

Zach and some close friends recently created a brand called Save The Fish United; Zach wasn't by any means an anti-fisherman. Although he didn't really care for fish on his dinner plate, he cared a lot about the world. The brand was just a comical acronym, STFU, slang for something I won't specify here. Regardless, Zach brought 4 or 5 of these Save the Fish United stickers to Alaska; he planned to place them in the most picturesque, scenic places he could find.

Ironically, I recently read a book called "Why Fish Don't Exist," in which the narrator follows the life of a distinguished biologist obsessed with classifying to try and find how to persevere in a world full of chaos. The author describes her own mental health struggles and tries to find an answer to the meaning of life. In one chapter, she asks her Dad this question, who announces that there was essentially no meaning, that nothing matters, and you don't matter. With this mindset, the author's Dad is described as one who lived exactly as he pleased: drinking copious amounts of beer, riding motorbikes, and belly-flopping every time upon entering a pool. However, this lack of direction left the author feeling despondent and pointless. Struggling to maintain hope, the narrator was desperate to find how to keep going and maintain forward momentum despite impossible circumstances. She turned to the past journals of a biologist who endured various hardships but somehow kept pushing forward; however, this search led her to a similar conclusion that her Dad proposed, which was that feeling despair was a choice and we control our own fates.

The narrator didn't accept this concept, and after spending considerable time with two best friends who suffered from painful pasts, she described this small web of people keeping one another afloat. From little gifts, friendly interactions, and laughter, she says these people "might not look like much from the outside, but for the people caught inside that web, they are everything, the very tethers that keep one bound to the planet." Zach was one of these tethers to me. The author realized neither her Dad or this biologist considered the possibility of the tangible ways in which these individuals were enriching and strengthening society. It wasn't a lie anymore to say that we matter, that life matters. She described this realization as the dandelion principle, which goes, "To some people a dandelion might look like a weed, but to others that same plant can be so much more. To an herbalist, it's a medicine, To a painter, it's a pigment, to a hippie, a crown, a child, a wish. To a butterfly, its sustenance."

With this in mind, she wrote, "from the perspective of the stars or infinity or some eugenic dream of perfection, sure, one human life might not seem to matter. It might be a speck on a speck, soon gone. But that was just one of infinite perspectives," and Zach's perspectives and outlooks on this world were incredibly unique and special. We'd be walking along and he'd blurt out the most thought-invoking quote you've ever heard by

the name of some obscure poet or author. I once told Zach he had such a way with words, and he knew this cause he replied with his classic smirk and said, "I do, I really do."

When I first met Zach, he initially came across as a stereotypical, sporty fraternity man. He would despise me for saying this here, as he's not one to follow authority, and most of his values didn't align with that of your typical fraternity. Liam - a close friend of Zach's as well - and I have mentioned this to Zach since, and we've laughed over the fact that he was such a remarkably different person from our first impressions.

One of my first interactions with Zach was in the basement of our fraternity. There was a night when Zach and the rest of our incoming group were required to sleep on the floor to get us all more closely bonded to one another. Some people pulled out cards, and others set up their sleeping areas; another brought a poker set, while Zach grabbed two trash cans and a heavily deflated dodgeball and asked if anyone wanted to play "sports ball." Apparently, "sports ball" involved any hoop, or hoop-like object, and a ball; it was kind of like a combination between soccer, basketball, and rugby. Later that night, I vividly remember him pretending to sleep underneath a large piece of plywood he found. With these initial impressions, I thought Zach was hilarious. On the surface level, he was very laid back; he seemed to be filled with confidence and enjoyed being himself. However, these superficial first impressions don't begin to describe Zach's character. He was so much more. As I grew closer with him throughout the year his genuine care and desire for real human connection were dissimilar to anyone I've ever met.

Aside from memorizing essentially every lyric to the Hamilton musical, I felt as if Zach always spent his time thinking and worrying about his future. He'd repeatedly told me he felt immense societal pressure to get a degree and pursue a job that would make money; however, he'd much rather be a math teacher, a therapist, a sailor, or even a pumpkin farmer. Zach viewed the world not as a place to endure or suffer through but as a place where he could try and assist in the betterment of others and enjoy his personal journey of experiencing himself. Zach constantly aimed to try and get the bigger picture. His long-lasting rants taught me how to live correctly. He was the only person I knew capable of speaking for hours on end, perfectly experiencing his individuality and eager to share his thoughts with the world. Whether this meant discussing economic inequalities or his challenges with indecisiveness, Zach was incredibly good at making powerful connections through conversations.

There's a quote that goes "We should concern ourselves not so much with the pursuit of happiness, but with the happiness of pursuit," which reminds me a lot of Zach. I interpreted this as if we live life according to our everyday ideals and values and find happiness by cherishing the little luxuries every day, there's no need to chase after anything. Zach was one of the only people I know that lived life entirely. Although he

often got caught up in expectations, he simply wanted to share his view of the world and have other people hear his story. Zach has mentioned to me multiple times that he thought his journey through life and experience was different from everyone else, and he wanted to share this perspective with others.

One night in Punta Cana over Spring Break, I laid down on some beach chairs with Zach and our close friend Nikhil. Zach played some of his classic alternative indie rock music bands like Mt. Joy and the Backseat Lovers, and we all spent the next hour stargazing. After some time, a large shooting star shot across the sky; we got really excited, and Zach smiled big, exclaiming that it was the first shooting star he'd ever seen. Zach didn't view life as a burden but as a reality that he was excited to experience. Zach got excited over the stars. He got excited about people being their ideal selves and setting out on their individual paths. He respected other people's opinions and greatly valued the things that brought him and others joy.

On a side note, I hurt my foot on this trip and he must have offered to give me a piggyback ride at least five times. I really regret declining the request, but that's an excellent example of Zach's gentleness and compassionate character.

Further, although Zach had this compassionate, soft side, he also enjoyed seizing the present moment. To quote Ferris Bueller, "Life moves pretty fast, if you don't stop and look around for a while, you could miss it." Zach and I spent our entire Mardi Gras together. We took the shuttle to downtown St. Louis with a small group of friends, but somehow it ended up just the two of us together. The Mardi Gras scene in St. Louis is massive, with estimates of over 100,000 people attending the parade. Instead of watching from the sidelines and waving to the parade participants, Zach hopped the fence and took some beads off a nearby float. I happily followed; remarkably, no authority saw us jump the fence. So, over the course of the next hour, we continued walking down the street, now a part of the parade, handing out hundreds of beads to the visitors behind the fences. I have no idea how we managed to do this, but the security guards were also on our side. While walking down the street, one of our friends saw us and ran out to hug us; however, a security guard proceeded to tackle them for the backwards benefit of our safety. Eventually, a lady in the float in front of us caught on, and she made Zach and I exit. This didn't stop Zach from trying to enter, unsuccessfully, two or three more times. Zach was so much fun to be around, this spontaneity, his strong values, and the importance of knowing who he truly was left a huge mark on me.

I was not the same person before I met Zach Porter, and I will not be the same person now that he's gone. I used to be fairly close-minded, I was good at socializing on the surface level, but had never fully experienced myself or realized the complexity of people's individualities and experiences. To quote Neil Degross Tyson, "There's been

about 100 billion people that have ever lived. But do you know how many people can exist? You take a look at the genes, find out how many combinations of genes can make an authentic human being, it is a stupendously larger number than the 100 billion. What it means is, you are alive against stupendous odds. You are breathing air, observing sunsets, gazing into the night sky. Most people who could exist will never experience that. Most people who could exist mathematically will never exist. You are a special - a living entity- as there ever was." I'm so lucky I got the chance to be here and the opportunity to exist, and I'm so beyond grateful that Zach could experience life at the same time. I regret not telling Zach about his impact on me, but in the short time I've known Zach, he genuinely shaped me into the person I am today.

Zach left me with the realization of the importance of experiencing life at its fullest potential. Thanks to Zach, I'm more confident in speaking my mind and treating myself kindly, and I know he'd want the same for everybody else in this room. Wherever Zach is, I know he's in a place where there are many shooting stars, bright northern lights that he always wanted to see, a bunch of dogs that he can pet, and a place where all the kindness he spread in this world is being reciprocated to him. I know he's in a place where he can sail away without worrying about wind or temperature, where he can recite endless Hamilton lyrics to his desire and give piggybacks to whoever wants them in the afterlife. I know he's in a place with no anxiety about people or expectations, and I know he's having the greatest adventure. I'm so glad Zach was a part of my life, he was truly a gift to this world. So go live your best life for Zach, hug all your friends, laugh loudly, give people flowers, and go on an adventure. Tell people about your dreams, your favorite colors, your favorite books, and dance whenever the opportunity presents itself. Make sure to cherish all these moments for Zach. Thank you.