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SURPRISE BEQUEST FROM MICHAEL ZEMSKY '70 TO SUPPORT NEW PRE-HEALTH SCIENCES PROGRAM

By Sarah Bilofsky

As a kid, Michael Zemsky '70 fell in love with science. To encourage the budding inventor, his parents built a laboratory in the basement.

Seven years younger, his brother Howard says Michael would often create experiments he thought the younger Zemsky would enjoy—like using dry ice to freeze a flower, then smashing it into a thousand pieces.



While Howard remembers the experiments, and says his parents always encouraged their children to travel and learn about other cultures, he is not sure why his older brother decided to study at Franklin after graduating from Syosset High School on New York's Long Island.

"He was always a deep thinker and a very creative person, so I have no doubt he did extensive research and chose it deliberately," he says.

Howard believes his brother put that same careful thought into the preparation of his will. When he died in November of 2019, Michael left an unrestricted bequest to Franklin.

"I think his gift is a direct reflection of the experience he had there," Howard explains.

After Lugano, Michael graduated from McGill University in Montreal and began working in patent research, eventually collecting two of his own.

According to the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the first was for his method of applying a fluorescent marking composition "particularly suited for marking currency." The second patent was issued for a process that created a unique marking system for coding bullets. When used, the patent explains, bullets discharged from a gun can be traced back to that specific firearm.

“He was very entrepreneurial, but never spoke in great detail about the projects he was working on,” Howard explains, adding that Michael traded the family basement for a large research lab he owned in Virginia. “I always suspected he was doing proprietary work.”

Howard believes it fitting that a portion of Michael’s \$100,000 gift is helping expand Franklin’s new pre-health sciences program—especially given the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The pre-health science curriculum is geared toward students who, after graduating from Franklin, intend to pursue graduate or professional studies in fields such as public health, medicine, nursing, or environmental health.

“He would be pleased and proud that his gift is helping those who share his love of science,” Howard says. “It was the subject he prioritized and saw as the path toward the world’s advancement.”

For Michael, that priority and path were evident early—including in the letters Michael wrote home from summer camp.

“Mine were typical, boring,” Howard says, laughing. “Having a great time. Food is great. Love, Howie.”

His brother’s letters took a different tone.

“In one he reports, ‘The ham radio instructor has left camp unexpectedly and the director has asked me to fill in. Please go to the local electronics store, pick up these things and send to me right away,’” Howard recalls. “Whatever the equivalent of a spreadsheet was then, he included a list—with exact serial numbers for parts.”

Serious about science, Howard says his brother possessed an equally ferocious sense of humor. It kept them connected, despite Howard working in real estate and economic development in New York and Michael busy at his lab in Virginia.

“Very few people can make me double over, out of breath, laughing” he says. “He had an amazing wit. Michael would just riff on a topic in a humorous way. It was genius. He was a master of free-association.”

He was also deeply concerned about the growing feral cat population, also leaving a bequest to Cornell University’s Feline Health Center.

“Michael was kind to all living creatures,” Howard explains. “He welcomed cats to wander inside his lab through a special door he built. They kept him company.”

“Cats are naturally very observant and move cautiously,” he adds. “I think he respected cats for the way they are and enjoyed watching them.”

Howard says his brother was similarly cautious, never making decisions lightly. He believes Michael’s will, which also included a gift to McGill, reflected his values.

“I’m confident he would not have included Franklin if he didn’t feel strongly about the positive impact it had on his life,” Howard says. “And if sharing Michael’s story leads others to support Franklin, it would be fitting. He always led by example that way. He had an inner compass that he followed. In some ways, it was not a traditional one—but it was great.”