

Zach

Zach was scared to death of coming to high school. Middle school was bad enough. He had been bullied for as long as he remembered. Physically, he had been the smallest boy in his class since kindergarten, all the way through eighth grade. He was convinced that being in a bigger school would undoubtedly bring a few guys around who were smaller than he was. No luck so far.

He made his way through the halls trying to melt in with the crowds. Zach was skilled at drawing attention away from himself in case some bully was ready to pounce on him. He hated school. He hated life. He hated his family due to a younger brother, Chase, who was twice his size and loved to punch Zach around whenever he felt like it. His dad really favored Chase who was the strong, talented, and athletic son that he had always wanted. Zach connected to no one in his family.

Zach sunk deep down into his seat at the back of the classroom, smiling as he drew a stick man hanging from a noose in the air with blood dripping out of his mouth as he was choking to death. Drawing was Zach's fantasy world. It was a means for revenge since he really wasn't a violent kid. He just wanted to escape the life he was living.

His math teacher noted Zach consumed with his work and wandered over to his desk to see what was so amusing, obviously it wasn't his class. When he checked out the drawing, he decided that it was pretty graphic and possibly a sign that Zach had bigger problems. Zach was sent to the office. Since he had never been in trouble at school before, the administration decided to bring in a counselor. That would be me.

Zach was embarrassed. He hated the attention. He said that he wished that he could just leave school and never return. At the time, it wasn't an option so I asked Zach if he would mind telling me more about the drawing.

Zach took the safe route and explained that he just really liked sketching, that he was into the artistry of stick men figures. He even told me to check out JS Lowry and his artwork. He obviously avoided the content and the meaning behind the drawing.

He took a long route to getting there, but eventually came forth with moments of truth. After having a coke and talking about his love of animation, the movie, "Nightmare before Christmas" and his ambition to work in graphic design, Zach stated that his parents really didn't "get him". His stated that his dad thought he was a wimp and his mother always cried when he came home from school, looking pretty sad after being beaten up by some random kid. He had no support system. He was pretty much on his own. His days were spent figuring out ways to be invisible. He was a victim.

Survival included a fixed route on how to get to and from school so that he wouldn't run into gangs, bullies, and the like. At lunch he would eat alone, away from anyone who

might pick on him. He planned ahead to be “sick” on speech days and tried to avoid being picked last in PE classes by complaining about a chronic knee injury that didn’t exist so he wouldn’t have to participate. He hid from the school nurse, who always wanted to check up on him and sometimes give him a big hug. He said that, by far, was the worst.

Zach appeared to be at no risk of hurting anyone. It just wasn’t in his nature. Above all, he didn’t want any attention from the adult world as he knew that the bullying would only get worse if anyone sympathized with him. We agreed to talk again whenever he wanted to hide or just hang out. In the meantime, teachers were notified to watch over him. Somehow, the torment had to be stopped.

Zach would eventually stop by my office now and then more to discuss his art than to talk about life. Sometimes they were the same thing. Right before summer break, I saw some confidence building in him as he began to grow both physically and mentally.

Then the next year passed by and Zach had moved on, at least I didn’t see him in school. The reality was that I just didn’t recognize him. I was standing in the hall during break when the two students in front of me nudged each other as everyone was walking to class.

“There he is,” said one of them. I looked up in the direction where they pointed.

A tall, skinny kid with an intense expression pushed through the crowded halls. His black hair was greased down flat and pulled back into a short ponytail. His face was chalk-white with gray streaks looking like walking death. Maroon and black make-up shaded underneath his eyes making them look hollow while bloody streaks dripped down the sides of his mouth.

He wore a white ruffled shirt tucked around his neck and a long dark trench coat that just met his military boots. Black fishnet material hung on his arms. But the most interesting part of this picture were the two sharpened fangs that hung over either side of his mouth. Our school believed in self-expression.

The message was clear, “Don’t even come close” as his eyes pierced the crowd daring anyone to make eye contact. No one did. One of the students near me said, “That guy is one weird dude. He gives me the creeps.”

Then, for just a second, the Dracula “wannabe” caught my eye and I finally recognized who it was. Of course, it was Zach. He had grown at least ten inches in height and possibly lost another couple in width. I didn’t say his name but nodded my head for him to come over.

He followed me into my office, and I closed the door. “Hey, Zach, what is this, my friend?” Then we both started laughing.

He plopped down in a chair. I could finally see the Zach I knew. The smile gave him away.

“I just finally started growing,” he said, “like an inch a month. I couldn’t put on any weight, and actually started looking like my stick drawings. Then it just came to me. I needed to look like a freak and scare people away. I just wanted to be anyone, but Zach and it worked. It’s like I’m hiding out in my own skin.”

Zach found a way to survive. He didn’t let the world push him around anymore. He became empowered to take a stand and to protect himself.

Zach eventually used his new “self” to support and befriend other victims on campus who looked like they were hiding out to survive, the kids who just didn’t fit in. He decided that they would be his cause. Because he was considered such an icon at school, teens felt that it was an honor when he gave them attention. A group of kids even told Zach that he was considered their hero. He had a group of fans follow him around before and after school, usually kids just wanting to be accepted.

Eventually he found out that he didn’t have to hide behind any kind of disguise. People genuinely liked Zach, which was no surprise. He just needed confidence and friends who believed in him. It was good to see him move past the loneliness and fear as he prepared for graduation. He was finally able to return to being Zach and get rid of the fangs.

Your thoughts: (no names or places)

Many people suffer from bullying throughout their lives. What did you think of Zach’s method to keep people away?

Is it ever ok to treat anyone with disrespect? Why does it happen so frequently?

How does art or music help people to escape from their pain?

Bullying can progress throughout life. Where do you see bullying in the adult world?

Do you think that some people are bullies and don't even know it? For example, someone could be really tough on a brother or sister, extremely disrespectful to a parent or grandparent, harass a teacher, intimidate a neighbor, or just plain be rude to the point of bullying?

Imagine that you are a school administrator, and a young man comes into your office because he has been accused of bullying. What would you say to him?