

Zachary Ray Johnson

January 8, 1981 ~ April 4, 2022

This will not be a typical obituary, because Zachary Ray Johnson was fantastically atypical. On his medical records, he was a person with developmental disabilities and a seizure disorder of unknown etiology. But to his family, friends, and fans, he was extraordinary. Incomparable. Sometimes maddening, always entertaining, a whiz at games, a shockingly good gift-giver, and possibly the most photogenic person who ever lived. He was hilarious, mischievous, tender-hearted, a true night owl, and a loyal friend who really worked at his friendships. He was a fantastic conversationalist: talks with him could range, in one session, from the state of the NBA to who would win in a fight between Venom and Batman to new art exhibits to musings about the nature of God and the purpose of life in this big, complicated world.

Zach wasn't in a rush to get here, though; his mom was about two weeks overdue when she went to bed on the night of Jan. 7, 1981. She woke in the wee hours of the morning on Jan. 8 and realized her fourth baby was coming—NOW. Seven minutes later, at home, Zach made his way into the world. This might have been a sign of things to come: Z Man was never more happy than when he was at home, enjoying a video game or a movie and eating fast food or "roasted cheese" sandwiches with the people he loved. He died at home, too, slipping away quietly at age 41 on April 4, 2022, just before his mom came down to play their usual evening game together.

After its spectacular start, Zach's life was a normal baby- and toddlerhood until he had his first big seizure at 2 ½ years of age. His epilepsy, and its resistance to medication, meant he spent a lot of time in hospitals and clinics, being poked, probed, and operated on. He was remarkably tough, almost impervious to pain, and incredibly courageous—sometimes to the point of folly, as when he caught a cottonmouth snake by the tail near his home in Texas, walked it home dangling from his hand, and deposited it in a handy aquarium in the garage before proudly informing his dad what he'd done.

There's no effective way to sum up a life like Zach's. He attended school in Green River, Wyoming; Lakewood, Colorado; and Fort Bend County, Texas. He worked at a Sugar Land, Texas, grocery store and at Liberty Office Products and served as a nursery worker at church. He had a stellar, decades-long career as a Special Olympics athlete, earning regional and state medals in golf, bowling, basketball, volleyball, softball, and bocce. His mom was his "Coach KJ" in volleyball, and his dad coached his basketball team. When he felt he'd won about as many championships as his idol, Michael Jordan, he followed MJ's lead and retired. Z's body couldn't keep up with sports, but he continued to be a fan, especially of his other favorite players—Shaquille O'Neal, Tracy McGrady, Hakeem Olajuwon, and Yao Ming—long after he could no longer play. In the later years of his life, Z loved game nights and sleepovers with his nieces and nephews; weekly dates with his sister, Jen; planning for and attending Salt Lake FanX in full cosplay; and making YouTube videos sharing his love for his family with the world.

Zach had many nicknames, which all reflected the love he attracted from so many. To almost everyone who knew and loved him, he was Z Man, Zebra, or sometimes just Z. To his sister, Jen, he was Lovey, and she was his Lovey, as well. And to a 1-year-old boy who was always happy to see him, he was Gruncle (great-uncle) Z.

We're not sure what the world will look like without Zach in it, and we will never stop missing him. We'll laugh and cry as we tell stories about him, drink Dr. Pepper and eat a few Vienna sausages or PopTarts in his honor, play Cover Your Assets and Things, put together some puzzles, and imagine the joyful reunions he is having in the next world with Grandma Jessie, Grandpa Orson, Grandma Taylor, Grandpa Tom, Grandpa Donaldson, Steve, Lee, Fred, Keith, and maybe even Meat Loaf.

If you'd like to join us to remember Z, his viewing is from 10:00 to 11:45 a.m. on Saturday, April 9th, at the Willow Creek Seventh Ward chapel at 2115 Creek Way in Cottonwood Heights. Funeral services will follow at noon at the church, and Zach will be interred later in the day near his Johnson grandparents in Rush Valley, Utah.

If you can't make it in person, feel free to log in to the funeral via Zoom, at http://willowcreekstake.com/funeral. And if you'd like to contribute in another way, you can donate to the Epilepsy Foundation in the name of Zachary Johnson at https://www.epilepsy.com/local/utah/donate-now.

Z Man always wondered at his challenges and longed to be free. We celebrate his freedom even as our hearts break for ourselves, bereft here without him for a while longer. We look forward to seeing him whole and unburdened on a great future day. We love you, Z, and we'll sign off using the titles you gave us:

The best parents ever, Ray and Kathy Johnson
Awesome sister Cassie Palmer and her cool husband Bashir Eustache
Jennifer "Lovey" Thomas and her great husband, Brad
Stacey and Greg Kratz, the best guys at FanX
The best nieces and nephews, Scott and I Guess Hannah, DeDee, Emma, Taylor, Natasha, Cute Grace, Kate, Faith, Jebbie, Max, and Bella; and the most delectable baby, Ari