

Thoughts on My Future

Life, Death, and the Summer of 2009

Zach Bucholtz

I have never been to a college fraternity party. When many of your fondest childhood memories, however, are of 400-person Italian wedding receptions lasting into the next morning, you know a thing or two about having a good time. I have never tried tobacco, yet I know firsthand how it can terrorize a family. To date, I have only sipped an alcoholic beverage one time, and have since had no desire to try it again. I have dated a grand total of zero women, but please don't tell me I don't know about love.

I know that college isn't about parties, women, or booze. I know that college is about maturing and preparing yourself for the future profession of your choice. The funny thing is: I haven't the slightest idea what I'm going to be when I grow up.

When I was a little boy, I knew exactly what I wanted to be. Art, I would say, was my life. I loved watching my mom doodle on her big, yellow notepad. She could be on the phone having a serious conversation and at the same time fill up a sheet of paper with a collage of flowers, women's faces, and a fancily scribed selection of the words used in her dialogue. Every so often I would have my dad take me to a box stored in the garage. Inside that box were what seemed like dozens of almost lifelike depictions of my favorite cartoon characters, painted by my mom. I looked in awe at these masterpieces, but could only dream of someday being able to create art as beautiful as my mom's.

Pasquale Santaniello is a 16-year-old living in Quindici, Italy in 1949. Every morning in this small village near Naples, Pasquale walks into town to pick up the necessary ingredients for that day's feast. He greets everyone he sees, and they exchange stories and tell a few jokes. Despite his youth, Pasquale has already acquired many of the qualities that would serve him

well later in life – a great sense of humor, courtesy and respect for others, and a raging pride in himself and his (rather large) family.

There have been many times when I said I wanted to work my whole life at Disney World. We vacationed there several times throughout my childhood, and every time I noticed something: the cast members always look so happy. Why wouldn't they? They get to spend all day in the beautiful Florida sun, and ride Space Mountain and TestTrack for free. With all its enjoyable family rides, picturesque scenery, and shopping opportunities, Disney World is a truly magical place. Having the opportunity to live there and get paid for it seemed unreal to me.

In 1959 an adult Pasquale ponders his future. He has served his country as a military police officer, but unwed and unsatisfied with what he already has, he makes a brave and risky decision: to move to America. The next year he settles in Chicago, Illinois, and a year later is married to Marianna Bianchi, the woman he met and fell in love with before departing.

I didn't care much for baseball my first few years of playing. That all seemed to change in one infamous night at the Bucholtz home. It was the middle of winter, with the season still months away. My dad, being the great coach he was, had set up a batting tee in our garage, and intended to spend some quality time instructing his nine-year-old son on the proper mechanics of hitting a baseball. I don't remember all the details of that night, other than me blowing up at my dad, taking my aggression out on the ball, and going on to have a breakout year. From then on, I was sure that I was destined to make a living in the Major Leagues.

It is 1969, the year of Abbey Road, Butch Cassidy, Tinker v. Des Moines, Apollo 11, Woodstock, the Tate-LaBianca murders, Sesame Street, Joe Namath, and the publishing of a novel by some Italian guy named Mario Puzo about a family of gangsters in New York. The previous year's murders of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. are still resonating in the minds of Americans. However, Pasquale and Marianna Santaniello have no time to get caught up in the excitement brewing in their new homeland. Now in southwest Michigan, they are business owners, hard at work every day while trying to make ends meet by selling pizza and pasta derived from Anna's homemade recipes. On top of that, they have two young daughters to raise, Santina and Nadia.

I often say that middle school was one of the best experiences of my young life. On top of having teachers who I still keep in contact with, I had developed a passion for music, and met many of my friends while playing in the school bands. My daydreams in this era often included me playing the drums to my favorite songs, or conducting an orchestra's rendition of my latest masterpiece. I saw the band directors writing music on their computer, and promised myself that I would someday buy whatever software they used and go to work on my own songwriting.

By the time 1979 rolls around, the couple has established Santaniello's Restaurant as the premiere fine dining establishment in southwest Michigan. Pasquale is able to divert his attention away from the business every once in awhile, concerned more with the constant misbehaving of Santina and Nadia, now in high school. Any boy interested in his daughters was subject to his approval. Young men would fear the Santaniello home, knowing very well they

could be chased out by Pasquale, who was also by now a father of four following the births of Ralf and Rosanna.

My first night in my new hometown was on the eve of my first high school football practice. Learning a new system with new teammates, I impressed my new coaches with an ability to absorb information and an encyclopedic knowledge of their playbook. I started every game that year for the freshman team, and we did really well. The only time I can recall coming out of a game was our season finale, which we won 50-0. I suggested to the coach that he let my backup get some playing time, but once he struggled a bit, I was right back in there. Rumor has it that when the head coach of the varsity team gave his end-of-season address, he mentioned my name as one of the guys who would be there to help the team next season. I was told that I had a bright future in the sport, and that college football was not out of the question.

By 1989, there were two men who had somehow earned Pasquale's trust with his daughters. Scott Grumbir had married Santina and recently fathered Pasquale's first grandchild, Justin. A big mystery, though, was Scott Bucholtz. The cowboy-boot wearing, blue van driving, rock and roll drummer with long red hair had stalked Nadia Santaniello, finally convincing her to accompany him on a date. Even more surprising was that they had by now been dating for five years.

My sophomore year of high school, I finally thought I had found my calling. I enrolled in a journalism class where the teacher was thought of by her students as the second coming of Adolf Hitler. She knew what made good journalism, and would refuse to negotiate her opinions,

knowing in her mind they were indeed fact. Her classes had produced some of the best newspapers and yearbooks in the country. She routinely had students win awards at national and statewide conferences. I was fortunate enough to be one of those students. As the sports editor of the newspaper I assumed the role of go-to-guy for anything sports-related. I had at last found something that I could do better than anyone. I was accepted into a prestigious journalism program at Ball State University, my teacher's alma mater. My future was set. Then one day The University of Michigan called to say I was off their waitlist; if I knew anything, it was that you don't turn down Michigan. But they do not have a journalism program.

It was June 10, 1989 when Pasquale was able to walk his second daughter, Nadia, down the aisle. And the wedding was, of course, a grand occasion. Early in the morning, Nadia's bridesmaids gathered at the Santaniello home to help prepare the bride for the big day. At St. Joseph Catholic Church, Pasquale gave her away to Scott Bucholtz, who couldn't resist sporting those infamous cowboy boots. Scott sat in on the drums with the band at their wedding reception, playing Joe Walsh's "Rocky Mountain Way", among other songs. Two years later, the couple gave birth to their first son, Zachary, the third Santaniello grandchild after Santina's daughter Andrea was born 14 months prior.

My mom suggested I take pre-med classes and perhaps be a pediatrician. She said that I have a compassion for other people, kids in particular, and a brain that could handle the requisite knowledge of a doctor. Although I had for most of my life been against education beyond a bachelor's degree, it made perfect sense to me. The thought of people calling me "Dr. Bucholtz" was something I knew I could enjoy.

Pasquale had spent much of the last decade of the 20th Century with his grandchildren: Justin, Andrea, Zachary, and now Nadia's second son, Austin. He loved to hook up some wagons to his lawnmower tractor and drive the kids around the yard. He also enjoyed kicking around a soccer ball and making them pizza.

1999 started an era of growth in the Santaniello family. It was in the fall of that year that Scott and Nadia showed a black and white picture of a small creature to their boys. Knowing what it was but afraid he might be wrong, Zachary let Austin answer when his parents asked what they thought this image was of. Austin said what Zachary had also correctly assumed – a baby. And the following spring, Bianca Bucholtz was the first of six children born into the family during the next decade. Rosanna's twins were the last two, born on March 24 of 2009, the year that changed everything in the Santaniello family. It was on that otherwise joyous day that they found out something they hoped they never had to hear.

We went to Florida for spring break my senior year of high school. We left just a couple of days after my twin cousins were born. I thought my mom seemed a little down during the car ride to Orlando, and I knew I saw her crying once or twice, but she lied and told me she wasn't. One night she called me into her room at our resort to tell me that my grandpa had Stage IV Lung Cancer. Suddenly Disney World didn't seem so magical anymore.

I thought my parents could use some good news. So, as we all sat in their room crying I decided that was the best time to tell them I found a date to the Prom. They suggested that be my excuse for calling my grandpa. He, like just about everyone else, liked to tease me about my love life, or lack thereof. So, when I settled down a bit, I called him up to tell him the good news. It took a lot of me not to start crying some more when I heard his voice on the other end.

My grandpa and I had a very special bond, going back to when I lived with my grandparents during eighth grade. He would take me to school and pick me up, always patient with me even when I took awhile coming out. When I came home, there was always fresh bread, either homemade or bought from the best bakery in town. We liked the same Italian bread; he enjoyed his with some wine and seafood, and I would cover mine with Nutella or soy butter. A taste for bread wasn't the only thing we shared, though. Living with him, I learned to treat others with more respect. I was using my hands when I told stories and inherited his weird sense of humor. And, I learned to have a raging pride in myself and my (rather large) family.

I devoted the summer of 2009 to hanging out with my grandpa as much as possible. This wasn't very hard for me. The Great Recession cost my dad his job and put a hold on my parents' plans to buy a new home, so for the second time in my life I was only living down the hall.

Being that I was around so much, I often found myself running errands that my grandpa could no longer handle. I would pick up medicine at Walgreens, drop off the restaurant's deposit at the bank, and wash my grandpa's Camry and top off the gas tank. I became quite a regular at the Splash and Dash car wash on Red Arrow Highway. I knew exactly where my grandpa kept his change, if only because he reminded me every time. I'll never forget him asking me to vacuum the car's interior, telling me, "the change is in the thing" while using his left hand to show me that he was referring to a small compartment to the left of the steering wheel. There were always others around that he could ask for help, but my grandpa knew he could count on me. We celebrated my grandma's birthday at my aunt's house one afternoon, and when my grandpa's nap time came, all of his children insisted he sleep in my aunt's large, private bedroom. He preferred his own bed, and the person he sought out to drive him home was not any of his children or their spouses; he asked me, and words cannot express how honored I was.

Despite his condition, my grandpa tried his hardest not to change, and not to let himself or others get upset. He still loved to tell jokes; however, it seemed at times like I was the only one who understood his sense of humor. We would be sitting in a room with half a dozen other people. Always the center of attention, my grandpa would tell a few jokes. Out of respect, the half a dozen others would fake a giggle. I, on the other hand, would be laughing hysterically, sometimes even to the point of tears, as I was genuinely and completely entertained.

Putting a minor dent into my plans was the stipulation in my acceptance to Michigan that required me to take classes over the summer. I arranged my schedule so that I could come home Thursday afternoons and leave for Ann Arbor Monday mornings, and people loved to question this decision. I'm crazy, they would all say, for leaving college every weekend to go home. I was a mad man, they said, for paying 100 dollars to park my car when busses and bikes are just as convenient. It was a no-brainer, for me, though. I spent every weekend that summer with my grandpa, listening to his jokes, washing his Camry, and enjoying his company.

One night when I was getting set to leave home for school, I made a joke that I would miss my grandma's dinner and have to eat Taco Bell instead. Now, a Taco Bell meal costs no more than about five dollars, which I could easily afford. My grandpa, however, reached into his pocket, pulled out forty dollars and handed it to me. I said thank you and tried to give it back. He seemed confused, almost angry. In his mind, the thought of someone thanking him for money was absurd, because he knew better than anyone that that's what family does for family.

Depending on who your source is, I may have saved my grandpa's life on a couple of occasions. The first was when I caught him falling down the stairs one day. That was really the first time I started to notice his decline. His already thin hair was nearly all gone as a result of his treatment. So too was the little bit of fat and muscle on his increasingly bony frame, thus

making stair-climbing quite a challenge. Luckily, I was there that day to stabilize him after he stumbled past a few steps.

The second time was one of my fondest memories of my grandpa. It was three in the morning, and I couldn't fall asleep. It was so hot up in my attic bedroom that every night I would come downstairs and sleep on the couch. I heard a noise coming from upstairs, and looked to see what was going on. My grandpa was coming down the stairs again, and his foot was caught on the tube that fed him oxygen while he slept. I turned on a light, untangled his foot and walked with him to the living room. He took a seat on the couch, and I sat a few feet away at the kitchen counter as he tried to light a cigarette with his pack instead of the lighter. I wanted so badly for him to figure it out by himself, but after he struggled with it for a minute or so, I walked a lighter over to him. He held the lighter in one hand, the pack in the other, and looked inquisitively at each. But he didn't look sad or confused. He didn't look like a man on the verge of death. He knew right away what was going on, and let out a version of his instantly recognizable laugh, had a smoke, and went back to bed.

My grandpa made it through the summer, but clearly his time was coming to end. So, too, were my weekend excursions back home. With a full schedule of classes and my dad's lingering unemployment making travel expenses almost unaffordable, I decided that it was best I not come home so often. Knowing that there was a chance I wouldn't see him again, my mom suggested I tell my grandpa anything I needed to get off my chest.

I was to move into my dorm room on September 1, 2009. The night before, I said my goodbyes to most of my family, even staying awake until my mom left for work the next morning. After I got some sleep and had all my things packed, I told my grandpa what I needed

to get off my chest. I told him the three things any man wants to hear, and the three things that best summed up what I felt about him.

“I love you.”

“Thank you.”

“When I grow up, I want to be just like you.”

I gave him a hug, and cried for a solid hour as I drove to Ann Arbor. It would be the last time I saw him awake. I got a call from my Aunt Rosanna on the morning of September 10 to let me know he was in what the doctors called “the transition.” I drove home later that day, unsure if he was still alive. He was, but in a deep sleep he rarely woke out of. My family and I spent much of the next couple days around his bed, spending all the time we could with him. It was then that I broke my vow of sobriety, but only because after everyone in the room took a sip of that disgusting thing, someone rubbed a little on my grandpa’s lower lip so we could all say we shared one last drink with him.

My oldest cousin, Justin, says he saw our grandpa wake up to make sure the nurse on duty at the house got a pizza, before falling back asleep. I wasn’t so lucky, but since the medical team (and our priest) said he could still hear us while in his sleep, I made sure to say my goodbyes again the next night. The day after that, September 12, was his last. His funeral was the next week, and I still can’t believe how many cars I watched pull into the cemetery to pay their respects that afternoon.

After my grandpa passed away, I somehow had to return to school and resume the inevitable quest into my future. As I ponder now what I want my life to be like years down the road, I remember not what I aspired to be as a child growing up, but the memories made through

those aspirations. I think of the total admiration I had toward my mom as she doodled on her big yellow notepad while on the phone, and how I still look up to her as a young adult. I then think of her hanging up the phone and giving her boy a big hug and a kiss. I think of celebrating with my dad after winning countless baseball games together, years after my tirade that night in the garage. I think of swimming in the pool of an Orlando resort with my little sister, Bianca, and how badly I want to write music with my uber-talented singer of a brother, Austin, using that same software the band directors used to use (which I finally bought seven years later). I think back to my childhood and yearn for the days when everything was so simple. I think back to those days and say to myself, “it was never any better.”

When I reminisce about my football career, my first thoughts are not of any game action, or how I barely saw the field during a championship run my senior year, but of the bonds formed with my teammates, who are now many of my closest friends. When I think of being a pediatrician I think not of science or wealth, but of my sister and my five little cousins, and how it’s kids like them that make life worth living. And then, I think of this paragraph from the last article I ever wrote for a newspaper, the obituary for my grandfather:

Pasquale Santaniello passed away Saturday afternoon in his Stevensville home surrounded by his wife, children and two nieces who were on hand to be with him during his final days. Pasquale was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer this March. He was seventy-six years old.

I read this and I think of how lucky I would be if I lived to be seventy-six years old, walk my three daughters down the aisle, hold my ten grandchildren in my arms, and have a marriage as beautiful and romantic as the one I witnessed between him and my grandma. The summer of 2009 wasn’t one of sadness for me. It was a chance to live with and learn from a man I idolize.

I may not have the slightest idea what job I'll have someday, but I know exactly what I want my life to be like in the future. I want to be just like my grandpa. I want to give more than what is expected and expect nothing, not even a simple show of gratitude, in return. I want my top priority to be my family, for I know that in the end it is my impact on their lives that will be remembered when I'm gone.

Giving me that Taco Bell money wasn't my grandpa's last deed. He never stopped giving, right up until the day he died. He could have died the night before I got that phone call from my aunt, when he climbed into bed for the last time. He could have died either of the next two days, when he laid in bed in a deep sleep, his every move watched and noted by a hospice nurse. But he decided to wait to take his last breath until the afternoon of September 12, 2009. He had one more thing he had to take care of before he said goodbye.

September 12 is my mom's birthday.