

How the Common Thread Between Superheroes and Social Workers Put One College Student on the Path to His Life Calling



Zion poses for a photo at a recent DCF "life skills" event for transition aged youth.

"Be a creator." That was the advice Zion, a junior and social work major at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), had for his peers as they gear up to return for the fall semester. It is a mantra he uses in his own approach to life because, in more ways than one, Zion is a creator. He has been described as a 'Renaissance Man' for his ability to blend his musical talent with his artistic endeavors such as his original graphic novel series starring superhero "Braggadocious". He was even approached by Netflix to be featured in a documentary.

Zion possesses a personal charisma that is obvious from the start. Ketsy Ramirez, Zion's DCF-assigned worker, said she met Zion for the first time when she helped him move back to college. But even after that short interaction, Ketsy recognized that he is "an amazing young man with a great spirit."

"After talking to him, I can see that his passion is directed toward helping and encouraging young kids to do better and to focus on the importance of education. He is the first one in his family to go to college, and he is very proud of it. Most importantly, he is grateful to the people who have guided him to where he is now," she said.

Meeting upbeat Zion, you would never assume that he faced some very real challenges in his life. Zion's mother passed away when he was a young child - 14 days before his birthday. He does not know his father and has been in the care and custody of DCF since his early years. While he is now thriving heading into his third year of college, he admitted that he got to a point during freshman year where things got rocky. He said he seriously considered quitting school.

"I'm not going to sugar coat it - I was lost. I followed the crowd and was having fun more than I was taking class seriously."

Zion credits his turnaround to his mentor Alan, who was also in foster care, with helping him not only correct course but start learning how to persevere and believe in himself and his abilities. Zion said Alan is like an "older cousin" and they easily bonded over their shared experience and similar interests.

"When I said to myself college is not for me and was going to give up, it was Alan who told me 'no that's not you.'"



Zion with his "older cousin" Alan pictured in the head scarf.

Alan remembers comforting Zion during that rough patch of freshman year and telling him it is okay to slow down and take stock of what is truly important in your life. Alan said it clicked and he took it upon himself to say he would not be defined by his past.

"Zion reminds me of a young version of me. Kind of had all the right intentions but the distractions around him had him going in all the wrong directions. Sometimes that means being more thoughtful about the people we're giving our time to. It's okay to accept yourself and then begin accepting people who are willing to accept you for you."

As Zion grew into himself, and really began to think about his goals and dreams, Alan saw Zion began to flourish and strive to be his best self. He said Zion is a natural leader and a sponge for the advice of the positive adults in his life.

"Alan helps me understand the value of relationships. That's an issue for people in foster care. It's hard to build relationships and trust people sometimes," Zion said.



SUN Scholars founder Chris Scott and colleague Alan Abutin appear on WFSB.

Zion met Alan through SUN Scholars, which is an organization that works with foster and adopted students throughout their college experiences.

SUN Scholars is unique in that its staff, including Alan, consists entirely of former foster and adopted youth. That shared background was a reason that Zion and Alan were able to form that "older cousin-younger cousin" relationship. He knows Alan 'gets him.'

Of the closeness between Zion and Alan, SUN Scholars founder Chris Scott said, "That's the type of relationship we intentionally strive to build. We know what they're going through, and they know we're here to help them grow."

The lived experience of SUN's staff, as well as the lived experience of 50 percent of its board members, is the reason why the organization refers to and treats all their students as "future colleagues," explained Chris.

"As a community agency it's really important for us to be part of the community we serve. I tell the students 'you are our future colleagues' so I'm going to treat you with the respect and dignity that colleagues should have for each other. They see that [the SUN staff] quote, unquote 'made it' and seeing us they know they can make it too in these roles."

Zion recently returned from an educational group trip to Peru organized by SUN as part of their Robert & Anthony Dudchik SUN Memorial Fund Program. He said the experience was life changing. Sitting atop Machu Pichu, in a moment of self-reflection, Alan said he got inspired to go bigger with his creative side and began envisioning what the future held in store for him. More specifically, what career might be a good fit for him.

Feeling fortunate to have been able to experience Peru in a way that admittedly many Peruvians he encountered could not afford to do, he just knew he wanted to return to Connecticut and to pay it forward.

"I thought, I hope I'm in the position to do this for someone else when I'm able to. I couldn't even dream of going to a place like Peru before."

Staring off at the cloud covered mountain tops and feeling close to the heavens, he started to think about how this trip was made possible. This SUN trip, and many other enrichment activities, were funded through a foundation formed in memory of two former SUN students, brothers, who died tragically in a car accident.

With those guardian angels in mind and with Alan - his "guardian angel" on earth - having his back, Zion vowed not to squander the opportunities afforded to him.

"I started imagining what my future life could be. That's what the Peru trip did for me. Before then I didn't really believe in myself. It's crazy how far you can go and where life can take you when you believe in yourself. Alan taught me that. My belief became so strong that I could foresee my future."

As a place, people and culture, Peru is unique and beautiful. It is also a culture shock for SUN students - and anyone else - who has never traveled out of the country. But getting out of your comfort zone also allows you to open your mind and grow your perspective.

"It was different that's for sure," Zion laughs. "That first day in Peru, I didn't recognize anything on the breakfast plate. By the end of the trip I started thinking, when I get home, I need to hit up a Peruvian restaurant."

Yes, many SUN scholars have not had it easy in their young lives. However, during this trip, they got to interact with Peruvians in much less fortunate situations than they could imagine in Connecticut. Zion said seeing little children about aged seven who were begging for food is etched in his mind. It's not a cakewalk being in foster care and not knowing your parents but,



Zion (standing second from left) with his fellow SUN Scholars at Machu Pichu - the site of his "ah ha" moment.

he said, at seven he remembers hanging out with friends and playing video games - not out in the streets looking for his next meal.

The trip allowed for deep introspection. It allowed Zion to have that moment of realization where he knew his calling was to help others and give back to the community.



Zion and Alan enjoying each other's company....and the view!

When Chris Scott started planning these international trips, he said that "ah ha" moment Zion had, and many SUN students past and present have had, was exactly the point.

He said these experiences do in fact inspire SUN students to start seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty. Chris said he wants the students to come back to Connecticut and say 'I have a lot of blessings that I didn't realize were blessings.'

He said almost every student whose gone on one of these trips has come home and asked 'how do I get more involved, how do I help out in Connecticut, how do I do more?'

Chris, who had his own eye-opening experience visiting Peru, said, "I came back and I was like I haven't had it easy but I'm in college, I've never worried about food, or a shower or clean water. It changes the way you see everything."

More than anything, Chris wants his students to realize that, while they may not have the means to give back at this point, he wants them to say 'let me invest in myself, let me build my dignity and when I have the time and means let me give in the future.'

"[In the U.S.] we have opportunities to break generational trauma that exists amongst many of our families, we have the opportunity for upward mobility, we have the opportunity to build special lives for ourselves."

He and Alan have witnessed Zion's self-discovery, his maturity and growth, and his calling for the giving professions. Zion has a passion for it that cannot be taught because his heart is truly 'in it'.

"Zion is definitely the 'next generation'. Myself and my colleagues [at SUN], we're the stewards for this generation. I know Zion is going to be the steward for the next generation."



Cover art for Zion's "Braggadocious" graphic novel series.

It was Alan's guidance that helped Zion turn this vision into a reality by getting him on the path to a degree in social work. In addition to talking it through together, Alan literally brought Zion to the CCSU campus to meet the program staff and register for classes.

Beyond school, Alan has had a big influence on the development of Zion's personal and interpersonal skills as a young man but also on his creative pursuits like his graphic novel series titled "Braggadocious" which is the name of the main character. The comic was the brainchild of Zion and his colleague Xavier.

"If it wasn't for Alan, I wouldn't have thought to have started the comic. But Alan said this is your time to shine."



The progression of Valin Zafar - aka "Braggadocious" - throughout the years.

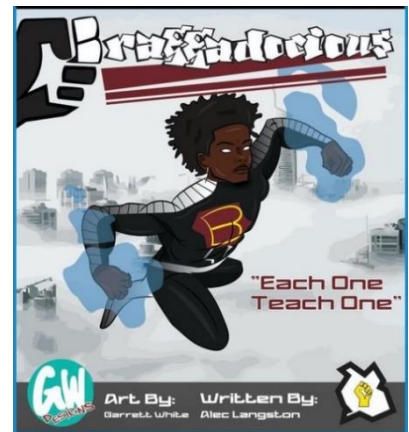
Zion took that advice and ran with it. The main character reflects Zion's own traits, experiences and resilience. Zion is big on creating community and was happy to bring in classmates and friends to contribute to the comic series. The successes and obstacles those peers face and have faced are also interwoven in the story of Braggadocious.

At some point, everybody goes through a transformational period of self-exploration. For foster youth who never met or lost their birth parents at an early age, just like Zion and Braggadocious, it may be a little more difficult to form a self-identity without knowledge of your roots.

However, Zion said, foster kid or not, people inevitably start asking themselves "who am I?" He said his artistic expression is not only an expression of his own journey but it also helps in answering that question of who he is as a person. He hopes it will be a source of inspiration for others.

"Even people who know their families ask that question of themselves. The story of Braggadocious comics represents what I go through and what other foster kids go through."

Zion's hero does not fly or break through walls. Instead, Braggadocious is "here for the community." He is here for young kids in poverty like the youth Zion met in Peru. He is here for people who are struggling to find jobs, pay bills and get a college education. Zion said Braggadocious is the representation of hip hop and its principles including peace, love, unity, and having fun. It then combines the influences of "Western world and Eastern world" cultures.



Inspired by true events. Support hero in the Braggadocious series with credits given to two members of Zion's 'community of collaborators'.

"Certain things college students or young people go through on a day-to-day basis. He's here for them and everyone in those situations."

Zion said he has expanded his network through the creation of "Braggadocious", such as the connection he made with his colleague Jonathan Smith who runs Rising Geniuses, LLC. Jonathan got them on Hot 93.7 to introduce Braggadocious to a larger audience.

Zion's time in Peru helped him lock in on social work as a major. However, as a dedicated Marvel and DC comic fan, and an emerging visual media artist, Zion's response to why he ultimately settled on pursuing social work was not surprising.

"Social workers are like superheroes. They are like celebrities. You see people on TV but forget that...social workers are really out there doing it."

As he reflected on his experiences and on his past and future accomplishments, Zion mused, "If I can do all this as a college student then what can I accomplish when I actually get my degree and become a social worker?"