



True Grit

Bethel Park grad overcomes obstacles to build a successful clothing brand worn by rapper Wiz Khalifa and the Steelers' Antonio Brown, to name a few.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

When it comes to art, most kids are happy sketching pictures of family members, animals, superheroes and imaginative creatures. Bethel Park's Jared Zych, on the other hand, was sketching shoes.

Sneakers, to be exact.

From an early age, Zych, a 2007 graduate of Bethel Park High School, was enamored with sneakers and sneaker stores. He would spend hours at the mall, studying and admiring shoes on display. He'd get his hands on a catalog from Eastbay, a popular supplier of athletic shoes and gear, and circle his favorite shoes, then find them at the mall to see how they were made.

Decades later, Zych has turned his lifelong passion for sneakers and athletic wear into a thriving business. Named NOLAC—which stands for No One Likes a Camper—Zych's apparel is being worn by professional athletes and celebrities, including rappers Wiz Khalifa and Chevy Woods and the Steelers' Antonio Brown.

Like many entrepreneurs who've fought to build a brand, NOLAC was not an overnight success. Zych struggled for years, selling part of his massive sneaker collection, and even his car, to launch his business.

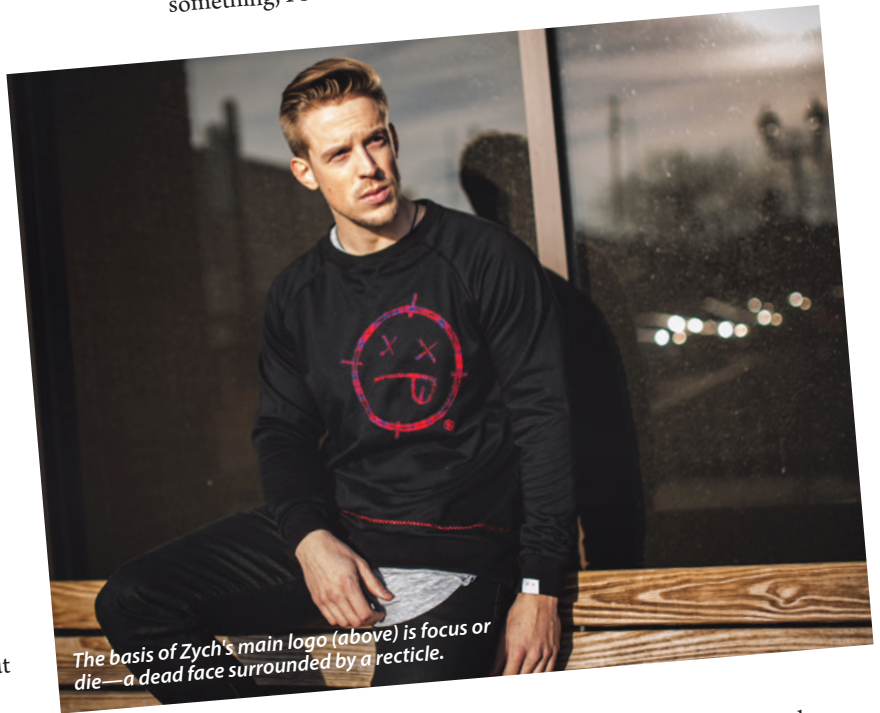
"Honestly, the process wasn't well thought out or even planned," says Zych, 28. "I was 23 and just knew I wanted to do something for myself. I basically cut myself off from all of the material things I thought were important to me."

The early days of the business were challenging but empowering, as they tested both his grit and commitment to getting NOLAC off the ground. The company was incorporated in 2012; sales began in August of 2013.

"I truly believe that in the lowest moments, we learn the most about ourselves," he says. "When I'm down, I thank God for testing me because if He didn't test me, I wouldn't know how much I believe in what I'm building and why I'm building it."

Zych, who is completely self-taught, notes that he had no knowledge of sewing, textile sourcing or clothing manufacturing before starting his business. What he did have was a vision.

"My passion to sketch and draw came from losing interest in class often and creating sketches in my notebooks, or anything I could use as paper," he states. "I've never had any formal training in any aspects of what I've done. God just blessed me with the talent but so more with this crazy passion that if I wanted to do something, I become resourceful and committed."



The basis of Zych's main logo (above) is focus or die—a dead face surrounded by a rectangle.

The company's name is derived from conversations with friends about individuals who use a "camper" strategy when playing video games. "Campers," he explains, "are people who sit and wait for others to come to them. I conceptualized it in relation to people in life who do the same exact thing. Instead of chasing what they want, they wait as though the world owes them something, and that it's going to come to them. NOLAC is a brand created because, as individuals, we can never become complacent, we can never settle, we can never camp."

His motto and passion led to recognition from star athletes and celebrities like Brown and Khalifa. The brand's Instagram account is peppered with praise from a wide swath of celebrities,

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Zych (right) with Steelers wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster (center).

There are no handouts here. You have to earn your keep and it isn't easy."

Over the next few years, he plans to focus on building more exposure for the brand. He also wants to speak to high school and college students about "all facets of life" and eventually travel to conduct Q&A-style discussions.

"I believe my story at this stage is one that will gain an ear," says Zych. "I want the youth to understand how many options there are in life. I want to use my story as a motivational tool to inspire and guide. I tell people all the time—I'm not selling clothes. I'm building a brand."

Zych says he handles 99 percent of the business operations by himself, pulling in independent contractors or part-time helpers for shipping and inventory when necessary.

"The brand is an extension of who I am, and until it reaches a point where branding is solidified, I like to have my hand in every aspect," he states. "I expect a lot out of myself and the brand."

After a year that tested him physically, financially and emotionally, he says he never lost faith in the struggle, pointing out that it's "impossible to stop an individual with passion."

He adds, "We are growing all the time, and that's all I'm thankful for. I truly believe if you aren't growing, you're dying in this industry."

And while other successful entrepreneurs may be tempted to relocate to larger cities, Zych has no plans to leave Pittsburgh. In fact, he still lives in Bethel Park: "I've had opportunities to leave, but I want to build here. This is home." ■

athletes, musicians and loyal customers—connections that grew organically.

"It makes me laugh, but the saying, 'Real recognizes real,' holds true here. I really had no connection with any athlete or celebrity before NOLAC," Zych says. "One thing that holds true with everyone who's worn my brand is that they have an incredible amount of passion and belief in what they do, so when I created the opportunities to cross paths with these individuals, there was mutual respect between us, and, in some cases, it's led to some incredible friendships."

While he's grateful for the support, he's not surprised by the fact that celebrities are attracted to NOLAC apparel.

"It sounds crazy to some, but I knew I would have my clothes being worn by a lot of people who currently support the brand," he explains. "It all circles back to the vision I have for what I'm building. It makes me happy to know that some of the people wearing my brand have access to the best clothes money can buy but still consistently wear NOLAC."

Numerous pieces in Zych's collection are printed with inspirational sayings such as "Fate Loves the Fearless," "Keep on Going" and "No Love Lost." Some of his best sellers are sweat suits and what he calls "fundamental pieces." These include plain long-sleeve and short-sleeve shirts that can be worn for any occasion, whether dressy or casual.

"I have NFL players who will wear them under their sport coats to games, and then work out in them after the game," he says.

Growing up

To shop for NOLAC apparel, visit www.nolacnation.com.

in Pittsburgh certainly impacted both Zych's work ethic and vision.

"Pittsburgh works hard—that's the easiest way to say it," he explains. "This is a city that knows what it means to work, and I'm thankful for that."



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