His day began before the sun had risen over the northern Wasatch Range. That same sun now sinks behind the Wellsvilles, marking the end of a long day with brilliant shades of pink and yellow.

Utah State University professor Ted Pease hulks his six-foot-three frame into a shiny red SUV and drives around the corner to Davis Hall, the old brick apartment building where he’s been living for the past seven months. He parks next to the beat-up vehicles belonging to recently graduated high school students who call this building home.

Around the back is apartment 101. Pease pulls a plastic key card from his wallet, waits for the click, and steps inside.

The room is dark and lonely.

Eventually he’ll join his wife, Brenda Cooper, in northern California. But for now, the 57-year-old head of the USU’s department of journalism and communication is living in a dorm building otherwise reserved for freshman.

Early into this arrangement, Pease would sometimes call his wife to tell her he was done with his day and headed home.

And she would always correct him.

“You’re not going home until you come here,” she said.

So now, Pease says: “I’m going dorm.”

Before the dorm

Until a year ago, Pease and Cooper owned a 5,000-square-foot home on a secluded, 12-acre sanctuary in Petersboro, a 325-person hamlet just west of Logan.

After living there for nearly 18 years and with Cooper nearing retirement, the couple decided it was time to move on.

“We sold the house when we could get out, because the market had been so lousy,” Pease said. “We tried to house sit for a while but that didn’t work out. We didn’t have any place to put all our stuff and we were afraid of breaking everyone else’s stuff.”

With two dogs and an elderly cat, the couple had a difficult time finding somewhere to live. But perseverance paid off and they eventually found a little house in Providence whose owner agreed to rent to the couple and their three furry companions.

One icy day in the spring of 2012, Cooper came home to find a foreclosure notice taped to the front door. The house was scheduled to be auctioned April 1.

Cooper was shocked. They lived for the next several weeks not knowing how long they had to stay. The four-month semester was barely half over.

“Really, it’s not an exaggeration to say that from the time we sold the house in December 2011 to the end of the semester last year in May, we went through rental hell,” Cooper said.

Fifteen years earlier, after an academic conference in San Francisco, Pease and Cooper took a drive up the rugged California coastline and found themselves in Trinidad, one of California’s smallest incorporated cities with a population of about 400 residents.

From the moment they saw it, they knew they were home.

Seven years later, they bought a small vacation home in Trinidad, and in the intervening years they’d travel there for winter breaks, summer vacations and long weekends.

They always figured they would retire there.

Just not so soon.

But following the foreclosure nightmare, Cooper decided she was done living in other people’s space.
“I had no intention of retiring this year — that wasn’t the plan at all,” Cooper said. “We were just pushed to do it a little sooner than expected because of the situation we ran into after we sold our home.”

As the prospect of retirement slowly became a reality, she was enticed by the temperate winters and crashing waves of the California coast.

But Pease, who was overseeing a transition that included an almost total changeover of the department’s faculty, wasn’t in a position to leave.

“We knew that it would be difficult to do this as a long-distance relationship, but it seemed like the best practical way to deal with it,” Cooper said. “We don’t like living apart and I’m not sure if we were to go back a few months if we would make the same decision, but that’s where we are right now.”

Over the summer, Cooper negotiated an early retirement and moved to Trinidad. Pease remained in Logan, and his search for a place to live continued.

“I could have rented a townhouse or something, but I said, ‘Brainstorm — hey, there are dorms, maybe they have faculty residence or something.’”

They did.

A mix of about 15 staff, faculty, visiting scholars and graduate students at Utah State take advantage of the convenient option to live near campus in the dorms. However, they live in family housing — mostly Aggie Village. Very few, if any, live in single-student housing.

Except one professor.

When Pease first told his wife he was going to live in an on-campus freshman dorm, she laughed.

“It’s not something that I could have done,” she said. “I like my privacy and I like having that sense of space for my own.”

But Pease figured he’d be fine.

It was, after all, just a temporary place to stay until it was time to go home.

Room 101

When Pease first moved his belongings to Davis, he was greeted by a little rainbow cutout on the door. Under the rainbow was a small cloud made of paper with his name scribbled on it in blue Sharpie. The resident assistant — an undergraduate who acts as a leader in university housing — had made one for all the new residents of the dorm.

As Pease pushed open the heavy gray door and stepped inside, one of the first things he noticed was a couch and loveseat that were really “dangerous-looking.”

But he had already made his decision. So, he prepared to accept his fate of living with a hair-strewn, SpaghettiO-stained couch.

Davis Hall area coordinator Shannon Jolley took pity on the professor and provided him with a new couch. She also agreed to remove the bunk beds to make room for Pease’s personal bed and belongings.

In an attempt to escape the drab confinement of the apartment, the veteran photographer covered the whitewashed walls in photos. A potted plant sits in the corner behind a forest-green overstuffed loveseat. Some may call it quaint, but Pease disagrees.

“A 1960s cinderblock dorm is not quaint — it’s tiny,” he said. “But it’s functional.”

The usual arrangement allows six students to live in each apartment.

“They must be really small people,” Pease said, shrugging his wide shoulders. “It would take me four days and then I would strangle my roommates. It’s only like 900 square-feet. I know because I paced it off one day. I was just curious.”

It was a claustrophobic transition from his 5,000-square-foot home.

“I do find that I don’t hang around the house as much as I used to when it was my house,” Pease said.

Rather than relaxing on the common-room couch with a room full of 18-year-olds, Pease plays tennis and golf on the weekends. He travels to see Cooper in Trinidad as much as his schedule permits.

“I don’t stay home very much,” he said, before abruptly stopping to correct himself. “I don’t stay dorm very much.”

Dorm life isn’t all new for Ted Pease, one of 15 staff, faculty, visiting scholars and graduate students at Utah
State University currently living on campus — and the only one to live in a freshman dorm.

As a freshman at the University of Washington, Pease lived in a high-rise dorm called Lander Hall. Later, as a Ph.D. student at Ohio University, he was a “dorm mother” for the freshman dorms.

Some of the students he lives among now weren’t even born when he was in Ohio. Some of their parents might not have been born when he was in Washington.

“The symmetry of doing it in 1986 and then again in 2012 is a little beyond ironic,” said Pease’s wife, Brenda Cooper, who took an early retirement last year and moved to the small town of Trinidad on California’s northern coast.

“That one was way worse than this one,” Pease said of his dorm experience in Ohio. “There was a kid upstairs, his name was Jordan. He had a basketball. I had to confiscate that basketball once a week. For some reason, bouncing a basketball was something important to do at two in the morning.”

These days, Pease said, the students who live above him in Davis Hall are either very quiet or very frightened of the “old guy” down below.

By comparison, Pease said, his current dorm life is a breeze.

“This place is like Pleasantville compared to every other college campus I’ve ever been on,” he said. “It’s safe and reasonably quiet and it’s not too out of control.”

When he was a “dorm mother” at Ohio University, there was much more partying.

“In theory it was a dry campus, but there was a lot of boozing,” he said. “There was a guy who fell out of a fourth story window during a party. There was some really dreadful stuff.”

He’ll never forget the young woman who gave birth in an OU dorm bathroom.

Like any other college campus, Utah State has its share of problems and parties, but Davis Hall area coordinator Shannon Jolley said USU’s campus — stacked heavily with teetotaling members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — has fewer alcohol incidences than other schools.

“I would say the vast majority would be roommate conflicts, just people learning how to live with other people and not always doing that maturely,” Jolley said.

The old guy downstairs

Pease’s apartment can be reached by an outside door, so he doesn’t have to go inside the main building. However, despite his efforts to slip in and out unnoticed, he’s caught the attention of many of the residents.

“My favorite was back in the fall when it was too hot — there’s no air conditioning, so I had to keep the window open,” Pease said. “I could hear everybody. I could hear them walking around and talking outside. This one young woman said, ‘Who’s that weird old guy?’”

One of Pease’s neighboring residents is a student named Chandler Kingsbury. At the beginning of the fall semester, Kingsbury and his friends came over one day and peered curiously into the open window.

“Hi Ted,” Kingsbury said. “Hey, this is kind of nice in here.”

Pease pulled back the embroidered Martha Stewart curtains he’d purchased from Kmart.

“Chandler, get out of here, you perv,” he said.

Paige Myers, another Davis Hall resident, said many of the students interact with Pease in person as well as on the Davis Hall Facebook page.

“He’s always really nice and he talks to us,” she laughed. “But it’s more like ‘Oh, hey Ted, sorry about the fire alarm going off.’”

The students don’t seem to mind that a professor is living as their next-door neighbor. They even try to be sensitive to quiet-hour regulations when they’re around his door, though it is sometimes hard to muffle their Call of Duty Xbox tournaments.

“For the past three-plus hours, what sounds like a zombie or exploding sense of sound warfare game party has been on the big screen TV that backs up to my living room,” Pease wrote on the dorm’s Facebook page a few weeks back when he was under the weather. “Can’t freshman zombies die a little quieter?”

He signed it, “The Dorm Mother,” which has become Pease’s name among Davis Hall dwellers.
Davis Hall’s resident assistant, Jordan Ames, quickly replied with an apology — and an offer to put an end to their game.

Pease wrote back “it ain’t bedtime... even for an old fart,” and insisted he just wanted to figure out what game they were playing. “It sounds like exploding-racecar-zombie-warfare-my-little-pony-extravaganza,” he wrote.

Myers said she appreciates Pease’s sense of humor, but she still told her friends to turn the volume down.

“It was right up against his living room so I was like, ‘Guys we should turn it down. Ted has pneumonia.'”

Shortly after moving in, Pease was laying in his bed one night by the open window. He could hear a girl’s voice coming from outside as she talked to someone on her cell phone. With a glance at the alarm clock on his bed stand, he saw it was 3 a.m.

“Her voice was just in the background like dee-dee-lee-dee-dee, and I’m thinking, ‘Oh please. It’s three in the morning,'” Pease said.

He wasn’t fully awake until he heard the girl say, “And you know, I think I might be pregnant.”

“I was like bing: Whoa, I’m awake now,” Pease laughed. “But fortunately, I’m not ‘in loco parentis’ so I could just put the pillow over my head.”

At least one student, though, has adopted Pease as a parental figure.

“I don’t know,” Amanda Tuft said. “Like a grandpa, I think.”

When Tuft first learned her neighbor in the basement would be a 57-year-old man, she thought it was a little weird.

“Because, you know — he’s like an old guy,” she said.

But once she met him, she realized he’s “pretty cool,” and potentially useful.

One weekend, Pease received a call from an unknown number. He picked it up and heard a young woman’s voice on the other end.

“Ted, this is Amanda from your building,” Tuft said. “My friend and I can’t get her truck to start. Can you help me?”

Ted replied to her request: “Well, I’m not a mechanic. Call the cops.”

Fires, zombies and laundry

The inside door to Pease’s apartment opens up to the stairway where the laundry room is.

“It’s convenient, but also not,” he said.

Pease wakes up at five or six every morning, so he gets his laundry done before seven.

“I don’t know if that bothers anybody — I sort of hope so, because the kids are doing their laundry late at night when they get back from the weekend,” he said.

“It vibrates my bed,” Pease said. “I woke up the other night, it was like midnight, and I’m going mrrr-mrrr-mrrrr.”

He compared the noise of the laundry and chattering students to living in a large city.

“The middle of the night stuff is really annoying, but I’m getting really good at blocking it out,” he said. “I mean, if I were in Chicago living by the ‘L,’ I guess I wouldn’t hear the train after a while.”

Some things, though, are tougher to ignore than others.

Since Pease moved into Davis Hall, there have been four occasions where the screeching of a fire alarm woke him up in the middle of the night.

“It’s usually someone’s cooking that sets them off,” he said.

The last two alarms have gone off when the temperature was sub-zero and the students had to stand outside shivering while the matter was investigated.

One night around 11:30, the alarm went off and the students filed outside into the frigid air. Upon investigation, the culprit was identified as a young woman who had used so much hairspray, it had triggered the fire alarm.

“That’s a lot of hairspray, and I’m thinking, 11 at night?” Pease said. “What’s the story? It’s got to be, ‘Let’s cement it in place before I go to bed.’ I don’t understand.”

On another occasion, Pease was sitting on his living-room sofa next to the Rubbermaid tote that doubles as his coffee table. Suddenly the fire alarm went off and he jumped to his feet to open the door.

Water was pouring down the stairway like a waterfall.
One of the residents, involved in the semi-annual game of tag called “Humans vs. Zombies,” had shot a Nerf gun inside the building. The plastic projectile hit the sprinkler on the ceiling and suddenly the fourth-floor apartment was drenched.

The students were ordered to evacuate and all stood around on the grass as water flowed down the outside of the building. Pease watched as the kid holding the Nerf gun ran out the heavy front doors.

“This kid came out, he was all hyped up,” Pease said. “He said, ‘Oh, my dad’s gonna kill me.’ Then I heard him say, ‘I guess I won’t be getting my new car.’”

As the designated RA for the area, Ames was running around in the chaos, attempting to salvage residents’ soggy belongings and calm students down.

“Ted kind of helped students to be calm while I ran around helping other people,” she said. “Obviously he was a little worried about it, but he saw the insane scrambling while everyone was trying to get the sprinklers turned off and his attitude helped the students to remain calm. That helped a lot, actually. He’s awesome.”

The damage cost tens of thousands of dollars. The fourth floor was the only area with major damage, but it took months before all the repairs were completed.

There are some perks to living on campus.

The location is convenient and the price — roughly $500 a month — is affordable.

“I’ll tell you what’s a good thing,” Pease said. “We live in Logan, so there’s snow right? At five in the morning, I hear this guy going along with his snowplow. And guess who’s not doing it? Me.”

He doesn’t have to mow the grass, trim the hedges or clean the gutters.

“I’m using their utilities and I get to watch campus cable,” he said. “There are some perks.”