, mowing the big yard and the upkeep on our outdoor portrait park. Cleaning a 1200 square foot apartment was much easier and quicker than the 3300 sq ft house and studio.

The burden of worrying about repairs and maintenance was also gone. If something went wrong in the apartment we called the office. Dishwasher went bad, they brought us a new one. Electric burners on the stove quit so they brought us new ones. They even replaced the faucet when it quit working!

We put a futon bunk bed in the living room that worked as a couch and fold out bed. The top bunk we used for storage for our photo orders and inventory.

In the 2nd bedroom we added a set of bunk beds with the roll out bed under the bottom one so that bed set could also sleep 3 people. So even though it was an apartment we could still have all 11 grand kids over at the same time and have plenty of sleeping room. I'm not sure the tenants down below us were happy when we had lots of them over to visit. We also had a pool that the grand kids could go to with us. And we never had to clean it or add chemicals like we did to the pool at our big house.

Apartment living

The garage was big enough for an extra freezer, and room to do some minor car repairs, like changing the oil and rotating tires, brake job if needed. In one of the garage bays we put up studio backgrounds against the wall and that was our indoor studio. It was kind of warm in the summer, but a portable AC unit fixed that. In the winter a heater Buddy warmed up the garage studio. The Heater Buddy eventually was our main heater for the van.

The Apartment was located a little closer to town than our big house/portrait studio so it was easier access to our customer base of high school seniors and family portraits. I think the neighbors might have thought we were dealing drugs as people would pull up to get their pictures and we would bring them out to their car in a photo box, and they would give us money. The apartment was a pretty stress free life style, and quiet. Most of the neighbors stuck to themselves compared to a neighborhood with houses where you would talk with your neighbors. Most of the neighbors in our surrounding buildings didn't have kids.

Since we didn't have all the property and house work to do we pretty much had lots of free time, that we spent watching TV, playing on the computer and putting on weight and getting out of shape. It was nice, but got kind of boring after awhile.

One thing we did while watching TV was to watch and research the Tiny House movement. It did make a lot of sense to us to go small. The tiny houses seemed like a way out but they were priced like \$50k or more and you needed property to put them on.

In the meantime no matter what we tried the photography business and income kept going down. Previously we could send out direct mail to the senior portrait market and get lots of response

Apartment living

and people booking sessions. The last senior direct mail piece we sent out in 2015, 1000 flyers, we got zero calls on. So after that mailing we haven't done any more mailings and just relied on word of mouth and repeat business from previous customers.

With income dropping, and the \$1200 rent payment going up a couple times and was now \$1300+, we would have to down size again or go out and get full time jobs. Working full time normal jobs we would lose our freedom to spend time with our grand kids and mess up our schedule with our remaining photo portrait business. When we did have weddings or portraits we made good money, but sessions and wedding jobs were getting less and less.

Chapter 7 Finding other income

With the photo business still slowing down we had to look for other income. We didn't want to give up the freedom of making our own schedule, like we have with our own business.

As we got older it was more important to us to be able to spend time with the grand kids than making lots of money. Both of us spent a lot of time with our grandparents when we were growing up. We treasured those memories and we wanted the same for our grand kids.

We thought about doing photography around the country, maybe like a traveling photographer business. Perhaps travel scenic photos or portraits on location using our web site to get business. Good idea but still too many bills and not enough income for that business model.

Dave Ramsey mentioned on one of his shows about a guy making good money being a handy man. We both have a lot of experience working on houses and doing basic house repairs. I thought about adding a handy man service that might be a perfect additional income source. In the Summer of 2015 I advertised my handy man service on social media, our web site and to our customers. Nothing, no response at all, back to the drawing board, keep trying.

With winter coming up and our photography slow season coming up I knew I needed to do something. The slow season in photography used to be January and February, now the slow season was mid November through April. Doing nothing for 5 months besides watching our bank account drop did not seem like a very fun time. There were no repairs to do, no firewood to chop up, no chickens to take care of, just sitting in the apartment watching TV or playing on the Internet waiting for the phone to ring.

Finding other income

In November of 2015 I was flipping through help wanted ads and saw one that said, “hired on the spot”. I liked that idea, a job I couldn’t get turned down on. I went in and filled out an application and the first of December I had a part time job at the local Amazon sort center.

They had flexible 4 hour shifts and days that you got to choose from. That would be perfect for our photo sessions as we could pretty much make our own schedule and still pick up a little extra income. Paid holidays, dental and eye insurance benefits too.

After almost a year of watching me working there Cheryl wanted to help with the extra money too so in October 2016 she applied at Amazon. She was hired right away also. Since we got to pick our own hours we scheduled the same shifts and rode in together.

Without the yard and house to take care of we didn't get the exercise that we used to. We call Amazon our health club job. We get paid to workout, builds up some muscles, and we both lost 20 pounds. As of September 2018 we're both still working there part time. As a bonus, we work the 5:00 AM shift, so we're allowed to show up for work early, like the night before, with our house.

In 2016 we tried to get the driving, delivery business going. I tried Uber because I like driving and people were making really good money they said. I had a 2001 Saturn SL2 which was a great economical car but too old and not much room for delivery business. I knew the Amazon package delivery was coming to Kansas City too I went and got a new Subaru to use. Then Uber decided to flood the market by adding on drivers and dropping rates. The way to make the best money was to drive at night around the downtown bar, club scene.

Finding other income

So after trying Uber for a few months I gave up on Uber.

Another option we tried was Uship. After watching the Shipping Wars on TV that seemed like an option to add some income. We both like driving and traveling. Plus since you bid on jobs you get to pick your own schedule. We can forward our calls while on the road to schedule photo appointments so there was no down side of not being by the phone. We did a few shipments but with the low bidding amount of hours involved, and vehicle expenses involved it just wasn't profitable enough for our expenses. Expenses like food, health insurance, rent, car payments.

A side note to the Uship, when we built the Camper Van I did so with the idea that we could use it to ship stuff with. So the layout is made to haul long packages or large ones if we ever wanted to do shipping in the future.

In September 2017 the Amazon Flex delivery finally arrived in Kansas City with the warehouse only about 15 miles from us. They advertised \$18-25 an hour which would be perfect .At \$25 an hour we could cover our bills with and work as many hours as we wanted Also flexible hours that we got to pick so it could fit in with the photo business customers.

A few issues we didn't like about the flex driving, such as the \$18-25 advertised rate was usually \$18 an hour and not \$25 an hour. At \$18 an hour, minus gas and expenses, we were making less than we were at the Amazon warehouse. And you had no idea where your next route could be. It could be out on gravel roads or could be downtown KC or in a town 25 miles away.

It was a fun job but the \$18 wasn't that great per hour income so

Finding other income

by the end of the year 2017 we discontinued Flex driving. We sold the Subaru since we weren't driving it and just had our camper van.

House and pet sitting, I'm not sure how this even came about. Maybe from a Facebook group on making money living in an RV or something. We both have always enjoyed animals and pets since we were kids. We've taken care of our houses, plants, pets and yard for 30 plus years so that was easy. Living out of our camper van we didn't have to leave a house behind to go do house sitting. This might be a good thing.

In November 2017 we stayed at a friends house while they were on vacation and watched their dog and house for them. I think we charged \$25 a day, and it was a nice warm house instead of staying in the cold van. They had a shower with more than 2 gallons of water, a full size kitchen, a washer and dryer. It even came with a fun dog for us to play with and to keep us company. And we even got paid to top it off.

I put a house sitting page on our web site and mentioned our house pet sitting service in our monthly photography newsletter. We offered the service to just our friends and photo customers at first. We started picking up more house sitting jobs, from friends, relatives and customers. By the middle of 2018 we we're spending about 1/3 of our time house sitting instead of staying in our van. And like our Amazon warehouse part time job and our photo business which by now was part time, we could make our own schedule around the other jobs.

Finding other income

With the cutting of expenses by moving into our camper van and the 3 flexible jobs, things finally stopped looking like a train at the end of the tunnel. And we still had the freedom to make our own schedule and doing work that we enjoy.

Chapter 8 Big Decisions

Winter of 2016-2017. The portrait photography has always been slow in the winter months especially January and February. Now with the flooded portrait market the slow season has become more like November through May, which obviously means the busy profitable months have gone down from 10 a year to 5 months. We had to make a living choice as the apartment was getting too expensive for our income. We looked at mobile home parks, other smaller apartment rentals, places further out of town in smaller cities. Finally coming to the conclusion that the least worst option might be doing the tiny house living, except in an RV, a van RV.

We had both been kind of sick since December of 2016 with coughing and runny nose fun stuff, and it was March. Cheryl had gone in twice to the hospital ER for breathing problems. They finally said she had bronchitis. We both had coughs that seemed to just not go away. Not something that would stop you in your tracks but enough to know something isn't right. Kansas winters are not very fun as you get older. Staying indoors most of the time doesn't help.

In March of 2017 we took a trip to Florida in our, kind of, converted Dodge Mini Van Camper. The mini camper van was a good idea but not the ideal situation for 50 year olds. We took 9 ice chests and made an elevated floor out of them. The ice chests held all of our clothes, food, cameras, extra supplies and tools, food and so on. We made our bed on top of the chests with an air mattress and sleeping bags. It was a good idea but hard to stand up in a mini van to stretch out.

Through Uship we picked up a small rattan chair from Lawrence, KS and an antique desk from downtown Kansas City to deliver to

Big Decisions

Texas and to Florida. We made the deliveries and stayed a few nights in Florida at campgrounds.

On the way back we noticed our breathing problems and feeling sick were gone. We figured well it's obvious we just need to go to Florida or somewhere warm for the winters. We also got to check out many RV's and get some ideas at campgrounds while there.

We noticed several home made DIY big vans there, not the typical ford or Chevy vans of the 70's and 80's, but larger, taller vans, that looked like over sized work vans. We peaked in and talked to a few of the people and they told us a little about them and how they built them.

On the trip home we were talking about these bigger vans as a potential living option. Back in 2015 we had looked one at the local Dodge dealer and noticed that it might make a great RV.

Also on the way back from Florida we noticed a lot of these tall white vans were everywhere. Some were different kinds of work vans and a few were converted vans to RVs. Like our old Roadtrek but bigger.

Going from St. Louis to KC on I-70 it seemed like a non stop flow of these new vans being towed heading east. We we're thinking we really need to check into these vans, they seem to be everywhere. We thought the brand new ones might be coming in from the West coast or something and headed east. After we got back to KC we started checking them out at our local Ford dealer. We learned that all of the Ford transit vans were actually built here in Kansas City. Well that explains the caravan of them we saw on I-70 on the way back from Florida.

Big Decisions

We had to make some decisions and soon. We just didn't make enough money through the photo business and Amazon part time to pay all the bills.

Is living out of a van really practical? What would people say? Should we just go both go get full time jobs? Would we have to work 40 plus hours a week at \$15 an hour at a job we would probably hate just to be able to pay rent, and lose our freedom of spending time with our grand kids and family?

When it came down to the big decision of what to do, it was without a doubt. Let's go for the van RV life for 1 year, keep our freedom, and then we can move back into a small studio apartment, somewhere.

Chapter 9 Taking the plunge/ Lets do this!

In May 2017 we finally decided to take the plunge to buy a Ford Transit van 250 and build our own custom RV to live in full time. After hours and hours of Internet searches and going back to the Ford Dealer to ask lots of questions it seemed like the van was the best overall option for what we needed.

The Class C RVs, are usually bigger than the van type RVs and they are built on a truck or van frame with a cab and bed overhang over the cab. The vans are usually classified as Class B RVs, the smallest of the RVs. Class A RVs are the biggest RVs usually built on a bus or truck frame.

Since the class C RVs were already built they were actually a little cheaper or close to what we could build our new van for. However the size of them would make it really hard for everyday driving in town. Plus the van is much easier to park and to find a parking spot. The Transit van we can park in most parking lots and it's pretty easy to drive with great visibility plus it offered better gas mileage.

There were hundreds of options it seemed like to pick and choose from when ordering our new van. We were crossing our fingers that we ordered the necessary options and didn't order unnecessary ones. We picked out the Transit Van 250, Extended length with the high top, which is their longest and tallest van. After being in the van a few months it seems like we did good on the options ordered. At first we had picked out the size a little shorter than the extended length but then changed our minds when we realized it wouldn't be big enough for what we wanted to put in it.

An option that we should have skipped out on were the rear

Taking the plunge/ Lets do this!

window defrosters. The tinted windows and bed area block much of the rear windows while driving and much of the time the inside window covers are on the back windows. The dark tinting on the rear and side cargo door we had done afterwards but should have been ordered with the van.

The side mirror heaters we should have added. A winter ice storm covered the mirrors with a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of ice. Chipping the ice off without breaking the mirrors seemed to take forever in the freezing temperatures and wind. The standard Sirius radio works great but doesn't have the tuning buttons on the steering wheel. Spending a little more on the radio with the steering wheel buttons and Blue Tooth would have been a good investment since we spend so much time in the van and it's our only vehicle. Rear speakers would be a good add on also.

The remote starter is an option we will add this coming winter. With the remote starter we can start the van from the bed in the back on the cold mornings and warm up the place before we get up. During the hot humid summer nights we can start it up to run the air conditioner for 10 minutes or so without getting out of bed.

A couple of options that we did order that worked out great are the high output alternator, and the 2 batteries instead of one. The van radio can go for hours without much battery power drop. Running the headlights, AC/ heat and the 1000 watt front inverter is not a problem. The dual van batteries and high output alternator do a really good job. We also ordered the 150 watt inverter that is in between the front seats, good for running a small battery charger or laptop while driving.

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The van was supposed to be done in late June or early July, which would be perfect as our lease was set to expire on our apartment July 31st. After the 31st the rent almost doubles if we have to pay month to month.

In July we finally got the build and finish date, which was, August 10th. Not good since now we now have to pay for another month's rent of \$2200 and that's if it gets done in time for us to make it livable. There are a couple of websites that you can check on the status of your van if you order it which are cool if you want to see the progress. The actual van build takes less than a week so it goes quickly once they start on it. We are just outside of Kansas City where all the Ford Transit Vans are built so it's local delivery for us and that saved us a few days.

And then at the end of July, just to add some unwanted excitement, we get a notice that all sales of already built vans and vans being built are put on hold because of a drive shaft recall. Even the vans that were already built but not shipped out from the factory could not be shipped until the drive shaft recall could be fixed on them.

At this point we had no idea when our van would be built. We couldn't purchase an already built new van on a lot because they couldn't sell those either. Finally some good news, a few days later we found out that the vans that hadn't been built yet would be built with the new drive shaft set up and they are continuing production. Then around the 1st of August there was a big hail storm in Kansas City and many of those vans that were already built and ready for shipping now had hail damage. So we did get lucky there also as ours hadn't been built yet.

Taking the plunge/ Lets do this!

Chris from the Olathe Ford Commercial dealership called us on the 9th to let us know our van had arrived on the lot. It was almost closing time but we couldn't wait to see our new home. We ran over to the dealership and checked it out and took a few pictures. The next day we were going to pickup up our Texas grand kids so it wasn't until the August 11th before we could go in and do the paper work and take her home.

Most camper van owners name their vans so we decided to name our new home Shell-E. Cheryl was born and raised in California and we both like hanging out at the beach and collecting sea shells so that's the name we came up with.

Chapter 10 Pre-Building

Since we didn't have much time to put the van together between the van delivery date and the apartment move out date, we started building the van insides in our apartment garage in June. Thankfully our neighbors didn't complain about the board sawing and smelly Varathane that we covered the cabinets and wood walls with.

We got the measurements from brochures and off the Internet of the exact wheel well placements, length, height and width. We made probably half a dozen trips back to the dealer to see how the insides were shaped and exactly where walls and support beams were located. Then we would go back home and measure and figure out where we would put everything.

After we drew it out on paper we then drew it with chalk on the garage floor the actual size. We got boxes and stacked them where stuff would fit, like the fridge, kitchen cabinet, shower, and bed.

There were many nights spent since the order date, staying up watching lots and lots of YouTube videos on every aspect of building a van or truck RV. Forums and Facebook were also amazingly helpful on deciding many of the technical things. Some of the van builds were incredible with great engineering craftsmanship and electronics.

Many van projects were way cool but way over my building expertise level. I had helped my grandpa and uncle build their houses when I was a kid, took a high school wood working class, so that was pretty much my wood working education. After high school I was an auto mechanic for about 5 years so I had basic automotive electrical knowledge. Building the electrical in an RV was completely different than just your typical car or truck.

Pre-Building

Like combining 12 volt power to the RV part of the van, then using 120 power from outside power sources and using 120 power to the RV part.

YouTube was probably my favorite educational source. It seemed like everything I needed to put together there were videos of people who had already done it. From plumbing, bed and cabinet building, even down to making the battery cables.

There were so many excellent ways to build an RV and different ways to do the wood building, electrical and plumbing it left my head spinning on which way to go with it. Finally I was running out of time, so I just had to stop watching any more videos and just do it. I looked at my van building as my practice RV. I could change things later that didn't work as expected and needed to be changed. If and when I build my next van I could use what I learned from this one so I had to look at it as an experiment or practice and just do it.

One challenge with the van is that it isn't a square box inside. The ceiling is curved or arched from side to side, and the roof is higher at the front then it is at the back. The side walls also curve in towards the top, so there is more width at the floor than at the top. Everything had to fit perfectly with little or no margin for error. That would be fine if we were engineers or professional builders and had the van there to make sure everything fits. But we didn't have the van yet and we were using pen and paper and chalk on the garage floor instead of computer building programs.

Amazon Prime Day! Both of us work part time at a local Amazon sort center, 16 hours a week so we get a little discount on Amazon purchases. Amazon made it much easier to get the stuff we needed

Pre-Building

to build our van.

When going onto forums, blogs, Facebook, YouTube or websites, many would list the links to the items on Amazon that they had used in their van builds. That made it really easy to know exactly the piece of equipment they were talking about.

In July Amazon has their Prime Day with their big summer discounts. I had a huge list of things I needed for the van and was hoping some of the items would be on sale. I was not disappointed, almost \$2000 later I had purchased many of the more expensive items and many smaller items, on sale, through Amazon. Everything delivered free to our apartment without having to go searching stores for items needed. A huge time saver.

Many things in building our van weren't available locally in any stores and while searching many clerks had no idea what I was looking for. I was going to go with 2 solar panels but then they put them on sale for only \$99 so I got 3 100 watt panels to put on the roof. Cables, power inverters, pumps, stove, sink, shower tub, table legs, roof vent fan and lots of other pieces came through Amazon. We even got our 12 volt RV refrigerator through Amazon!

Locally we bought all the wood, lots of the plumbing connectors, hoses, flooring, insulation and finishing products. I got a lot of blank and confused looks when explaining what was needed for the plumbing. A combination of home plumbing type hookups were used with hoses with clamps, then they had to interchange with each other, which apparently they don't. PVC pipe along with some made for RV plumbing. Being a do it yourself builder I didn't know what didn't work so I just made things work.

Pre-Building

When putting the interior together everything seemed to take longer than planned. The bed and bench seat cushions were a good example of taking 10 times longer. The original plan was to have 4 equal sized cushions. Two for the bench seats to sit on and two to use for the bench seat back. Three of the four cushions would be used for the bed when we made it. The fourth one would have to be stored somewhere when the bed is made. When going over the final sizes for the cushions we realized that the 3 sections wouldn't fit right with the bench sizes. The table size and the seat backs were too tall to fit properly. It was a couple inches off so we had to redesign the bed bench sizes and cushion sizes making it equal thirds. With the redesign we ended up with 2 wide cushions and 2 more that are half the width of the 2 large cushions. Put together it would equal 3 sections and the seat backs were now the perfect size.

The 4 inch cushion material got delivered and we were excited to try them out. We sat on them to see if they would work good for the benches. The cushions seemed perfect, nice and sturdy for the bench seats. We then laid them on the floor to see how they would sleep since they were also the bed cushions. It was nice and firm, sort of like putting a blanket on top of a wood floor. We both looked at each other with that, back to the drawing board type look. Cheryl came up with the idea to try a mattress topper. So off we went to stores looking for a mattress topper. We found good one on sale for \$220, not exactly what was in the budget. Between the material, cushions and topper the cost of the bed cushions were now close to \$500, my original estimate was maybe \$75. Wrong!

Pre-Building

Cheryl and our oldest daughter had searched online on how to make the covers for the 4 inch cushions and were ready to start sewing the covers. However the foam part of topper added another 2 inches so again back to the drawing board, again. We ended up getting out the kitchen electric knife and cutting the cushions in half so instead of 4 inches thick there were now 2 inches thick.

It was a tight fit but we stuffed the topper in the covers with the cushions and zipped them up. About 2 months longer than expected but they they are really comfortable. The other part of the mattress topper rolls up like a sleeping bag and we lay it out on top of the cushions when we make the bed at night. This makes an extra layer to protect the cushions and makes the bed a little softer.

Another part of the pre building wasn't building but figuring out how much room we needed for everything we wanted to have in the van. About a month from move in day Cheryl took the stuff she wanted to use in the van and put it in the tall metal cabinet we were going to use for storage. All the kitchen utensils, food storage, pots and pans, everything had it's spot. I took all my camera equipment and related items and put those in the bottom 2 shelves. At the end of the month she had noticed many kitchen items she hadn't used in the last month. So the stuff she wanted to keep but not use in the van went in to the storage unit we rented.



Chapter 11 Cabinets and wood frame building

The cabinets and interior were hard to decide on since there are so many really great van builds on the Internet. The good thing about building it ourselves is that if something didn't work out as planned we could always change it out. The hallway is 22 inches wide at the narrowest part, wide enough for us to squeeze by each other when passing.

We had a big metal cabinet that we used in the house, 18 inches deep, 72 tall and 36 wide. It was a perfect fit so we went ahead and used it instead of selling it. Our plan was to swap it out with wood cabinets but so far it's still working good. It's on the passenger side by the sliding side door, it overlaps the door opening by a few inches.

For the kitchen area we purchased 2 kitchen cabinets already built from Menards. The base floor cabinet, has the sink and stove built into it. It's 36 inches wide, 34 tall and 24 deep with the 2 doors in the front. The cabinet directly over the base cabinet is smaller, 36 wide, 12 deep and 14 inches tall.

I attached a 2x6 board to the van wall behind the upper cabinet and bolted the cabinet to it. The lower cabinet sits on the floor. On each side of the cabinets is 3/4 plywood wall from floor to ceiling. The one towards the front of the van has the shower on the other side of it. The plywood on the back end of the kitchen cabinets is the wall for the refrigerator, microwave, and laptop computer storage shelves. On the other side of the refrigerator cabinet is another 3/4 inch plywood wall that fits up against the bed and table area frames. The refrigerator area is 24 inches wide. On the bottom of the area we store our convention oven. The refrigerator sits on a shelf 20 inches above the floor. Above the fridge area there is the

Cabinets and wood frame building

shelf for the microwave. Above the microwave are 2 shelves for laptop computers and another shelf for storage. We use a cardboard box on that shelf to put stuff in so the box can be taken down to access it.

The table bed area is made out of 2x2 boards/studs. The bed and table are raised up, so there is storage area, then on top of the level is the bench seats area with storage under them and the middle also serves as the dining room table floor. A water tank sits on the van floor under the bed benches on both sides, one for fresh water and the other for the shower drain water.

The level above the water tanks we store our clothes, extra parts, tools and miscellaneous items. Items are stored in cardboard boxes that can be slid out from under the bench seats towards the center area between the benches. 5 boxes total, the 6th spot is taken by the rear inverter and electrical components.

When the bed is made it's on top of those two levels. With the extended roof transit van we still have plenty of room for the bedroom so we can sit up in bed to read or watch TV. The TV mount is attached to the wood wall on the bed side of the fridge wall. On the passenger side we have a desk, makeup mirror area. Below that is the hanging clothes closet, with the flat and smaller hangers we can fit about 12 hanging items.

We didn't fill in the cubby holes in the walls behind the wood bed and cabinets so we could use those spaces for storage. Behind the big metal cabinet is our coat closet. We tuck the coats in between the van wall and cabinet. We can stuff our winter coats and jackets behind the cabinet in between the van wall.

Cabinets and wood frame building

Behind the bed/benches we put extra small clothes into the small air tight bags and slide them between walls. It is sometimes a challenge to find or remember where we put certain things. Sometimes we take a photo of what's in a bag before we stash it somewhere. Putting the bags there also helps a little for insulation.

Chapter 12 Electrical

Back in the 80's, right after high school I went to automotive school and was a auto mechanic for about 5 years. I had a basic knowledge about electricity and 12 volt car systems. However, combining the van alternator electricity, solar panel electricity, 120 volt home type plug in electricity, and van 120 volt inverter electricity required a little bit more learning. The more I researched about building an RV electrical system the more complex it got and I learned many things I didn't know about.

Which type and size of wire to use was a field of it's own to learn about. I went to the Internet and asked lots of beginner questions about wire and sizes. Lots of different answers as to which should be used where.

One universal answer as far as wire was it's better to use a wire that is too big than one that is too small. Using one that is too small can lead to bad things, like potential fire. There is stranded wire, which is many little wires in one wire, and then the solid wire like that is used in houses. I thought wire was wire, nope. Apparently stranded wire works great for DC type electricity like in a 12 volt RV system. Solid wire does not work so well with a 12 volt DC RV system. Then there are the battery cables that you need to hook up the batteries to each other.

I found out that battery cables, were not the best to use for, battery cables. Regular battery cables don't bend very well so when you are running cables in tight areas it's really hard to make them fit. Batteries that are side by side need short cables so a flexible cable makes hooking them up easier. What many people use is welding wire, looks just like battery cables but the welding wire is easy to bend.

Electrical

I ended up using several different sizes of wires depending on what devices I was hooking up. With each different item or appliance in the van running off of 12v you need to know how much power the item will need. Power is measured in watts and or amps and not just volts. Led lights need way less power than the 12v refrigerator or ceiling vent/fan. So different size wires are necessary for each item. The distance makes a big difference also when running the cables. Rule of thumb, make the battery type cables run the least amount of distance as possible. The cables going from the batteries to the fuse box, inverters and 12v charger were much larger than the ones going from the fuse box to the appliances. You don't need overkill like using a too big of a wire as that adds in unnecessary costs and sometimes it's a little harder to route the wires.

The solar panels have special wires/connectors to hook up to each other so that was a little easier to select the right wires for them. There are however different ways to hook up solar panels to increase voltage and efficiently using different charge controllers. The solar panel controller is in between the solar panels and batteries. It controls the voltage and amperage going into the batteries so they don't over charge. There is a circuit breaker between the power controller and batteries in case the power needs to be cut off from the solar panels.

The basics of the electrical system I came up with was to use 3 100 watt solar panels and 3 group 31 marine/RV 12v AGM batteries. I was going to use either 2 or 4 6 volt golf cart type batteries but the spot I had for them wouldn't fit 4 batteries.

Electrical

The spot would fit 3 batteries perfectly so I went with the 12 volt batteries. The 6 volt batteries need to be installed in pairs to make the 12 volt. 12 volt batteries can be an odd amount, such as 1 or 3 and they can also be an even amount such as 2.

There are 2 inverters to convert the 12 volt to 120 volt, a 1000 watt one under the passenger seat and a 2000 watt one in the back by the batteries. The electrical center where the three batteries are, the 2000 watt inverter, fuse box, main power cut off switch and 12 volt charger are in the back just inside the rear passenger side door.

Inverters, there are two different types, make sure to get the right one or you might be frying some of your chargers and other 120 volt powered appliances. When I started the van build planning I had no idea there were different kinds of inverters. I only knew about the one type, which was usually pretty inexpensive. Then I found out if you don't use the more expensive Pure Sine inverter then it can and will fry many of your appliances and chargers.

The van 120 voltage can come from one of the two inverters or there is an extension cord coming up through the van floor so the van can be plugged in from a house or campground power supply.

The front seat 1000 watt Pure Sine inverter is powered from what is called CCP, customer connection point, which are 3 60 amp hookup posts beside the drivers seat on the left side between the door. To hook up the inverter to get the maximum amps I made 3 battery cables that hook to each of the 3 CCP posts and then spliced the 3 cables into one. That gave me 180 amps to go to the inverter under the passenger seat.

Electrical

The power cable goes from the CCP to a circuit breaker attached to a board, attached to the back base of the driver's seat. From the breaker it goes along the floor to the inverter. The inverter ground cable is attached to a bolt by the emergency break handle for a good ground. The inverters also have a separate small ground wire going to the van body.

The main use for the front 1000 watt inverter is to power a 35 amp charger to charge up the 3 12 volt RV batteries in the back, in case the solar panels don't supply enough power. If there isn't much sun, especially in the winter or too much power is getting used then the 35 amp charger can charge the batteries. There is an orange extension cord used to connect the front inverter to the charger in the back, ran through the walls and behind the cabinets. The 35 amp charger uses 120 volts.

The 2000 watt inverter in the back is powered from the 3 RV batteries. It is used for the microwave, convection oven, hair dryer, computers, and battery chargers.

The rest of the wires in the RV section are two wires to and from the fuse box in the back. It's a closed type system meaning none of the RV 12 volt wires are grounded to the van frame or body. Each 12 volt power outlet has a positive and negative wire coming from the fuse box.



13 Plumbing

The plumbing had it's own challenges due to the fact that I was trying to make pieces fit together that weren't designed to fit together. I would go to the Home Depot or Menards and tell them what I was trying to accomplish and what I needed and many times I got a blank stare.

The sink was the easiest as it drained straight down and over a few inches from the sink drain. I put together several pieces that adapted to the sink and to a drain hose into the 5 gallon tank in the cabinet under the sink. A couple of months later I discovered that they make a special drain hose that screws right into the sink drain, with the hose and goes right to the bucket. That would have saved me several pieces and a few hours of trying to make it work.

The shower required a lot more creativity. Trying to figure out how to get the water to the shower, have it heated. Then get the shower drain water to a tank on the opposite side of the van by the passenger side rear wheel well. At first we got a garden water sprayer that you pump up with the handle that held about 3 gallons of water. We attached a shower head to it, then tested it out in the apartment and it seemed to work fine.

It was a pain to have to pump it up though to get pressure to it. It would be much easier if I could hook up a motor pump to it. Then I was reading about showers on a van forum and someone gave me the link to exactly what I was looking for. The water pickup had a pump at the end of the hose and rechargeable battery built in. We could fill up the sink and use that for our water supply. Still only 2 gallons or so of water but that was good enough.

To heat the water was the next problem to solve. There were

Plumbing

many different kinds of water heaters, gas ones, electric probes, heating elements to put into the water tank, tank and tank less ones. None of them seemed to get excellent reviews, while being small and affordable. We figured for as much as we need hot water, the quickest and easiest way would be just heat it up on the stove in a pan, and that has worked well until we find a better way.

Now to get the used shower water from the shower drain to the tank is the next project. Most RVs seemed to have the shower right over an exterior gray water type tank mounted under the van so it's gravity fed into the waste tank. I needed to use the RV in zero degree Kansas temperatures too so I came up with a different plan.

You can put a heater on the gray water drain tanks under the van or RV but that requires more power. I figured if I had the drain tank in the van then it would be less likely to freeze as long as we were living in it everyday.

I built a wood base of 2 x 6's to put the tub on, it is actually a 2x3 foot mop basin sink, not really designed for a shower to stand in but it works. After several trips to the hardware store I came up with a set up to come out of the bottom of the tub, and then a 90 degree turn. It then went through a PVC pipe to a smaller hose through a filter, then to a pump that would pump the water out of the shower and over to the shower waste water tank on the other side of the van.

The shower waste water tank holds just the used shower water, not other gray water. It's located by the right rear wheel well on one end and next to the batteries on the other side of the van. The shower/tub is located right behind the drivers seat.

Plumbing

The shower originally was enclosed with clear plastic and a shower curtain on the entrance side. We wanted plastic instead of a solid wall so we could recline the drivers seat somewhat to sleep in if necessary. If we put a solid shower wall behind the drivers seat it would leave no room to recline. We never did recline the drivers seat, so in April we replaced two of the 3 plastic walls with the thin vinyl white shower wall material. Now the shower curtain side behind the drivers seat are the only non solid walls. Also our grand kids decorated the front of our shower basin with some of our favorite shells that we have collected over the years! It's really fun to look at.

In April we also upgraded the shower drain pump and water supply pump. With the original build wiring and switch set up, one of us had to turn on the drain pump switch from under the kitchen cabinet. The other person also had to turn on the shower water pump in the sink. I hooked up a drain switch inside the shower, beside the shower head. Also added another 12v water pump and switch so now the shower water supply can be operated from inside the shower by the person taking a shower. This set up works great and gives you more control of your shower.

The shower drain tank is a 13 gallon tank. To drain the shower drain tank I ran a 3/8 drain line with an inside valve through the van floor.

The fresh water tank is a 26 gallon tank. It is located by the driver's side rear door. Just open the rear door and the fill hose to the tank is right there. We use a 50 ft water hose that shrinks up when empty and expands when in use. Perfect for storage. We also have a water filter we attach to the hose when filling the tank.



Chapter 14 Van arrival-20 days till move in

We took the Shell-E van home to our apartment on 8-11-18 and immediately started putting in the bed and cabinets to see if they would fit. Shell-E is the name we gave our new van since Cheryl grew up on the beach in Southern California and we both love going shell hunting. Check out the front of our shower/bathroom!

The bed frames had to sit perfectly over the wheel well covers or nothing would fit right. Somehow they fit and then we set the kitchen cabinet and the shower in, it all fit perfectly. The countless trips to the Ford dealer to measure and Internet searching and studying the Ford van manual had paid off.

After we confirmed that everything would fit, we took everything back out so we could start on the flooring and adding insulation. Once we put the bed frames and cabinets in permanently we wouldn't be able to insulate the parts of the walls that were covered so we concentrated on those areas first .

The apartment lease was up on August 31st so we had only 20 days to get her done enough to move into. Also in that 20 days our 3 grand kids from Texas had come to stay with us for a week. We were still working our photography and Amazon jobs and had to get the remaining stuff packed to move out of the apartment and moved to the storage space we rented.

The flooring was time consuming and it made it seem like our progress was slow. We took out the matt that came with van to use for a template to cut the insulation and plywood. Then we put 1/2 inch pink board insulation down on top of the original black matt along with 1/2 inch plywood flooring type board on top of the insulation. On top of the board we layed out the vinyl flooring

Van arrival 20 days till move in

that had a old wood type look, it actually looks like real wood. It feels like you are on an old beach boardwalk and we were really happy how the floor came out.

It was the 18th and the only thing we had finished was the floor, since we had been spending time with the grand kids and working.

We promised the grand kids, all 11 of them, that we would take them camping while the Texas girls where here visiting. So on the 18th we filled Shell-E with sleeping bags and camping gear and went camping. It was was a very hot humid Kansas night but everyone had a great time camping out. Inside was very hot because there were not any vents put in yet. We had a little battery powered fan and that was it. After telling ghost stories and lots of giggling everyone finally fell asleep.

The next day Cheryl took a lot of her jewelry and let all the grand kids take turns picking out the pieces that they wanted. Since we were downsizing this was one of the things she wanted to do. This way they can enjoy the things she doesn't wear now instead of waiting until they get them from her will. Each of the girls got to choose several pairs of earrings and bracelets. For the boys she got goodies that they would enjoy so they didn't feel left out.

On the 20th we got back to work building the insides, putting reflectix insulation on the walls where the cabinets were going. Next came the bed and table frames with the water tanks on the bottom. The hardest thing to put in was the big metal cabinet since it was so awkward. We must have been fun to watch as we were trying to fit a 6 foot cabinet in this van without punching a hole in the roof or siding.

Van arrival 20 days till move in

By the 24th we had most of the cabinets in but were still building on the bed frames and adding more insulation where needed. The bed frames had to line up perfectly before we screwed them down so the table could make the middle boards for the bed.

The plumbing got hooked up next and another prayer answered, no leaks from the shower drain or the main water supply tank.

The 29th the batteries got hooked up to the 2 inverters. I turned the red power switch on and to my delight nothing went up in smoke. The refrigerator arrived and we got it installed and working off of the batteries. We made all of the battery cables and that took a long time. The solar panels would have to wait until next week as there wasn't enough time left to install them and the roof vent fan.

We had the basic, important stuff, the fridge and the 2000 watt inverter hooked up to run Cheryl's hair blow dryer. The last 2 days we had to finish stocking the van and moving out of the apartment.

We emptied and cleaned out the apartment with the help of our 3 daughters. The last to go out of the apartment were Cheryl's plants. They wouldn't survive in the van so our girls all took them to their homes. You really don't realize how much stuff you have until you have to move it. At 11 PM on the 31st we said good bye to the apartment and we were officially homeless. Well not really, but we were now officially full time RVers.





Chapter 15 Full time Van life begins 8-31-17

August 31, 2017, move out day for the apartment and move in day for Shell-E. The first night we headed out to our oldest daughters drive way to spend the night.

It's hard to comprehend how dark the inside of a van is until you wake up in the middle of the night and open your eyes to nothing but black. Panic sets in for a second until you find a flashlight and find your way to the potty. The window blackout shades we made worked perfectly as not one bit of light from the outside came in. We hadn't installed the ceiling vent yet so there was no light coming in from that.

Other than being pitch black, the first couple of nights went well. The bed was super comfortable and just enough room to stretch out. The fridge worked fine so we had food and drinks and the bathroom worked as planned.

Full time van living was a little bit easier since we had lots of family and friends in the area. We could always fall back on them in case things went bad. We always had options to driveways we could stay in so it wasn't like we were living under a bridge down by the river.

We were very thankful for the weather the last 2 weeks of August because it was unseasonably cool while we were building the van. But then the first week of September it got hot again.

One night we stayed inside our oldest daughters house to cool down but we really missed our own bed. Especially since the blow up air mattress that we slept on, that we had given them, had issues. The seams inside came unglued or something causing one side to puff up and make it lopsided. So when one of us moved the

Full time Van life begins 8-31-17

other one got launched onto the floor. We decided the next night we would just get an extra fan and sleep in the van. We discovered another option if we were doing an overnight stay at someone's house. We can just bring in the van bed cushions to sleep on.

When it is that hot it is hard to cook so we do resort to more salads or a trip to a fast food place. We found that the fast food places are a great spot to write a book too!

A question we get asked a lot is where do you stay or park at night. We got this idea from another van dweller, park in the parking lot at night where you work. Since we worked the 4:30 AM shift at Amazon we asked the boss if we could show up early for work, like 8 hours early. He didn't know of any rules against that so on the next night before we worked we showed up to park there.

We parked at the end of the parking lot, and then the security guard pulled up and asked us what we were doing. We explained that we got the okay to park overnight. He told us not to park back here, go park up by the front door so it would be safer because they could keep an eye on us. Now we have the up front parking and just have a short walk to the door in the morning.

We did find out what time the lawn sprinklers come on, at night, in the middle of the night. Because when they came on they shot right into our open roof vent that is directly above our bed.

A few of our co workers asked us about our van, if it's an RV or what? Then they told us that they work at the local Ford Plant that builds the Transit vans and told us which parts they install. If we ever had any questions about the van just ask. Good to know the people who help build the vans are as proud of them as we are.

Full time Van life begins 8-31-17

A few days after we moved we finally had time to install the solar panels and vent on the roof. We put the solar panels on first. It is pretty scary making that first hole in the roof of your brand new van.

Next came the much needed roof fan/vent installation. It's hard to explain the pit in your stomach as you cut a 14 inch square hole in the top of your brand new van, hoping that you got it in the right place and the right size. When you cut a board or water line wrong or too short you can always go get another board or hose. If you cut a hole wrong in your van roof, you can't easily go get another van roof.

Fortunately it was the perfect size! We put the vent in with the screws and a couple layers of goo to seal it down, everything looked great. The big problem is that the vent is flat and the roof is curved with 1/2 inch deep rain channels. What could go wrong there? The first leak test came in the middle of the night during a big thunderstorm. Guess who sleeps under the vent? Cheryl and yes it leaked, slow at first then it poured. We got some towels for clean up and the next day did some more sealing with more Flex Seal and more Dicor super sealing stuff. So the next storm we had a little leak and again added more sealant and so far all is dry under the vent. Happy wife happy life!

Our maiden voyage in Shell-E was to Illinois to visit Tim's uncle, he is the person that taught Tim a lot of the house building experience that he used on the van. His uncle lives out in the country, and somehow we got a wrong number on his address punched into the map app. We're driving up and down old narrow gravel roads

Full time Van life begins 8-31-17

out in the middle of nowhere trying to find his place. We finally called and found out we were 10 miles the wrong way. The van that was clean and shiny and new, now has gravel dust in every inch of it, in the door jams, on the solar panels, on the wheels, oh well, we made it to Illinois.

He seemed very pleased with the work we put into it. We slept in his house so for the first 10 days of van living, we only got to sleep overnight in our van a couple of days.

Everything worked well on the trip except our main 2000 watt inverter quit working on the way. We took the inverter from the front that charges the batteries in case of the solar panels can't keep up and put it in the back so we could run the hair dryer and stuff. In the mean time we had to ship the faulty inverter back to the company so they could send us a new one. In about 2 weeks we had our replacement inverter and it's worked perfect since then.

On the way home we found this great spot under a bridge along the the Mississippi river river to take a picture. When we first told people we were moving into an van lots of friends and some of our family teased us about living down by the river under a bridge. It really was beautiful there.

We promised the grand kids sleep overs in the van. First was the 3 year old girl and her 7 year old brother, 4 people in a small space and it was pretty warm, what could possibly go wrong?

Everything was fun until bedtime. Well the 7 year old pretty much stayed where he started but not his little sister. At one point in the middle of the night she literally wanted to kick Cheryl out of her own bed. Lucky for her she is so cute!

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The 5 year old twin girls were next now these girls are so sweet and did very well. We had dinner played games and it was time for bed. Our bed is elevated, about 4 feet from the floor, so we put the kids in the middle, then I had to be careful not to fall off the edge. It was pretty hot still and we figured out that 4 people in our bed was not enough room and not the best for sleep overs.

Well you have to be fair to all the kids and in October we finally had the 6 year old twin girls (yes there are two sets of twins!) over and who would expect 18 degree temps that night. We were afraid the girls were going to freeze to death so we were up all night just worrying that they were covered. Their 2 younger brothers who were 2 and 3 were way to young to sleep over. It would have been to hard to fit the three girls from Texas in the van at all because they were 8, 9 and 12 years old. We had to mention them all because we don't want to leave anyone out.

Needless to say we made a rule that we would sleep over in their houses and would have no more sleep overs in the van until we could make them beds on the floor when the weather was nice.

Chapter 16 Running a mobile photography business

We needed to be able to run what's left of our photography portrait business out of our van. We had been setting up our business over the last several years with the products and services that would be fit a mobile studio situation so the transition went pretty smoothly. We've had a traditional studio (brick & mortar) since 1985 so going studio less was a brand new way to run our photo business.

Offering the normal photography studio items, like frames, albums, folios, folders and other photo related items took lots of space for inventory. We eliminated all of those from our price list and just went with basic prints and digital files. This worked out great for the mobile studio set up as we didn't need to haul all that inventory around. Extra supplies such as order delivery boxes, office supplies, a few portable backgrounds and our printer we put in our storage unit that we rented. We carry several collapsible backgrounds with us for our headshots portraits as they don't take up much space.

Advertising and marketing are done using the Internet and by-word of mouth from previous customers. The website, www.tgfoto.com works out great to put all the prices, samples and details of our services on instead of having to meet a customer in person or mail them paperwork. Customers really like the prices on there when they are shopping for a photographer. Flyers we can send by email and the person getting them can print out their own to share. That saves a lot of money in postage.

Scheduling photo sessions and even weddings is done by email, text messaging and telephone. We took our old studio land line number that we've had since 1993 and switched it to one of our

Running a mobile photography business

mobile phones. That worked out well as we didn't have to change the number on all of our marketing materials. Our cell phones run our computer Internet by using the Hotspot feature. A laptop has replaced the desktop computer and big monitor. It's a little harder to retouch files on a laptop so we outsource most of our retouching to a professional retouch service by email.

Photo sessions are done on location instead of a traditional indoor studio like in the past. The outdoor more casual look has become more popular in the last few years. We can do close up headshots in our van with the small backdrops we carry if someone needs a studio background.

We make the van studio by setting up a backdrop in front of the shower/bathroom. The person/subject sits on the floor by the side door opening and we use the natural light with a few modifications. The van needs to be parked properly depending on where the sun is to get the best lighting. Rain and wind can pose a challenge also with this set up.

A portable camera flash is added to light up the background and another one is attached to the shower wall edge for a hair light. The results are it looks like the photo was taken in a regular studio.

After the session the digital picture files are uploaded to an online album and then the customer is emailed a link to the album. Print orders are done by email instead of the old traditional studio way of having customers come in to order what they wanted.

Doing orders by email has cut down on extra add on sales but it's a trade off in time and needed space. It also allows people to place

Running a mobile photography business

their order anytime day or night and from any location where they may be.

To deliver the finished prints we can go to their house or sometimes they meet us where we are working that day. Customers with prints that are from out of town we can always take them to the post office and mail them. Retouched digital files are emailed to them or put in an online album.

Chapter 17 Winter living October thru December

October in Kansas always means great pumpkin treats and cooler weather. And we found out that it gets pretty cold inside our van. Without a heater on there was about a 12 degree difference inside the van compared to outside. If it was 20 outside then it was around 30 inside. 30 degrees inside your home is pretty cold.

We started looking for ways to keep more of the heat in and the cold out. There were still places we could put more insulation up because every exposed part of metal will bring cold inside.

Tim has a infrared temperature reader and we compared bare metal to insulation covered metal, there was at least a 10-20 degree difference. All the van metal walls that weren't covered with insulation, that we could get to, got covered. So far the water tanks or lines hadn't frozen so putting the tanks inside the van was a good idea.

We heated the van with a Heater Buddy indoor propane heater and sometimes if it got really cold we would turn on the van for 10-15 minutes and that would make it nice and toasty. We did add a small electrical heater that ran off of AC 120v. We couldn't run it for extended times or it would drain our batteries too low. It was fine for cool nights but not cold nights.

The floor was the coldest part of the van, we had to wear slippers or warm socks or our feet would be super cold. There was in many cases on the cold nights and mornings a 15-30 degree difference between the floor area and the top of the van. So the top half of you could be fine but your feet felt like they were in a freezer. So on the average you were pretty warm.

Winter living October thru December

With our bedroom in the top 1/3 of the van, it stayed pretty comfortable on most nights. The heat would rise to the top where we were. We hung a extra large, beach picture, beach towel over the doors to seal in the body heat and a curtain closed the other side of the bed.

There is an art to sleeping in a van when it's cold. You need to dress in layers and use blankets in layers. Don't sleep with your face under the covers as it will cause moisture from the breathing. You need to avoid sweating so as it gets colder then you cover up more. Sleeping with warm wool socks is really helpful too, nothing worse than cold feet.

One night it got so cold that I felt like my head and nose were being burned up like a sunburn, only cold. Tim had discovered that by wrapping one of the blankets around his head, just exposing his face enough to breathe made a big difference. He kept telling me that I needed to cover my head. I guess I was too vain just didn't want to mess up my hair.

Anyway that night I was so cold and must have woke up Tim because he made me cover my head and face with a fleece blanket. I must have gotten too cold because I seemed to be in a daze the whole next day. The blanket over my head and around my face was so warm I could have slept all night, if it wasn't for the hot flashes. I hope the flashes are gone for next winter. Hot flashes are another story but it seemed that just as I got settled in and warm I would have to uncover and cool down only to cover up to warm up again after the hot flash.

The wind was a problem too, when the wind was coming from the North at 20 plus mph it made it colder inside. Our bedroom is in

Winter living October thru December

the back by the rear doors, so on windy nights we tried to park the van facing the north and that seemed to help a bunch.

Most nights we could make it through the whole night without getting up to turn the heater on. It's pretty much sucked if you had to get up in the middle of the night to get to the bathroom though. It was Tim's job to get up first in the morning and turn on the Heater Buddy and or start the van to heat up the place faster. I loved to start the stove and make some tea or coffee in the morning it really warmed up the place.

The kids got a kick out of Tim's Facebook posts of him hot boxing the van. He would turn on the van heater all the way up and turn on the heater buddy all the way up and heat up the van so we could take our showers or right before bed so we would be warm for most of the night.

During the winter every time I cooked something on the stove the smoke/fire alarm would go off and say "FIRE" "FIRE" it would scare the heck out of us. One time we were at a local park right by the Frisbee throwing course and it went off. I'm sure all the people wondered what was going on in the van but they all left in a hurry.

In the early morning hours of November 11 I woke up to a severe pain in my side. As the pain grew worse I knew I had to go to the hospital. The pain was so bad I actually rode on the floor of the van in the fetal position. Turns out I had a kidney stone. Once we got to the hospital they told me I had to be admitted because they couldn't manage my pain with regular pain pills. Sometime during the night of November 12th my blood pressure dropped and my temperature rose. My doctor noticed that I had sepsis in my kidney.

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The stone was stuck and blocking the flow so the infection just kept getting worse. They took me into surgery to put in a stint to get the infection to drain out. A few days in the ICU, most of it was quite a blur. I was all puffed up from the fluids they were giving me. Once the swelling went down a few days later, I noticed that all my muscle tone was gone. I don't ever remember being so sick. After a few months taking it slow at Amazon everything is back to normal. I do drink a lot more water now though, I don't ever want to have another kidney stone.

October was busy for the photography business with the Fall leaves but in November and December that died off. We were still working at Amazon 4 days a week during the peak season and picking up a few extra hours.

In November we discovered the idea of house sitting, probably from an Facebook RV group or something. Our first job was for one of our photo business customers and good friends.

It was a nice unseasonably warm day towards the end of November and we were playing ball with golden retriever in the back yard and then she decides to jump into the pool. Oh great, we're going to get fired from our first house/pet sitting job. We were trying to think of a way to explain that the dog was in the pool so we sent a picture of, the dog in the pool. They said no problem, the pool is her play area.

At the end of December we picked up a couple more house pet sitting jobs from other photo customer/friends. It was nice sleeping in a warm house when it was cold outside. 2017 was quite a year for change, looking forward to a calmer 2018.

Chapter 18 Heading south to warmer weather

Winter is here in full force, you can see your breath, inside the van. The temps have been very low, January 1st it was 10 below zero with wind chill of -20. Thankfully we had a house sitting job the first 8 days of January and got to pet sit with 3 dogs. They were a lot of fun and I had a blast cooking in this awesome kitchen.

While we stayed there Shell-E had to stay in the driveway without us keeping it warm. We knew about that and prepared Shell-E by draining the big fresh water tank so we didn't have broken tanks. We also put RV antifreeze into the shower drain lines so it wouldn't freeze. But there were still some things that froze, even some things in the fridge froze. Our 5 gallon fresh water bottle under the sink froze solid along with some of the tubing for water. Fortunately Tim used rubber tubes so they expanded without splitting and when melted kept flowing after we got the heat running in the van.

We decided that this Kansas cold was too much. When people ask how do you heat the van in winter I always say "Go to Florida". So January 10th we headed out for Florida with a stopover in Texas to visit our son and his family that live there.

We love to do experience gifts instead of buying toys and material things for the grand kids. Tim's Grandma's used to make these yummy caramel pecan rolls from scratch. His mom showed me how to make them so they can live on to the next generations.

We brought along all the stuff to make the rolls with the three Texas grand daughters. The rolls were a hit. Grandpa even helped the girls make chocolate and butterscotch chip cookies. Their belated Christmas gift also included a trip to the movies

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for the movie of their choice. They picked *The Greatest Showman*, it was an awesome choice.

We never want to wear out our welcome so on January 15 we headed out for Florida. At one of the rest stops we had to find our beach, summer stuff, the short sleeves and shorts. At this point we're pretty happy with our choice of moving into our van.

We store some of our extra clothes in smaller air lock sealed bags and then put the bags in the walls behind cabinets and the bed frames. The trick is to try and remember exactly where had we stored them? I now have a list of stuff on my phone and where it is stored in the van complete with pictures. This whole van living adventure is a work in progress. If it works we use it, if it doesn't work we change it or get rid of it.

On the way to Florida we parked at highway rest stops to sleep. Our first day in Florida was beautiful and sunny we went to the giant Tampa Bay RV show. There were so many cool ideas for RV's and lots to see. The best thing I saw was the exact tiny house that I would love to have if and when we move back into a stationary house, even the decor was exactly what I would have done.

Tim had read on Facebook that some of his Dodge Viper racing friends were racing at Sebring International Raceway for the next 4 days. Tim contacted one of them and he said to come on over. We left the RV show that evening and made it to Sebring around 11pm and planned to park in the Wal-Mart parking lot overnight. The manager said they don't allow overnight parking. Perfect, almost midnight and we have no idea where to park for the night. We had been to the race track on several occasions so we decided to head

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to the track to see if we could park somewhere. It was cold that night, as a cold front blew in during the late afternoon, in the low 30s by that time. We went up to the pit gate and asked if they had RV parking and said we were here with one of the race teams. He said, "There's 300 acres here, park where ever you want, no one will even notice you were there".

The next day we ran into a few old friends we knew from the Viper club and they wanted to pay Tim to take some pictures of their cars. Yeah some extra gas money.

We spent 4 days there watching the race cars from Miata's to Vipers. Tim did pictures and I just got to hang out. Camping there was fun with lots of fast cars and fun people. We could also use their flush toilets and that was a bonus. The weather was great after that first night short sleeves and no jackets.

After the races we headed to the beach on the gulf side, stopping at a rest area to park for the night. When we got to the beach we met a guy that had done the same thing we did. He built his van by himself and was traveling around seeing the sights. He gave us a few tips for stealth parking. Stealth parking is rolling up to a parking spot, turning off all the lights and going to bed so nobody can tell you are in the van.

January 22nd was my birthday so Tim let me choose the dinner spot, it was the Conch Republic restaurant, we'd been there before and the food was great. Growing up by the beach in California I love seafood. It was raining a bunch when we left the restaurant and it was almost closing time so we figured since we were their customers it would be okay with them if we took a nap overnight in their parking lot.

Heading south to warmer weather

The knock. The knock in van parking is when you are parked somewhere and security knocks on your door and tells you that you can't park there overnight. We got our first knock at a Walmart back in 1998 when we parked at a Walmart around the Florida keys in our old Chevy van with the kids. So far we haven't had any knocks in our Shell-E van. Knock on wood!

The camping at the beach and some other places is a little tricky if you don't want to spend a bunch at campsites. Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

With a little help and some tips from other online RVers we found some spots to stealth camp at a beach parking area. One tip actually came from a local police officer, if you get there later and mingle in with the other cars and leave early in the morning then you won't get the knock. So we got a few nights free parking right by the water, we could hear the waves all night.

Some of the campgrounds in certain popular areas can be expensive, as in \$300 a night or more. Definitely out of our budget. Some of the state parks are reasonable, we camped a few nights near St. Pete Beach for \$45 a night.

They have showers and laundry machines so it's a good spot to get the clothes washed and take a longer shower, longer than 2.5 gallons that is. They also have running water at the campsites so we could fill up our water tank. One of those nights we camped right next to another Ford van just like ours except there's was a shorter version and had 4wd. They had a campfire and invited us to have some s'mores with them and we each traded ideas and stories. They mentioned that their van had 72 square feet of living space so Tim had to brag that ours had 84 sq ft. We all got a laugh

Heading south to warmer weather

about that.

While we were in Florida we photographed a couple of models that we met online using our headshots van studio backgrounds. It's nice to have your indoor studio for portraits where ever we go.

February 1st we stocked up on some Florida oranges and started the dreaded trip back to the frozen tundra of Kansas. We made it our goal to spend 2 months next Winter in Florida or Texas, anywhere warmer than KC.

We decided to take the long way back and stop by the kids place in Dallas and to check out their brand new house they had just purchased but wasn't finished being built yet. It's usually 10-15 degrees warmer there than in Kansas.



Chapter 19 March thru May

We had a wedding to do on March 3rd it was an old classmate of Tim's. It was pretty cool to pull up to the venue with our house and studio and get ready right there. We already had all the cameras they just needed setting up for the wedding. The wedding was beautiful and so many nice people. The weather was pretty warm for March, in the 60's.

The middle of March it was still really cold in KC so we decided to take a trip down to Texas. Tim Jr just bought a new house and everyone wanted to go see it. Our oldest daughter and her gang and Tim and I all traveled down that way. Our middle daughter was going to go but ran into some car problems.

The kids had so much fun playing and Tim Jr took us all out to an amazing meal at a local steakhouse. We were all enjoying our meal when we heard a scream and our 4 year old granddaughter had slammed her finger in the door. A few of us ended up hanging out at the ER for a bit to find out there were no broken bones and all was ok.

We did a few headshot photo sessions with our mobile studio van while we were there. The Internet lets you get business from all around the country so when we go to places we usually are doing photography there also.

After a few days in Texas it was time to head back to Kansas. We had some house sitting to do, photo sessions and still working 12 hours a week at Amazon, 4 days, 3 hours a day. When we house sit It's pretty fun to go from my little van kitchen to a gourmet kitchen that is huge. Some of the houses we stay at have pools so we even get to sit out by the pool.

March thru May

The middle of April our middle daughter and her husband had a wedding to go to in Florida so we spent a week watching their house and 4 kids. The kids were so good we really had a great time hanging out with them. Tim had some time to make some improvements to the van. He redid the shower walls and added some new switches.

The weather was really weird this year. It went from being very cold, like 6 degrees, to hot hot, like 90 degrees by April 15th. We were hoping for a nice spring with 70 degree weather but only had a few days of spring like temperatures in between.

Since this is the time we get severe weather and tornadoes in Kansas we started looking for places that would protect us and Shell-E from hail and even tornados. We found several and I made a list on my phone that has safe spots to park depending where we are. Our favorite couple of safe spots are by two of the shopping malls. Both places had some really high parking garage spots. Shell-E is close to 12 feet high with the solar panels so we were happy to find a safe place to hide out.

One night May 2nd to be exact we saw an alert about bad weather with possible tornados, so we went over to the mall to park. At first we just parked out in the parking lot so we could see the storm coming in. We even went up on the top of the garage to get some good pictures. The storms and clouds in the Midwest are amazing.

As the storm got closer we decided to move Shell-E into the garage under the building and walk back toward the front to still watch. As we were watching the storm it was warm at first but all of a sudden the temperature dropped and the tornado sirens were

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going off around us. During the storm we were texting the kids and Tim's sister letting them know we were all right. They thought we were nuts for posting pictures of the incoming storm.

The wind changed direction and it started blowing debris at us so everyone in the garage moved away from the openings into the back of the garage. The wind got crazy you could hardly see anything outside. Then in about a half hour everything cleared up, by then it was dark and the storm had passed. The next day our youngest daughter showed us the line of a tornado and it was headed right at us.

On May 11th NASCAR was in town so we headed to the Kansas Speedway to check out the displays that they have out front. They bring in trucks and set up displays or race related items and car companies set up a few new cars. It was free plus they were giving away random prizes and samples. They were giving out small sample packets of Flex Glue. That stuff is great for van building needs.

After checking on ticket prices we decided to go to the truck races and watch Jennifer Cobb. The girls loved watching her when Tim was taking pictures at the local tracks. It turned out to be a very good race, we really had a great time and decided to stay overnight in the parking lot which was free too. About 7AM there was a knock (our first "knock") on the door. The lady said we had to go out until noon then we could come back in if we wanted to.

Chapter 20 Summer June thru September

This has to be one of the hottest summers I've seen since we moved to Kansas! Figures we would be living in a van this summer. The nights get a little warm without air conditioning but our fans keep us cool. On the hottest nights sometimes we would turn on the van air conditioner to cool off the place before we went to bed. Thank goodness for public air conditioners, family and our house sitting friends.

It's hard to do creative writing such as this book when sweat is dripping off of you onto the keyboard. It is surprising how many places you can find to sit out a 90+ degree day with high humidity. We found that we can take our laptops into places, like the local library or eating places. Some of the McDonalds have have removed their indoor playgrounds and set up places to hang out with your electronic devices with plug ins and USB charging ports.

We did some camping in June in Lawrence KS at Clinton Lake when we weren't house sitting or parking overnight at Amazon. They have beautiful campsites and great showers and bathrooms. It was quiet and peaceful so we could do our computer work and enjoy the scenery. We got a couple fold up bikes that we would take out there and ride around the campground. It was fun having a campfire to cook out on and roast some marshmallows. We figured since we have a camper van we might as well do some camping.

It was fun until it started heating up and the bugs arrived. On our 3rd trip there we made the mistake of leaving on the interior lights and the doors open. When we went inside for the night we noticed that all the outside bugs came inside, mosquitos, June bugs and gnats. Hundreds of them. We decided we would leave one light on and as they gathered around it we would swat them with the

Summer June thru September

electric tennis racquet bug zapper we had just bought. It was the best \$2 we every spent. When you press the button it zaps the bugs. As Tim was swinging at one June bug another one was dive bombing him. We were both laughing so so hard we had tears rolling down our cheeks. After that night we decided that we would find other places less buggy to camp or hold off until Fall to go camping.

That last experience also prompted us to check out air vents to go on the front windows. We found some from the Ford Transit Forum and they are perfect. They fit right on top of the front door windows and have a screen and vents built in. The air flows right in or out to the back vent without letting the bugs in. Another good investment.

Our senior portraits, family portraits and headshots stayed kind of steady through August with a slowdown in September with back to school. October is usually our busiest month with fall leaves family and senior portraits. Overall it's been a really busy Summer and time has flown by. Between Amazon, portraits, house sitting and just spending time with family and the grand kids we kept a full schedule.

We try to spend time with Tim's Mom when we can because she doesn't get out much and loves the company. She always tries to get us to stay and wants to feed us whenever we go to visit. She's had a few surgeries to clean out blocked veins and living out of the van we had time to go watch her cat and water her garden. When we had the big house and yard it seemed like we spent all of our

Summer June thru September

free time fixing up the yard and garden, now we can spend time with family and friends.

The pet sitting is so much fun, we are helping people keep their pets and homes safe and we get new pets to hang out with.

As our 1 year anniversary of moving into our van has come and past we don't have any definite plans to get full time jobs and move back into an apartment or house. On the Internet groups we can now agree with the number one reason to RV life, Freedom.

So for now I think we will stay in the van, it has proven to be a fun adventure. Last night I told Tim when the right place comes along we will be ready to move in but for now I haven't seen it.

Chapter 21 Questions & Answers

We get a lot of questions about living in a van, here are a few of the questions and answers.

Q. Are you thinking about special “bucket list” trips to places like Yosemite in addition to the beach?

A. Yellowstone and Niagara Falls are tops on the list that we haven't been to that we want to see. Then obviously anywhere warm in the Winter, maybe race car, car related stuff. Maybe Universal Studios Florida. (Cheryl wants to see both sides of the Harry Potter thing)

Q. How do you find people receive you when they find out you live in a van?

A. At first they don't believe us so it takes a minute to convince them that we really do. Half say this is so cool that they would love to do this. the other half say no way, I could never do that, especially with my spouse.

Q. Do you ever have people treat you like they might be scared of you, like you are Gypsies and will put a curse on them?

A. No, not that I know of, most probably don't know we are living in the van since it's a stealth camper and really doesn't look like an a typical RV.

Q. Have you ever had a law officer tell you to move on, you can't stay somewhere?

A. No not yet. We usually get permission first if there is any question about where we are staying.

Questions & Answers

Q. Any thoughts on adding some extra sleeping space for grand kids to spend the night?

A. Not at this point, they could always sleep on the floor, at least 2 of them or sleep in the 2 front seats as they recline. We ordered the van with the tow package so we could always get and tow a camper trailer.

Q. How do you deal with water, electric and sewage/waste when you're not in an actual campground with hook-ups?

A. We have a 26 gallon fresh water tank that can last us quite awhile plus 8 gallons of drinking water. When traveling for a month last Winter to FL we filled up at a camp ground and a race track. Lots of places also have water and dump stations. Depending the toilet system would determine how you get rid of that waste. There are a bunch of YouTube videos on how to deal with sewage/waste and the different types of toilets. Ours is a little different since all of our tanks are inside.

Q. Also WiFi, How do you get your mail and bills?

A. We get WIFI from our cell phone hotspot. We have a PO Box here locally where we spend most of our time. Bills combination snail mail and Internet, but can also call in over phone to make a payment if needed to.

Questions & Answers

Q. How do you live, (with each other) that close together in such a small place? What about when you are irritated with each other?

A. When you are that close in quarters you really think through overreacting to your spouse. instead I try to think what he was thinking as he does things and being married over 30 years you kind of start to think alike. Yes we get irritated with each other but now we talk it out and try to work through things. You just gotta let stuff roll off your back and let things go, like let things be how they are instead of how you think they should be. In our van hallway, you have to turn sideways to pass so whatever you want or need is usually on the other end and there is most likely someone in your pathway. You can't let the irritations get to you. His needs, her needs is one our most helpful books about getting along.

Helpful Internet Links

RV to Freedom Group - Learn to Live in an RV

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/rvtofreedom/>

<http://www.doityourselfrv.com/>

<http://www.ortontransit.info/>

Ford Transit Forum <https://www.fordtransitusaforum.com/>

Ram Promaster Forum <https://www.promasterforum.com/>

Ford Transit Website <https://www.ford.com/commercial-trucks/transit-cargo-van/>

Olathe Ford - Where we bought ours.

<http://olathefordcommercial.com/>

Free Campsites <https://freecampsites.net/>

Gas Buddy site <https://www.gasbuddy.com/>

Freedom Vans build site <http://freedomvans.co/>

Tiny House Magazine <http://tinyhousemagazine.co/>

Facebook Solar Powered RV's & Boondocking

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1730535217184853/>

Solar Powered Recreational Vehicles

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/solarpoweredrvs/>

The RV Entrepreneur

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/makemoneyrving/>