

# A heartbeats LIVES ON

After the loss of her father, sophomore Zella Handzel keeps his story alive and spreads heart health awareness as a Kansas Teen of Impact

story by SOPHIA BROCKMEIER

There are two shiny, red pins on sophomore Zella Handzel's red shirt as she's sitting in her first hour chemistry class. One's a red dress that reminds her of her nomination as a Kansas Teen of Impact. The other's a red ribbon for her "hero." For her father. For Chris.

He was a volleyball fan, food connoisseur and college athlete. He worked diligently for his "second family" — the Howard Needles Tammen and Bergendoff architecture firm. Chris didn't seek attention; he sought to lift others up, according to Zella.

Chris collapsed at Zella's older sister, Emaline's, volleyball tournament, from a cardiac arrest resulting from atrial fibrillation. His family had a history of heart conditions, and Chris had the recessive trait. Days later, on April 29, 2024, he passed away.

But Zella's not letting this be the end of his story. She's keeping his story alive by using her platform as a Teen of Impact to raise awareness around heart health and the life-saving technique of CPR.

"There's so many ways that I see him," Zella said. "I'll just think, 'I miss you so much', but then I think about, 'Look at what I'm doing now. I wish you could have been here to see all of it.' I wouldn't have been as connected if I didn't see it as such a big issue in my life. So, I think it's something negative that turned into such a positive impact."

Zella was nominated to be a Kansas Teen of Impact by American Heart Association Development Director Natalie Spar. The Teen of Impact program

is a nine-week program that started on Feb. 6, raising money and awareness for the AHA.

Over the nine weeks, Zella, along with a "team" of her closest supporters, hopes to raise \$10,000 for the AHA. Apart from donations from family, friends and local organizations, she'll also lead school and community leadership activities, such as CPR training and fundraisers.

"Zella is just such a personable, joyous person," Spar said. "She's just a joy to be around. She really wants to bring honor to her dad and her family. And I think that's a really, really touching reason for wanting to do this."

Chris was the kind of person who attended heart walks to raise awareness for heart disease.

The kind of person who wore AHA T-shirts everywhere he went.

The kind of person who attended every one of his daughter's volleyball matches, and made up cheers and dances with the other spectators.

And the kind of person who, unbeknownst to his family, was an organ donor.

In fact, Zella's mother, Carissa, and Chris had discussed his *hesitation* to be a donor in the past, but he had just quietly changed his mind. It wasn't until Chris passed that the Handzels found out he was a donor.

"My mom just broke out in tears," Zella said. "I couldn't believe this all happened, and that he really made such a big

difference."

Then, they received the letters.

Coupled with hand drawn illustrations from children, in the following months, the Handzel family sat down to open up the notes of gratitude addressed to them from the organ recipients.

"He wasn't even thinking about [being a hero], but it was just such a difference that directly affected people's lives," Zella said. "So when we received those letters, it was like, 'Wow, this is real, they called him a hero. Yeah, he was, and you didn't even know him.'"

So when Zella turned 16 and received her driver's license she proudly checked the "organ donor" box, because her "hero," her father, was a donor too.

Several days before Chris passed, Emaline remembers him collapsing on the floor of the gym at her Baltimore volleyball tournament. In the critical moments after he fell and before the first responders arrived, Emaline performed CPR on her father.

It was this measure that allowed Zella to be able to spend a precious few more days with her father.

Yes, Zella had taken basic CPR during school, but after the process became personal, she wanted to honor her father by teaching others this potentially life-saving skill.

On Feb. 18, Zella led a hands-only CPR course at SM East in partnership with the Heart Club — the first of her many official Teen of Impact events.



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**NATALIE SPAR  
AHA DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR**



**SHE'S A TEEN of IMPACT** A breakdown of Zella's nomination as a Kansas Teen of Impact candidate

**NOMINATED BY**  
natalie spar  
AHA Development Director

**ZELLA IS NOW IN**  
nine-week program  
with other Teen of Impact candidates

**HER GOAL IS TO RAISE**  
ten thousand dollars  
for the American Heart Association

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