

Sandy Roberts brought a light everywhere he went. When asked to describe him, his friends and family all mentioned words like smiley and happy. His brother, Zack Roberts, described him as a “fun magnet.”

“He always wanted to make you laugh, and he knew he could if you just gave him the chance,” Zack said.

Sandy passed away in 2010 while majoring in film at the University of Southern California. His passing shook every community he graced, inspiring several tributes. One of the most notable was the previously named Sandy Roberts Film Festival at University School. But others Sandy impacted have honored him in different ways, such as songs, documentaries and tattoos.

Scott Roberts, Sandy’s father, said the “FLCT Alumni Reunion Day b4 New Year’s Eve Sandytacular” is the last tribute he can whole-heartedly support.

Every year since Sandy’s passing, members of Child’s Play, the improv troupe Sandy performed with at Florida Children’s Theatre (FLCT), get together to put on the event and perform an improv show in his honor.

Sandy became a member of Child’s Play in his teen years, after taking improv classes at FLCT for years.

Even before joining the FLCT community, Mimi Roberts, Sandy’s mother, said Sandy had a confidence many dream of, even as a child.

“He didn’t need the spotlight,” Mimi said. “He felt very comfortable in the world and very comfortable in his skin.”

She recounts Sandy and Zack lying on their bellies at an art museum, sketchbooks sprawled open while they worked on their own masterpieces. When museum goers would pass by and say to Sandy that they liked his picture better than the one on the wall, he would say, “me too.” And he meant it.

But even so, the arts have always played a role in Sandy’s life, in a unique way according to his father.

“The key to Sandy that is different than a lot of creative people is that somehow Sandy learned how to be happy and positive, and still want to be creative,” Scott said. “A lot of creativity is born out of bitterness, born out of wanting to entertain your way out of a depression. He didn’t have that. He came totally from a happy place.”

His brother Zack said growing up at FLCT had a positive impact on both of their childhoods, providing them with friends and memories. He said it was where Sandy developed much of his sense of humor and provided him a safe place to express himself, even in front of an audience.

The brothers got involved with FLCT by doing a couple shows, but realized they cared more about making each other laugh than memorizing lines. He said improv teacher Ed Zeltner taught them important rules such as “yes, and” and how to develop a scene, but also facilitated wild moments that “can only happen when kids are told they don’t need to hold anything back.”

After years of improv classes, specialty groups were formed, one of those being Child’s Play.

The group reached levels of success that surprised even their biggest fans. They performed in improv festivals across the country, showcasing their talent with performers of all ages. In Chicago, they were the only troupe accepted from the Southeast region.

Ed said the bond they shared is what set them apart. Since the troupe was comprised of middle school and high school students, they had a lot of downtime to work on their craft. And like any group of friends, each performer found their role in the group, on and off stage. Ed said Sandy played a very grounded role in the troupe.

“He wasn’t [playing] the out there, wacky stuff. He often played a lot of real grounded characters,” Ed said. “Which is nice, because a lot of times we get a lot of people that are performing improv and they just want to go for the silly and ridiculous, where he was able to pull out the funny from the norm.”

And the group continued to form their bond even off the stage. Child’s Play member Alexa Meyers said that they would spend most weekends at his house, and Sandy would film it all. Sandy was determined to find the humor in even mundane hobbies like playing board games, because he always wanted to create.

Pursuing comedy now, Alexa said Sandy’s collaboration skills and creative freedom are admirable and rare. Sandy encouraged Alexa to try and fail, then laugh at herself if she did. She tries to take a part of his fearlessness with her everywhere she goes.

“Being an adult in this industry, and especially trying to pursue comedy in any realm, is so difficult when you’ve been spoiled for 15 or 20 of playing with your best friends,” Alexa said.

And as all friend groups do, they grew older and began to spread out across the country. Billy Garcia, the youngest member of the group, said he was eager to get back together and perform with the group during their college breaks. This reunion show morphed into a memorial, though, after Sandy passed away during his junior year of college.

Now, the alumni meet for the tenth year, despite being spread apart.

“We’re so scattered across the country and getting older, and each year you worry one or a few of us won’t be able to make it, but it’s always nice to see everyone prioritize it in their lives,” Child’s Play member Patrick Hart said.

Janet Erlick, FLCT’s Executive Artistic Director, said the fact that the group still manages to fly from whatever state they are in to perform each year for the event is a testament to what the FLCT community is. She described it as “roots and wings,” and that no matter where someone is or what they are doing with their life, there is still a home at the theatre.

Zack said his family is honored that Child’s Play continues to perform as a tribute to his brother, a sentiment echoed by Scott and Mimi.

“It’s exactly the type of legacy he would want to leave behind, a chance to make people laugh,” Zack said. “I miss Sandy more than I can ever describe, but I love that at the end of the year, he still has a way of making me smile.”