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Titan 'Green' Takes on New Meaning Through Student's Sustainability Efforts

Dec. 2, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Spend five minutes with Dominic Gambaiani '19 and you'll never again drink out of a disposable plastic water bottle. It won't be because you feel guilty; it's because Gambaiani's enthusiasm for protecting our planet is so contagious.

A sophomore at Illinois Wesleyan University double majoring in environmental studies and theatre arts, Gambaiani's dramatic flair puts a creative twist on living sustainably —composting, refurbishing furniture and other household goods, and even "dumpster diving."

Wading In

The Wheaton, Ill., native started doing his part to save the planet at an early age. When he was 8 years old, he received a book for Christmas entitled *True Green Kids: 100 Things You Can Do to Save the Planet*. Most kids would have taken the book's tips and been satisfied to recycle or urge their families to turn off the lights. Not Gambaiani. Instead, he wrote a letter to then-President George W. Bush, protesting his plan to cut down forest trees. Next Gambaiani encouraged his neighbors to swap unwanted clothing. He started collecting broken electronics and old paint for proper recycling or disposal. In eighth grade, a neighbor advised him to forage through the residence hall dumpsters at nearby Wheaton College at the end of the school year, and Gambaiani's dumpster-diving hobby was born.

He salvages the good, the great and the nearly worthless. His most unusual dumpster find illustrates his creative nature. Gambaiani stumbled upon a wooden giraffe with a missing head. A friend urged Gambaiani to leave it as junk, but he saw a possibility. Gambaiani sawed the giraffe at chest-level and mounted a flat piece of wood on top, making a table for his basement. Not only does Gambaiani help the earth by salvaging and reusing items, he's learned some practical DIY skills in the process. By fixing, repurposing or repairing, Gambaiani sells the items he finds but can't use himself through Facebook garage sale groups. In addition, he provides tips for living sustainably as well as saving money through his Vine and Twitter social media accounts — ([@DGambaiani](#)), creating short videos entitled "Deals with Dom."



Dominic Gambaiani '19



Dominic Gambaiani '19 repurposed a headless decorative giraffe into a table.

Furniture isn't the only thing he salvages. One Saturday night while he was still in high school, Gambaiani and a group of friends decided to go to Dunkin' Donuts near closing time, knowing product not sold that day would end up in the dumpster behind the store. Gambaiani convinced the owner to give him and his friends the large bin of donuts that remained from the day and were about to go to waste. He soon realized healthier food choices probably lay in wait in dumpsters behind grocery stores.

"The first time I peered into a grocery store dumpster, I thought it was a sin to throw all this away," he recalled. "You'd be surprised at what you find. Stuff that has nothing wrong with it, maybe the 'best by date' has passed or it's not as fresh as the new stuff that came in, or it's oddly shaped — stores just throw it away. And it's perfectly fine. I started taking stuff and either using it the day of or freezing it."

Gambaiani's dumpster food-finds are not unique. Experts report Americans waste an incredible amount of food. The guilt lies up and down the food production and distribution chain — fresh produce left in the fields to rot because it's not perfect enough to sell and costs too much in labor to haul to the landfill, waste from restaurants and grocery stores, and the stuff we buy but never cook or use, throwing that out as well. The Environmental Protection Agency has found wasted food is the single biggest occupant of American landfills, which are the single largest producer of methane

emissions in the U.S., according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Many organizations do an admirable job of donating product they can't sell or composting waste from restaurants and other food services, but Gambaiani says much more remains to be done to combat the problem. At Illinois Wesleyan, for example, SAGA has been composting food waste for years, but in the Dugout, a large amount of food waste ends up in landfills. Gambaiani's a member of both Illinois Wesleyan's GREENetwork and the Sierra Student Coalition; these groups, along with several other students, faculty and staff, are helping implement a new signage system to help students dispose of their trash correctly.

"About two-thirds of the food waste is composted behind the scenes in SAGA, which is really good," said Gambaiani. "But in the Dugout, we're trying to make it simple and yet educate people who don't know what composting is and why it's important."

Combining His Passions

Gambaiani said combining his love for theatre with his passion for the environment has been easy at Illinois Wesleyan. The University's curriculum is designed for easy academic exploration, and students are encouraged to pursue their passions in whatever combination of majors or degree programs appeals to them. In his theatre curriculum, Gambaiani has discovered set design.

"This is an entire aspect you don't get when you are on stage," said Gambaiani, who performed throughout high school. "Working in the scene shop, I built a flat that became a scenery piece for *The Boys From Syracuse*. Working in design has reaffirmed my creativity but in a different way."

He's considering combining his twin passions for his senior project by developing a wood recycling program within the theatre program. "The costume shop already keeps nearly everything and recycles pieces of clothing over and over again, but we could do a better job with some of the scrap wood. So I'm looking forward to exploring that and applying both of my majors in one place in my life."

Changing the Paradigm

Gambaiani's enthusiasm and firm-yet-friendly style has converted many of his fellow theatre majors at Blackstock Hall to his way of thinking.

"They now pay attention to what goes in our trash and what can be recycled," he said. "They've even asked me about composting, so I'm looking into that." The yummy meals Gambaiani makes in Blackstock's kitchen with his salvaged foodstuffs might also have something to do with his positive influence.

Although he believes he was already well versed in reasons why the planet should be protected, Gambaiani said his course "Environment and Society," taught by Professor of Environmental Studies and International Studies Abigail Jahiel, provided new ways of looking at the relationship between humankind and nature. The course encourages critical thinking about the environmental predicaments of today, and Gambaiani said discussions on the dominant social paradigm influenced his thinking. "When we think about how our society wants the cheapest goods, we don't really think about the production that goes into that, from labor to resources, and how much that has an impact on the root cause of so many environmental problems. It is very difficult to change behavior from wanting what's easiest or cheapest."

He knows major change is difficult for a variety of reasons. "But with every mind educated about what is happening around us, stepping stones are laid down and solutions are seen at the end of the path," he said. "I'm educating as many people as I can by actively making differences that spur discussion as to what exactly I'm doing and why."



Dominic Gambaiani '19 sorts through the TerraCycling bin in Blackstock Hall.