

EULOGY FOR JARED ZIMMERMAN AS DELIVERED BY HIS PARENTS, KEN AND JACKIE (April 19, 2016)

Ken:

We are not sure we are going to get through this... As so many of you have noted, there is no playbook for this because this is not how life and death is supposed to unfold.

As Jackie and I and Brianna and Gabriel and all the others who loved him and us start to go through the grieving process, we want to do three things: (1) remember Jared for the wonderfully unique person he was and will remain always in our memories, (2) make sure that all of those who so helped him and us deal with his illness have no regrets, and (3) make one ask beyond the ongoing blessings you all have showered on us with your continued love, support, prayers, and help in this unimaginable time.

Jackie:

First, who was our wonderful son Jared. It is hard standing here to even know how to begin to describe him, especially when it was only seven years ago at his bar mitzvah that we spoke to him of his potential and promise even as we reminded him how deeply he was loved, never in a million years thinking we would be on this same bima so few years later at his funeral. But let us try to tell you about our boy: Jared was incredibly smart,

warm, loving, curious, adventurous and engaging, certainly before his illness but after as well. He had a very clear sense of justice - one that started at a young age. For instance, when he was in grade school and would get mad at us for something he would invoke the Convention on the Rights of the Child. How many 3rd graders do that? He was incredibly curious. In second grade, he took apart a computer just to see how it worked. He loved music, everything from classical, jazz and gospel to folk songs and rap. He was an outdoorsman. He skied but especially loved snowboarding. He skateboarded and golfed and (as his Aunt Nan would say) “loved, loved, loved” to hike. He got his wilderness first responder certificate (which is like a wilderness EMT course) after his junior year in high school - the youngest person to take the class and pass. He was a voracious reader, mostly focusing on books on existential philosophy and similar subjects that Jackie had never read and Ken had never finished, like *Godel, Escher and Bach* and *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. He loved poetry and good food (becoming a foodie long before it was popular). Jared had a wry sense of humor. He could be very funny and very sweet at the same time. Jared would have made a great professor or rabbi (except perhaps for the religion part): he was didactic, loved to pick up apart arguments in the best tradition of Talmudic scholars, and relished rising to the occasion especially when arguing with his parents.

Ken:

And Jared did go out into the world—adventurous, curious, exploring were core to his character. After his high school freshman summer, he went to a class at Columbia University in NYC every summer day, and then called us from random points in the city that he somehow found: a closed subway tunnel that might be good for skateboarding, a cool Indian restaurant that had a special dish he found intriguing, Coney Island that he went to either because he loved the hot dog eating contest or because it was the end of the subway line or both. In this past year, that trait was coming back into evidence: he took us to Barge Music under the Brooklyn Bridge to hear several musicians I had never heard of (but he had) and Lincoln Center for weird, somewhat monochromatic films from Scandinavian directors equally unknown to us. He frequently combined this with his love of the outdoors: bike trips with his friends to abandoned buildings in Essex County and, with me, expeditions to climb Mt. Marcy, Mt. Washington (with his friends Jake and Eli and their parents), and a remarkable four day Yosemite backpacking trip that included thunderstorms at 12,000 feet.

Jared was smart, even a smart-aleck frequently. He had all the traditional indicators of brightness: an almost perfect ACT score, an AP award for multiple tests that was especially remarkable because the illness had started to show. For him, it

frequently translated into engagement with other people: making up games with his friends in grade and middle school and, of course, chess. Somehow, even during Jared's several hospitalizations last year, he would regularly beat me in chess—something that caused me both consternation and pride. Jared's intellectual spirit shone through throughout his life, as reflected in the following excerpt from an essay he wrote as part of his college applications:

“I am as independent and tenaciousness in the pursuit of ideas and values as I am on a skateboard. When at age 16 I gave a speech as part of my Jewish confirmation, I told the congregation that I didn't believe in God, and thought Buddhism a good alternative to the Jewish faith. People whispered, surprised by my candor. But, taking pains to ensure that they didn't think I was a nihilist, I said I supported and wanted the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, and would search for my religion among all the options. And I listed the things I believed in: logic, nature, and art. I noted I was too young to make any final decision on my faith, because I wanted to learn more. It wasn't a traditional speech, but my Rabbi told the assembled crowd that it was the most notable speech of anyone he had confirmed. I had said what I believed in, not only what I had been taught.”

But the two characteristics that stand out were his kindness and his resilience. As Brianna and Gabe have related, he was a wonderful older brother, minding “his babies.” While they were only 18 months younger, Jared always looked out for them—and, as we are increasingly finding out—perhaps introducing them to certain habits earlier than we may have wanted or intended. Bri and Gabe, you will always have an older brother because all that he showed, shared, and provided you remain with you as it does with us. And he was always a loyal friend and brother, driving four hours to pick up Gabe for spring break two weeks ago, getting down on his knees to help his baby cousins find Easter baskets, and so much else.

And Jared’s resilience—sometimes stubbornness—was also hard-wired. In one of our favorite videos, Jared’s friends collected a compendium of Jared wiping out on skateboard jumps, mountain bikes, snowboards again and again. But he always got up. He wrote, “If you’re not falling, you’re not trying hard enough!”

Jackie:

So we loved him, and found him a growing, thriving young man until in his junior year of high school things his illness started to become apparent. Over the past three plus years, he and we experienced the onset of a mental illness that is still not clearly diagnosed but probably is schizophrenia. For a young man

whose identity was so clearly rooted in his ability to think and to whom so much came easily intellectually, this was brutal. This disease, like so many mental illnesses, is evil and destructive in so many ways. Through it all, Jared fought back. Somehow he applied and got admitted to college, writing a remarkable essay about failure in the midst of a year filled with delusions and social isolation. After a series of hospitalizations that would have ended the ambitions of most young men, Jared undertook an astonishing effort that ultimately enabled him to attend Bard College where he had succeeded academically and seemed to be thriving with the help of a wonderful support system at the college and in the community.

We want to say a few words about these people, the Bard team (Leon Botstein and David Shein in particular) and Julia Eilenberg, Pat and Dante, Jon and Max and so many others who supported Jared and us through the hard times. You were true friends to Jared and for that we are forever grateful. For those in Jared's life in the past year, please know that we will always be grateful to you for making Jared's experience supported and positive—something that only came about because of the deep caring and skill you provided. And for our dear family, friends and community who offered shoulders and ears and hearts, and others who shared the deeply personal experiences of loved ones with mental illness or other challenges, including several who have lost children and whom we will be leaning on

even more in coming weeks, months, and years, thank you for your bravery and willingness to be open with us. It is something we will hold in and call upon going forward.

And Brianna and Gabe: we want to thank and honor you for all you have done for your brother, honoring him with your love and support and friendship through all his life, but especially the past several years.

Ken:

Brianna and Gabe, and all who are gathered here, we want you to know and hear that no one—and especially you two—should have any regrets about the level of support and attention and love that we all gave to Jared. Please understand this: we as a family are proud of all we did for him. He was loved and, just as importantly, felt loved. You two were enormous sources of support and love for him and for that we are eternally grateful.

We do not know yet and perhaps never will know how to make sense of Jared's death. All we can say now is that he had an illness-- a vile, evil, tragic illness—that was directly responsible for his death. The outpouring of support, love, prayer, and kindness represented here by your presence here today buoys us in ways we can't describe, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all that we have gotten to date and know will continue in days, weeks, and months to come.

Our ask goes beyond this. We live at a time when so many issues in this country that have been neglected for too long are being raised – the dignity of work and workers, the ongoing presence of race and racism, the ability of people to love and marry whom they wish. Our ask is to make sure that we include the battle against mental illness and stigmatization of those who suffer from it as we collectively fight to get rid of stigma, ignorance, exclusion, and bigotry in so many areas. There are many ways to do this... This can start with educating ourselves, providing a smile or open visage to the strange and sometimes disturbing person on the subway or street corner (even if it is not reciprocated), or fighting to end the disgrace in this country that our prisons and jails are our largest mental health facilities.

We do not yet know how to turn personal tragedy into social change. We are unsure of what the coming days, weeks, and months have in store for us. But we expect that we will try to channel the fight that Jared showed, the resilience he exhibited, the love he somehow managed to give us, into making other people's lives better so that we can honor his life to the greatest extent possible.

We will miss Jared for the rest of our days—the person he was and just as much the person he would have been. Jared, your

memory is a blessing to us and to so many others. We love you and always will.

Ken:

We want to close with an Irish blessing that Jackie gave to Jared at his bar mitzvah. It is even more appropriate now.

Ken and Jackie:

May the road rise up to meet you

May the wind be always at your back,

May the sun shine warm upon your face,

And the rain fall softly upon your fields,

And until we meet again, dear Jared

May God hold you in the palm of Her hand.