

By John W. Fountain

*"I got you. Don't worry, Professor Fountain. I got you."*

I can still hear his words. "Thee Aaron Lee." That's what I called him. For that is how Aaron often referred to himself, almost in third-person while beaming and flashing his big white toothy smile, his eyes shining with the delight of a schoolboy who dreamt of someday becoming a professional sports reporter in ~~this~~ his hometown.

I first glimpsed that smile in what now seems like a lifetime ago, ~~when he became my student at Roosevelt University in 2013. before our relationship would expand into~~and after countless emails, texts and letters, office chats and telephone conversations shared between mentor and mentee. ¶

~~I can~~ Still hear the excitement in his voice, always detectable even when Aaron tried to bury the lead while delivering the latest news of some new job, journalism project or award. ¶

~~Aaron has some really big news this week. And I know he would call or text so that I could shout it from the rafters and, celebrate. If he could...~~ ¶

~~We both knew this day would come. That time waits for no man. It is a truth that Aaron arrived at in life much earlier than I did.~~ ¶

~~He was always young at heart. A dream chaser.~~ ¶

~~When we first met in 2013, he was my student at Roosevelt University.~~ From the time I met him, Aaron had big journalism dreams. He dreamed of writing stories rich in culture and wrapped in narrative triumph and humanity — untold stories.

He dreamed of landing bylines, and landing a journalism internship the way ~~that~~ some young men in the too-often-violent streets of the South Side, where he grew up, dream of playing in the pros. He was a "baller" of a different kind, a newsman and aspiring documentarian whose passion was covering sports and unearthing the relevant human stories therein.

Aaron dreamed of becoming the first in his family to graduate college and stand as a symbol for his family and also his community of what is indeed possible when you work, plan, build, dream.

Even when there are obstacles.

Even when life happens along the journey and it knocks you down and drains the hope and days and mortal time from your body, blood and bones, but not your heart and soul. Aaron taught me that.

Even when he was robbed at gunpoint while a student. Even when he was discouraged, funds low, and the dream elusive, Aaron never quit.

*"I got you, Professor Fountain."*

I can still hear him assuring me about promises to deliver assignments and projects on time, which he always did, as our relationship blossomed into ~~before our relationship would expand into~~and after countless emails, texts and letters, office chats and telephone conversations shared between mentor and mentee.

Aaron taught me that prognoses can neither deny nor define one's dream. That the human spirit is greater. That we are all on the clock and that our eventual expiration date is set in stone. That time is always shorter than we think, so don't waste it complaining or feeling sorry. Instead, ~~we should~~ wring all the days

of your livesfe — sundrenched or ominously cloudy — of every last drop. ~~And leave it all on the court. Until your heart stops.~~

Early on, I used to tell Aaron, who always exuded a sense of palpable haste, to slow down. He would respond, “Professor, I don’t know how much time I got.” Then he would share, matter of factly — and always with a measured laugh, —the latest harrowing episode in his battle with Crohn’s Disease.

I stopped telling Aaron to slow down. He never did.

He worked his way up the sports broadcast ladder, becoming a sports producer for a TV station in Texas and beginning work on a short-documentary film titled, “Dream Chaser,” —the story of Carl Montgomery, another South Side native and former teammate with hoop dreams.

Aaron pinched and raised the money to fund the film he produced and directed. Then in May, he held a screening at a theater in Chicago, where he had also recently began working as a bureau producer at ESPN. His dreams were coming true.

And they are still coming true, but without him.

In June~~A month later~~, I received a message from his girlfriend Amber Brown: “Aaron passed away last night. I know you are really important to him and I wanted to let you know.”

Aaron was really important to me. More than these words here can say.

Aaron Timothy Lee died June 20, at age 34, after a lengthy illness. But not his dream. Not his heart. Not his soul.

And he’s got some really big news this week, even if he isn’t here to share it. His film, “Dream Chaser,” airs at 7 p.m. Friday and throughout the weekend on Marquee Sports Network — —proof of a Chicago son’s indomitable spirit and the power of a dream.

And I know, if he could, he would call or text so that I could shout it from the rafters and celebrate with him. I can still hear the persistent excitement in his voice, always detectable even when Aaron tried to bury the lead while delivering the latest news of some new job, journalism project or award. The achievement of his dream is worth celebrating.

*Don’t worry, Thee Aaron Lee, I got you, man. And I’m shouting from the rafters: ‘I’m so very proud of you!’ Rest well, brother. Love, Professor Fountain.”*

#JusticeForJelaniDay