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Empowering people through athletics, camaraderie and inclusion: Zach Bertke (BSBA '05)

How an entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for helping others led Fisher alum Zach Bertke (BSBA '05) to start a non-profit that provides resources to people with disabilities.

After earning his law degree from Georgetown University and spending eight years working on mergers and acquisitions, Zach Bertke began an interest in entrepreneurship.

“I knew I liked business,” said Bertke (BSBA '05), a member of the Honors Cohort’s seventh class. “I figured a law degree was versatile, but I was looking for a more entrepreneurial role.”



He became general counsel for a mid-size company in Columbus where he specialized in human resource consulting and corporate health and wellness. Soon after, another venture – albeit a part-time opportunity – presented itself.

“Some friends approached me with an idea to start a nonprofit centered on providing developmentally disabled

individuals with access to lifestyle and wellness facilities and programs,” Bertke said. “I thought I would be a good addition to their team given my background in law. I didn’t know much about the challenges the disabled faced, but once I had my eyes opened to them, I knew this was a real issue. Suddenly, it became a passion of mine.”



They established the Five Strong Foundation, a nonprofit that “empowers individuals with developmental disabilities through athletics, camaraderie and inclusion.” By raising money to support other local organizations and offer their own camps at no cost, the goal is to help those individuals live more active and healthy lifestyles.

Since its inception four years ago, the organization has helped build the self-confidence and interpersonal

skills of over 700 individuals. In connection with Special Skills Sports Camp, Five Strong has helped to host football, basketball and soccer camps at Ohio State and throughout Columbus.

“We had the time to do it,” Bertke said. “We were all well-connected in the Columbus community, and that was the secret sauce. Many people – from young professionals to business owners – want to give back to the community.”

That support is on display every year at the organization’s signature fundraising event, the Columbus Derby Day. Held the same day as the Kentucky Derby, the event draws more than 600 attendees dressed in derby attire to Huntington Park, where they participate in auctions, sing and dance to live music and pet horses. The event can raise up to \$100,000 in support of the Five Strong Foundation in just one day.

Bertke traces his willingness to take calculated risks — like changing jobs and creating nonprofits — to his application to the Honors Cohort. He arrived at Ohio State knowing he wanted to participate in honors programming at the university, but it wasn’t until a roommate told him about the Cohort program that he decided to go for it.

A member of the 7th Cohort, the program was still relatively young, but Bertke saw it as a differentiator — one that continues to shape his professional development today.

“It was an intimate setting where students could thrive as a group,” he said. “It was access to a wonderful curriculum, excellent professors and the best classmates. I got to work with real companies in a very personal way early on. It exposes you to what future opportunities actually look like.”

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