

A life less ordinary: Jacob Beck-Jaffurs 09/01/87 - 11/03/11

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Rachel Lister is one of Jacob's classmates, flatmates and friends. Prior to medicine, she trained as a nurse and paramedic in Wellington, and has spent much of her life living and travelling overseas. Along with Jacob, she was heavily involved in the development of the Professional Pathways Trust and continues to have a hands-on role in the management of this charity. She enjoys travelling, attempting to surf and, like Jacob, embraces every minute possible on the beautiful coastlines of New Zealand.

At medical school, we are surrounded by overachievers. We are all relatively intelligent, we are all hard-working; many students excel in academics, sports or other skills. Some have multiple degrees or qualifications; some play music, or golf. We are accustomed as a group to being around people who excel. And because we are accustomed to it, in many ways we become immune to it. Immersed in our own achievements we often forget how fortunate we are and how much we have to give. Sometimes it is necessary to take a step back and ask ourselves: What is the purpose of our achievements and skills? What value can we add to our communities? And what more could we be doing with our time now? A few students show us just how much more we could be doing and humble us with their quiet contributions to the world.

Jacob Beck-Jaffurs was one of these students. In the trainee intern year of 2011 at the University of Auckland, Jacob was one of the most enthusiastic, pragmatically altruistic and modest overachievers many of us will ever meet. He died this year on 11th of March in a diving accident, and this article is to celebrate the life and contributions of such an awesome and inspirational young man.

Jacob Beck-Jaffurs was born in the USA, and moved with his family to Whangarei as an 11-year-old boy. His father Chip is an emergency physician and his mother Barbara, a lawyer. Jacob grew up surrounded by people who encouraged and pushed him to excel. He was an athlete and a waterman who honed his surfing skills at the Raglan surf academy as a young teen, and competed on the national stage. Later, as an avid diver, he would drop 40, 50 or even 60 feet underwater in one breath to spear a fish or simply watch the majesty of the depths play out before him. He was a distance runner, played soccer and volleyball competitively, and at the time of his death, was committed to training as a boxer, and aiming to compete internationally. He loved to surf, dive, climb mountains, explore and to generally participate in anything that would get him out of a lecture theatre and into the open air.

Jake did well in medical school- keeping up his grades throughout (a massive achievement considering the amount of time he spent skiving off class to go surfing). He thrived on emergency medicine and trauma, and he was forever proposing some new venture for the future, usually in expedition medicine, from marathons in the Amazon, to Surf-Aid in Bali, to being the medic at Scott base where he could go ice climbing. He had a simple enthusiasm for the fun side of medicine, content when suturing a patient's arm in ED or scrubbed in theatre and generally bored (like the rest of us) with too many lectures. He took a year off after 3rd year to work, travel and surf his way across every windswept beach he could find on this beautiful planet. He also worked weekends throughout medical school, managing to get to T1 year with very little debt (not so much through his earning power, but through his unparalleled ability to scrimp on absolutely everything)- something worth mentioning as an achievement in itself for those of us who know how much time and money medical school can drain from your life.



As a man who grasped every opportunity he was given, Jacob was able to see the disparities in opportunities available to other students in high schools such as his own. He was shocked and concerned at the poor representation of low decile high school students in the medical programme. Not one to look at a problem without searching for a solution, Jacob co-founded the Professional Pathways Trust in his 4th year of medicine. Managing to juggle the demands of the hospital, study and his beloved surf, he spent countless hours working on this charity, building it up to one of the largest of its kind in the country.

Professional Pathways provides mentoring to students from low decile high schools into professional careers such as medicine or law. It gives these students a real life connection with the professional world that they don't necessarily find in their school or home lives. Jacob believed, and Professional Pathways was founded on this belief, that exposure and encouragement can make a profound difference in the lives of young people and he wanted to see some of these students achieving things they may never have dreamt of. With hard work and commitment, Professional Pathways expanded rapidly from just three mentors in February 2009, to over 150 mentors in the space of one short year. Starting a national charity was not easy, with financial stress, time pressures and logistical problems along the way. However, along with the management team, Jake worked hard to iron out the kinks so that at the beginning of 2011, Professional Pathways was relaunched with a new website, new management systems and plans to take on every low decile school in the country.

When meeting with students from various high schools, Jacob had them spellbound, mesmerized by this energetic young man who was able to conclusively demonstrate that it is possible to look like you just left the beach and still be a doctor. He would sit and listen, quietly acknowledging their fears and feelings of inadequacy and boosting their confidence by giving them medical school exam papers to work through, proving that common sense and a keenness to learn are more than enough to survive medical school.

A scholarship has been established in Jacobs's memory, which will be awarded annually to an exceptional student who has received mentoring through the Professional Pathways program. If you would like to contribute to this scholarship or learn more about Jacob's charity, please visit www.professionalpathways.org

The years I knew Jacob were too short, but the impact he made upon my life and the lives of hundreds of others will last forever. He was an athlete, a doctor, a professional and a friend. The Jacob I knew was selfless and modest, quietly going about the business of bettering himself and supporting others without ever seeking recognition. He walked through this life with a perpetual grin on his face, forever chuffed with the simplest things, like a sunny lunch break in the Auckland Domain or being able to smuggle free coffee from the hospital. I can only hope that my medical practice in the future will live up to the high expectations he not only demanded of himself, but also inspired in everyone around him. Jacob lived with dignity, passion and grace and he died doing something he loved. Jacob was just 24 years old.

We will miss him always.