

ON THE ROAD

Again

THE SCENIC ROUTE

A few of the stops Sawyer and Willa plan to stop at along the way

COLORADO

SIGHTS TO SEE | ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK
SAWYER'S TAKE | "WHEN I WANT TO COLORADO I SAW A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT, AND BETTER, BEAUTY THAN KANSAS."

ALASKA

SIGHTS TO SEE | NATIONAL PARKS
SAWYER'S TAKE | "I HAD MY GOAL FOR THE GAP YEAR [WHEN I WAS] ABOUT 13 YEARS OLD, THEN LAST YEAR MY GOALS WERE SOLIDIFIED WITH GOING TO ALASKA WHICH IS BASICALLY COLORADO ON [A BIGGER SCALE]."

CALIFORNIA

SIGHTS TO SEE | THE COAST AND THE MOUNTAINS
WILLA'S TAKE | "I DEFINITELY WANT TO SEE THE BEACH WHEN WE GO TO CALIFORNIA."

by | carolyn popper

"Can you hand me a half-inch?" Two other auto tech students crowded the exposed engine of the 1986 Ford E-150 — a blue, vintage monster of an automotive — as senior Sawyer Waterman attempted to replace the gaskets that had leaked oil all over the engine. For the other students, the van is an interesting project to work on during their auto tech hour. For Sawyer, it's his future home and every paycheck he's ever saved.

"It's my baby. It's all of my money," Sawyer said.

When Sawyer asked his girlfriend of eleven months, senior Willa Ivancic, to spend the next year driving across the country living out of the van, she took two days to fully consider. She knew he was going to ask her, just like he knew he wanted Willa with him on the gap year from the time they celebrated their one-month anniversary.

And as they laid on a towel overlooking Clinton Lake on their weekend camping trip, Willa felt the way she knew she would on the gap year. So her answer was yes.

Since his first job of picking up cigarette butts off the downtown streets of KC for minimum wage, Sawyer stashed his money in the gap year fund. He was dubbed Woodside Country Club's first ever "most hard working towel boy." When he unloaded boxes for UPS after school, he lost weight burning through muscle mass from lifting hundred-pound boxes for seven hours a day. It was the hardest job he'd ever worked and his mom encouraged him to quit, but it paid 30 bucks an hour. In the end, he handed over \$6,400 in cash for the van and upwards of an additional \$2,000 in repairs.

From the assistance of Youtube tutorials, his grandpa and auto tech teacher, Sawyer had installed insulation, replaced the radiator, fuses and gaskets. Parts were cheap when he could find them on RockAuto.com. He stripped the entire back of the van to make room for the bed he would later build — that being Willa's one condition: a bed. No futon. If she was giving up half of her closet, she at least wanted a mattress under her pillow. It still needs air conditioning and a built-in shower on the outside of the van made from PVC pipes, but when they drive it around Kansas City, they can already see canyons.

"I'm so proud of him," Willa said. "He's done so much for this van, so much effort, time and money. And it's his dream."

Willa had always been independent, too. According to her mother, she never once needed to be told to finish her homework, go to bed, wake up for school, make her own hair appointments. She worked two jobs without complaint for the van. When she decided to graduate a year early, Sawyer would sit with Willa at her kitchen table until she completed her extra year's worth of online classes each night.

"We learned a long time ago the best way to parent her is to let her be her own person," her mother Sara Rieman said.

When she sat down at dinner with her mom and stepdad and told them she'd be leaving home for a year in a van with Sawyer, they urged her not to let her future be decided by a relationship. They loved Sawyer, and could see that he loved her, but both her parents were married young and divorced early, so they told her she was her own person and she couldn't lose herself to someone else's plans. As soon as she wanted to come home, they told her, they'd send a plane ticket.

And Sawyer reminded his mom that this may be the only time in his life when he can live out of a van and travel around the country. If he could go, he promised to fully fund the entire project. His mom, Kelly Main, knew he was right — he has a nickname in the family, "Sawyer the Lawyer," because he always wins his cases.

"If you raise your children to be independent, then you have to let them go and do the things they're strong enough to do," Main said.

Sawyer and Willa have never been naive, according to Willa. Sawyer says they're optimistic, but more realistic. They're aware of the likelihood that maybe they break up before the gap year begins. And if they do, Willa will fly to Europe and resume her plan to be an au pair. Sawyer will find a different travel mate. Lately, they've spent more time together to practice for the long hours together in the van, camping at nearby state parks over the weekend. Sometimes Willa is

a backseat driver. To find alone time, Sawyer might go for a run while Willa goes into town to shop.

"I'll get flashes of our future together when we're camping or driving and singing or exploring new places," Willa said.

This December, after Sawyer graduates a semester early, they'll move into their own studio apartment together downtown until they leave in the van. Willa likes that the studio apartment is small — it'll be better practice for the van. She knows that the apartment will help them figure out both what works and what doesn't when living together. It's small, but it's theirs.

They both see the plastered smiles and mechanical nods of people thinking their gap year's a little too crazy. Sawyer's church camp friends find it ridiculous he's not going to college right after high school. But both of their life goals are not to end up plagued by student loans, like both of their parents were. Willa hopes to find her career path somewhere along the gap year and Sawyer hopes to find his work in electricity, maybe as a wind turbine technician.

They're practically the same person — everyone who meets them together can tell. Willa feels like they read each other's minds sometimes. They've had three or four real fights in the time they've been dating. When Sawyer gets pessimistic, her zen, hippie attitude lifts him, which he knows will work well when the van breaks down. Senior Quinn Cosgrove notices how supportive they are to each other. Even their laughs are similar, he says.

"Willa has always smiled so freely," Willa's mom said. "She makes herself vulnerable with her smile, and that's how Sawyer is. So when she found him I was like, how did she find her exact counterpart?"

They decided they will both bring \$10,000 for the trip. Setting aside \$400 for each month in the van for necessities, they'll have enough extra in case of emergencies with the van, or if they want to try an excursion like skydiving or skiing. Willa wants to stay in Portland for a month and Sawyer wants at least two in Alaska. They haven't picked out their route back home yet.

They'll figure out which easy, transferable jobs to pick up in each city like Postmate driving or pizza delivery when they get there. Sawyer hoped he could learn enough coding to freelance on the road, but he's only reached about a base level knowledge. At night, they'll sleep in the parking areas just outside of national parks. If need be, they'll make a Walmart parking lot work. Sawyer will buy a gym membership to Planet Fitness so they can use the showers along the way. Willa dreams of picking up a stray dog on the way to bring along

Hi guys it's Lila just wanted to say hey and show you how beautiful Visby is cause it looks literally so good and it's amazing, k bye and have a cool day!

lila tulp | senior

and starting an Instagram account, maybe a blog.

"But we're not doing it for the social media attention. We're doing it to live," Willa said.

Imagining what life will look like, they both see the same thing: opening the back doors of the van to something different every morning — mountains, open fields, canyons. Sawyer will make tea, Willa will fry eggs on the portable stove. She plans to make food based on where they are, like salmon in Alaska. Willa trusts that when the van inevitably breaks down, he won't waste time to fix it. Sawyer doesn't sit around.

Without solid plans for each destination, or even a specific list of destinations, Sawyer and Willa will live without an itinerary. They want to wake up each morning surprised and exhilarated for whatever comes next.

"There's a million reasons not to do anything. But there's only one time in your life you'll be able to do something as stupid and amazing as this," Sawyer said.