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ONE MAN'S TRASH, ANOTHER'S TREASURE

"... If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?"

—The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., April 1968, Memphis, Tenn.

Chris Wilk lives in a gorgeous 3,200-square-foot home in Wheatfield with a finished 1,200-square-foot basement.

He and his wife, Gina, also have acreage. Their back yard features a gigantic swing set, sand box and an in-ground trampoline for their 9-year-old son, Ben.

Wilk, 36, can afford it; he pulls down \$80,000-plus per year with benefits.

He's a garbage man.

...

"I grew up in Crown Point," Wilk began. "I wrestled (at 125 pounds) for Crown Point High School."

Chris, wrestling for coach Scott Vlink's Bulldogs might be part of the reason you can endure the job you do. Talk to me.

"I'm a commercial front-load driver for Waste Management. I work out of the Portage shop. I do gas stations, restaurants, the malls"

Do you have a partner?

"No, everybody works by themselves now, whether you're on a commercial or residential route."

"When I started, I was on the back of a rear loader, pitching. It took 15 years of 'throwing homes' before I was able to get a commercial route."

Do move-ups go by seniority?

"Oh, yeah. Age-wise, I'm still the youngest guy there. But I'm about in the middle as far as seniority."

Union?



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“Teamsters Local 142 out of Gary. That’s why I make the drive. I could get a job closer to home, but with the union, I make better money.

“I usually work about 56 hours per week. The (Indiana) Department of Transportation won’t permit us to work any more than 60.”

Where do your routes take you?

“Gary, Griffith and Highland. I usually start work at 4 a.m.; today, I started at 3 a.m. Nobody goes home until all the garbage is off the ground, whether the delay is because of a breakdown or inclement weather. I also have to clean up my truck at the end of the day.”

Injuries?

“I laid my leg open on one of those thick plates that go inside a microwave. It was inside a plastic garbage bag. I still have the scar, but I patched myself up and finished the route. Waste Management really focuses on safety, which is good; it keeps me disciplined.”

Odd occurrences on the job?

“(One place) ... in Highland had an eight-yard can that always was overloaded. I couldn’t get to it without picking up refuse off the ground and tossing it back into the box.”

Yeah?

“All of a sudden, the garbage started flying back at me.”

Raccoons normally don’t throw things.

“A dirty man wearing a tight, black dress jumped out at me. It was like 4 a.m. Kinda freaked me out.”

What did you do?

“I got back in my truck and hit the rest of the complex so he’d have a chance to gather his worldly possessions from the can before I dumped it. I think he was living in there.

“And there was the day I lost my ‘pop stop’ in Merrillville.”

Pop stop?



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“I’d been doing that particular route for a long time. There was an old man who took a liking to me. Every time I’d pick up his garbage, he’d have a can of pop waiting for me.

“Sometimes, older people look for you. He had a vacant lot next to his house where he’d dump his grass. When I got there, his mower was running, but he was nowhere around.”

Yeah?

“I wanted my soda. I started calling out his name, then I saw him in the vacant lot; he was blue. It must have just happened. His wife was inside the house; I phoned for help, but he already was dead.”

Poor old fella. Chris, let’s switch gears. Tell me about some of the fringe benefits.

“If I want something, I’ll have the customer put it aside and go back for it. I have a pickup and a trailer. I’ve salvaged lawn tractors, Weedeaters, a 60-year-old Schwinn bicycle built for two

“Some people can be very wasteful. In this household, we recycle and also keep a compost pile for our garden.”

You said you push a button after every stop to compress your load. What happens to the remaining garbage?

“We had a landfill in Wheeler, but it’s full. Same with the one in Michigan City. Now, I take my loads to our transfer in Gary, on 15th Avenue, where it’s loaded into (tractor-trailers) and taken down south.”

The smell?

“You get used to it or ignore it. Nothing really grosses me out. Don’t get me wrong; it’s there. The maggots are bad in the summer.”

Winter?

“This Christmas Eve was one of the worst -- the ice. My nerves were shot. My truck weighs 20 tons empty. You’re within inches of power lines. I also have to thaw out the locks and latches of the enclosures on my commercial route with a torch.”

Occupational pet peeves?

“People seem to love to park in front of Dumpsters; that’s how I met you last summer at Glen Park Academy.”

Sorry.



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“When I started, I was like, ‘Man, I don’t know if I want to do this for a living.’ Now, 18 years later, I’m proud to say I work for ‘Waste.’ “

...

Chris Wilk is a hard worker who is living proof that one man’s garbage is another man’s treasure.

And I’m glad I met him.