

12-volt batteries had died. Replacement batteries tended to cost almost as much as an entire scooter, so most people junked them. But Malone knew how to power the scooters for next to nothing. He had previously recovered a hundred emergency exit lights discarded at a construction site where an office building was being renovated. Each of those lights housed a 12-volt battery, one that could be repurposed to power an electric scooter. "At this point," Malone says, "I figure I've sold more than 100 recycled electric scooters, and I've made an average of about \$150 on each one." His profit margin on Rombas—which also often just need replacement batteries—is even higher.



MALONE PAUSES while deciding whether to take a huge plastic bag filled with hundreds of brand-new Srixon range balls, which he's just pulled out of a Golfsmith dumpster. He's got a fondness for this particular location, he explains, owing to the huge assortment of racket covers he found here when the store decided to eliminate its line of tennis products. He can't remember who told him tennis racket covers sold for pretty close to their retail price on Amazon, but they were right, Malone says: "I made a shitload of money on them." Ultimately he decides to keep the Srixons, showing

ing the bag into the bed of his Avalanche.

Malone is not alone in his pursuits. Indeed, he has discovered an entire community of trash collectors in the Austin area. These scavenger entrepreneurs are overwhelmingly white and working-class, hustlers who tend to carry a ton of personal baggage and yet are "still more willing to share what they know than just about any people I've ever met," Malone says.

Take his friend Coulter Luce. It was Luce who taught Malone to see beyond commercial dumpsters and look around the apartment complexes surrounding the University of Texas campus, especially at the end of the academic year. "The first time I went over there I found so many computers in the trash that I couldn't believe it," Malone recalls. "Plus all this other stuff that had just been dumped by rich kids in a hurry to get home." Luce, who had gotten into dumpster diving after losing his job and descending into financial distress, went so far as to befriend several building managers, who would tell him when a student was being evicted for nonpayment of rent. Frequently, Luce says, kids just leave all their stuff behind. "And that stuff went straight into the dumpsters, where I'd be waiting." He claims to have made \$65,000 that first year, even though he was using methamphetamine. "I was tweaking and it messed me up," Luce admits. Malone called Luce in 2006 after stumbling upon a huge find in the

parking lot of Discount Electronics, a local Austin chain. The store was clearing out its warehouse and had hauled everything to the parking lot of its main store on Anderson Lane. Malone focused on the 40 prototypes of Dell's newest high-end desktop computer, which Discount Electronics had contracted to test. He was still loading them when Luce showed up and walked right past the computers to the photo paper and toner. "Coulter taught me to stop going after the big prize and get the consum-

ables," Malone says. People aren't going to need new printers that often, but they constantly need paper and toner.

As for the 40 Dell computers, Malone still considers them a missed opportunity. "They were all damaged," he says. "The way Discount Electronics had tested these prototypes was to put them on a super-powerful heat sink for a solid month, to see how much they could take." If he had waited a few months until the model had gone on the market, Malone estimates, he could have fixed them up with replacement parts and made about \$1,000 in profit on each machine. Instead he rushed to sell the broken computers, which meant he mostly ended up giving them away. Luce, meanwhile, made a killing on the consumables he had collected.

Luce also pioneered a unique method for targeting storage units. When people move their stuff out of storage, he figured, they make a lot of decisions about what to cull. Most leave things behind, either in or near the facility's dumpsters. People who have gone through a divorce or are coming to collect the possessions of a deceased loved one inevitably toss an amazing array of valuable items. Luce explained to Malone that he could rent the smallest storage unit in a facility, usually a locker-sized space that cost \$20 per month, and have 24/7 access to a place where treasures were discarded on a daily basis. "I got an entire shop's worth of power tools, all brand-new, right after I rented my first storage unit," recalls Malone, who now has units in four different facilities. "What's great is that you have places to stash your loot and protected dumpsters that only you can get into."

Another of Malone's trash-hunting friends was a man named Mike Miller, whom Malone calls "my personal guru of dumpster diving." Miller, who died of heart disease a few years ago, taught Malone to collect all the pieces of disassembled or broken items, because they could almost certainly find use in different projects down the line. It's a lesson that Malone adheres to as we drive through Austin. At Discount Elec-

**66**  
POUNDS  
Amount of  
e-waste  
the US pro-  
duces per  
person  
per year.



IF  
MATT  
MALONE  
WENT  
DUMPSTER  
DIVING  
240 DAYS  
A YEAR,  
HE COULD  
ACTUALLY  
MAKE MORE  
THAN  
\$600,000  
ANNUALLY.

tronics, he collects an assortment of circuit boards, wafers, and tiny screw-down connectors that can be fitted into dozens of electronic devices. Later, in the dumpster at yet another Office Depot, Malone finds a brand-new office chair with a claim slip indicating that some parts are missing. When he returns to his office and looks up the serial number on the Internet, he will discover that the chair—which retails for \$339—is only missing a pair of washers. "I'll probably sell it on Amazon for half of what Office Depot charges," he says, "but that's still \$170\* for what he

estimates to be a total of 20 minutes of work.

Once, while sorting through the dumpster at this same Office Depot store, Malone came across a boxy machine that he didn't recognize. The thing was brand-new, though, so he followed Miller's mantra: "When in doubt, take it!" When Malone looked up the serial number online, he discovered it was a Martin Yale business card slitter with a retail price of \$1,850. He sold it for \$1,200 through Craigslist.

FOR MALONE, Luce, and the community of scavengers they are a part of, one big threat looms: the increasingly widespread use of commercial-size trash compactors.

Big-box stores like Walmart have praised compactors for reducing the volume of trash they send to landfills, but to Malone and other dumpster divers the machines are utterly evil, creating far more waste than they | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 103**

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