

I FEEL CRAZY

**STORIES OF
AMBITION
FROM A
21 YEAR
OLD**



ELI RICHMOND

I'm beyond grateful for everyone I've had the chance to meet
these first 21 years of my life.

I'm looking forward to meeting more.

Make my day – say hello

<https://BlogE.li/connect>

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INTRODUCTION

Yesterday, I went to Reddit asking for help to find a cheap, small office in Austin, TX, that I could rent while launching my startup this summer. The first couple of suggestions were to save money and work out of my apartment – I hadn't been clear. I clarified that this office would be my home and workspace. They did not like this.

The idea didn't seem that radical to me. I knew it was unconventional and technically illegal, but in reality, people do it. I've read a bunch of biographies about entrepreneurs, and many of them did this or something similar at first. I'm assuming Reddit has an even distribution of normal people. And they downvoted my post so much that I went from 20 karma to -30 in a day. Me, this random person on the internet, apparently suggested an idea so bad that despite it not having anything to do with them, 50 people took the time out of their day to downvote and/or leave some pretty nasty comments on my post. I was shocked and a little hurt, not by these strangers' opinions, but I thought oh my gosh, this is probably how some of my peers and people I know view my ideas and ambitions plans too. They actively dislike my sometimes unconventional way of living.

This shouldn't have been as surprising as it was, though. It was more so a brash and stark reminder of reality. Throughout my entire life, I've been going against the grain and feeling the friction of doing things that I believe aren't

that big a deal, but others find crazy. This book you're reading right now is a perfect example. But it has worked out really well for me so far. Although, the doubts and confusion of other people do make me feel crazy at times. It's a miracle I've lasted this long.

This book contains a bunch of stories from my life up to this point. In sharing them, I hope you will find the strength to carry on when others don't understand what you are doing. You aren't crazy despite chilling opposition from seemingly everyone. No, you are the epitome of human spirit. You are brave, and we all need your contribution to the world.

Li'l Eli

Before Memories

I don't know much about what I was like as a child; I'm not sure how much it matters anyways.

Both Mom and Dad say that I've always been into sports from a very young age. I don't know which set of traits or characteristics cause this. I wonder if an attraction to sports is similar to being an extrovert or being agreeable – it feels like an attraction to sports is a combination of very specific traits.

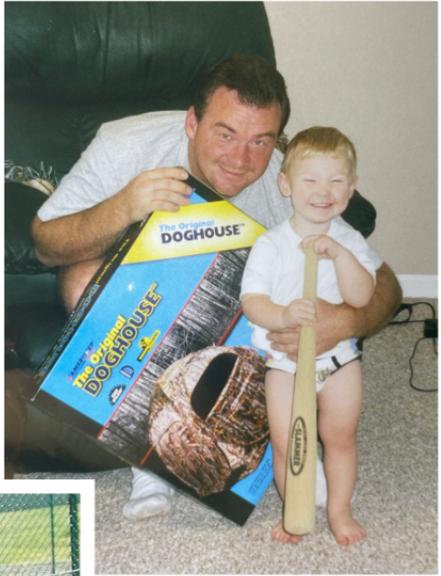
My parents used to take home videos when I was younger. We were watching some where I was about 7 years old I got one of those 5-in-1 multi-game tables for Christmas, and it had a mini basketball goal attachment that went on top as well. I took a shot with the basketball and missed. Then again. And again. And again. And again – all misses. This went on for a long time. I was so locked in, but I also missed every shot. Watching my sister, who just turned 8, I realized she has never been like this. I found it intriguing that I had that kind of focus as a kid, even despite repeated failure.

There are a bunch of stories that seem to support my love of sports and obsessive tendencies. In preschool, my teacher gifted me a Mark McGwire book because, per her words written on the inside cover of the book, "It [baseball] was all I lived and breathed." Hastings, a video rental place, gave us

the tape for *The Sandlot* because we had rented it so many times.

During these home videos, it was pretty clear that I loved being in front of the camera. So maybe I've had an above-average need for attention dating way back.

Again, I'm not trying to say these things really matter or actually foreshadow anything. But it is kinda interesting at the very least.



PUMPING IRON

7th & 8th Grade

I had just broken my foot during a football game, which meant I had a lot of free time on my hands because I couldn't do much on crutches. By this point, it had been clear to me for many years that I wanted to become a professional athlete in either baseball or football. I knew I didn't have to choose for a while. I practiced and loved the game a lot more than most people given my nature, but there was no plan.

For whatever reason – prolly boredom – I picked up my Dad's copy of *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder*. The first half of the book is about Arnold's journey into bodybuilding, and I was, ya know, inspired; It was eye-opening that he had this plan and workout regimen and like willed this success into existence with hard work. The second half was, of course, about bodybuilding education, and for a long time this book was my gym guide as I started to figure out my own plan.

This was my first real experience with discipline because you have to go to the gym everyday. You also have to take care of your nutrition and all that. There are no coaches scheduling practice; It was all on you. It was hard, but exciting, and made me feel unique and special because, my 7th grade peers weren't doing anything like this. Even in the 8th grade, when lifting was required during 1st period for football, nobody was

taking it as seriously as I was that early on – maybe there were, but that's what it felt like.

This was also my first real experience with the friction of a crazy idea. I vividly remember having screaming matches with my parents about how I was not going to eat pizza for supper. Maybe that is willful of me, or maybe it is mean; I don't know. But I could not understand why they were being so difficult. I remember thinking, didn't they realize how hard it was for me to have this discipline in the first place? Also due to this friction, I started feeling distant to my friends at times. They wanted to go hang out and waste time, which is perfectly normal, but some days I hadn't lifted yet, and that was my priority.

Eventually, I realized that your body doesn't even peak till years after high school. So, I could still pursue being an athlete and bodybuilder at the same time. But either way, the training and nutrition didn't change a whole lot. I still had to do it every day. And I loved it.

It wasn't all work; though, this book focuses on it. I had a lot of time to fill during the summer, and working out doesn't actually take up that much of the day. For a couple summers, my closest friend at the time would always hang out at the house everyday after football practice. Everyday we would eat a turkey sandwich and chips for lunch (a habit that remains to this day), watch some Jon B or Boogie2988 on YouTube, and then head out to go fishing till his parents got off work to pick him up. It was awesome. It was hot, sweaty, fun, and adventurous.



THE PAYOFF

9th & 10th Grade

I started getting really good at sports, my dedication was paying off. I remember telling my fishing buddy that I was going to win offensive player of the year for our 9th grade football season. I hardly touched the field last year, so he was right to shrug this off. But I did it. I won that award; ya know, I worked for that award. And as a team, we set the best record in Brookland junior high history: 8 and 1.

That year, baseball didn't go as well. For football, the teams were divided into junior high (8th/9th) and high school (10th/11th/12th), while high school baseball joined students from the 9th to 12th grade. I played plenty of JV games and showed promise due to sheer raw strength and size, but that was about it. The thing I remember most about that season was our heckling squad – three guys in my grade who also didn't play much that year. They devoted all their energy to becoming licensed professionals in distracting the other team. It was proly a little bush league but whatever.

I started at Tailback during my 10th grade year of football. It was a pretty big deal considering the importance of size and strength in the sport, especially since adolescents grow so much in just a year. And despite our team not being very good, I had a really great season for a 10th grader. Baseball would also turn out pretty well that spring too. I was only the

designated hitter with 3 home runs on the season and a decent batting average, not a bad year. One of my teammates was an extraordinary baseball player who had started on varsity since 9th grade. We were friends but extremely competitive, and his line was always, "Yeah, but what is your average?" because his average was always very high. I wanted to have a higher average than him more than anything in the world. It might have been this year that I heard my favorite compliment I ever got while playing sports. One of the baseball dads said something like, "I'm dunno what it is, but you are fun to watch. Yeah, just fun to watch."

By the end of the football season, I had lost a lot of friends though. My main friend group, which I had been hanging out with since the 4th grade, stopped inviting me to things. I'd see them at school and during sports, and everything would be great. But, outside of school, I was no longer asked to hang out. The main guy in this friend group, kinda the glue or alpha, lived 10 houses down from me. So, on weekends, I'd have to drive by his house with all of my friends' cars lined up in his driveway. I still don't really know why. I don't think there was a well-thought-out or specific reason; life just happened. It hurt, but I had a mission and a vision to complete, and things were looking up.

—

My school would have basketball homecoming, and for the finale of that week, each grade would perform their homecoming skit. This was during the spring semester, so I'm getting a little out of order here. Anyways, I hadn't participated in these that much before, but for some reason, I really wanted to this year. I can't even remember what our skit was about other than we were ACDC, and as lead

guitarist, Angus Young, I had to bring the energy for 10 minutes straight. Stepping into our arena, or the Bobby Dome, I was unbelievably nervous; the seats wrap all the way around, so the entire school can see from all angles. But ya know, the attention is what makes it exciting too. Of course, everything had to be a little exaggerated because the skit is supposed to be somewhat serious/professional but, more importantly, funny.

A close friend played another guitarist in the skit, and later, we would go on to make a few sketch comedy YouTube videos. They were so dumb, but they are some of my favorite memories. I still don't know how I managed to learn anything in high school, because all of my memories of it are about everything besides education. Looking back, maybe my desire to try something new was because my entire life was being turned upside down.



SPECIAL LADY

10th Grade

Since I wasn't seeing friends as often, I wasn't around people as much. Oddly, my curiosity started increasing; though, I didn't notice it at the time.

I began reading *Elon Musk* by Ashlee Vance around Christmas. Obviously, this guy was super inspiring. But I only got about halfway through the book before other things got my attention. Before that, Elon's inspiration led me to pick up a thin, green hardback about the history of engines. I had no idea how gas turned into motion, but this book was short and inviting. It turned out to be one of those few moments when you learn something and it feels like magic. I was in awe that another human, just like me, had created something so useful and beautiful.

I was flipping through it in drivers education when the single hottest girl in our school asked to see what I was reading. Sitting behind me, she caught me off guard. I was simply reading and eating my carefully measured daily 250 calories of pecans before being overwhelmed with a confusing mix of emotions: embarrassment, awe, nervousness, and attraction; I handed her the book, sure she would never look at me again.

One of my pretty close friends at the time was in this drivers ed class with me. He was a real people person and

happened to be pretty good friends with this special lady and another girl who was in our class. I didn't really know either of them.

Since drivers ed is kind of a fake class, we all got to talk and hang out most days. I got to know this special lady really well during the semester, but I was treading lightly. There was this feeling that she was a rebellious heartbreaker, and I had big dreams and no need for that kind of distraction. But over time, it turned out that was not the case. I fell deeply in love for the first time. Between the special lady and my success in sports, this was a great period in my life. It wouldn't last though.



A NEW ME

11th Grade

A strange, unpredictable thing happened during this relationship. For a long time, sports took the backseat. She was my number one priority, and I was along for the ride. It was aimless and young and fun but not my nature.

If you couldn't tell by now, books have provided good bullet points for me to remember pivotal points in my life. About 7-8 months into dating, I read *Rich Dad Poor Dad*. It had a familiar feeling of ambition that I had experienced with sports, but it was all about money. At the time, I had a serious problem: I was working at Bills, a grocery store, after I headed for greener pastures by leaving my last job working under my Dad.

As the book predicted, this job wasn't any better; actually, it was worse. I had no control over my schedule, and my boss loved to give me the shift from 4pm to 10pm on Saturday nights – this was the time I was supposed to be spending with the special lady and all of her friends. I hated this. Hated. This. This feeling of not being in control was actually killing me.

I decided I would take control of my life and start a business: car detailing. As all projects are in retrospect, this feels small and insignificant. But, at the moment, this was a huge step for me. I had control and a way to make pretty good

money. This business would successfully last two years until I decided to move on.

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Around the same time, I undertook the biggest project of my life. To preface, I actually hate talking about this. I did this to help another person, and I don't like taking any attention away from that. But I think it's an important thing to share. This is for you, not me.

A close teacher of mine got cancer. I had this newfound confidence in coordinating things and thought it would feel really good to help her out. So, I decided to set up a fundraising event for her through the school.

I pitched the principal, and he allowed me to host a basketball game between my friend group – called the Sharpshooters, basically a high school's scaled-down version of professional athletes – and the school's news media team, Bearcat Breakdown, our school's scaled-down version of celebrities. It is funny how school really is a mini-version of life, and hopefully, this gives you an idea of the excitement there was in the school leading up to the game – or at least, it felt that way to me anyways.

The event was in the afternoon, where the entire school was let out of class to watch us play this silly, entertaining game of basketball in the Bobby Dome. We sold shirts, took donations, sold concessions, and raised several thousand dollars. It felt crazy to coordinate such a large event as an 11th grade student.

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I reread the Elon Musk book from before and decided that I didn't want to be a professional athlete. I wanted to do what he does. For those who don't know, Elon's core belief is to expand the scope and scale of human consciousness by solving the world's biggest problems. This is what I set out to do.

During Elon's college years, the next big transformative thing was the internet. Over time and a lot of thought, I figured AI was the next big transformative thing. I tried to start learning it, but I had no idea how to teach myself things. Eventually, I realized that I needed to learn programming in order to do AI stuff. Keep in mind I have no idea what programming means at this point; It is just what the internet tells me I need to learn.

So, here I am, fumbling around trying to figure out how to program with the same spirit I used in the gym and in sports. At first, I tried Codecademy, but it wasn't that great. Somehow, I landed on Harvard's free online introduction to computer science course, CS50x, and it was amazing.

I wanted to learn Python because AI is primarily written in that language, but CS50x is taught in C. Naively, I decided I'd do the assignments in Python. However, halfway through when they start giving you most of the code and your job is to fill in small parts of it, I couldn't complete them. So, I quit. But I was still trying to figure things out.

Learning how to learn is a slow and difficult process. Luckily, I'd speed things up by blowing up my life.

EXIT
The Sharpshooters



SELF SABOTAGE

Summer of 11th Grade

Here is a story to give some insight as to how cold I was towards the end of this relationship. The special lady was bawling while I sat in the passenger seat of her car parked on an old back road in Brookland. Things had gotten really bad the last month or so. Neither of us was treating one another with any kind of compassion. There were deep cuts below the surface. We both knew that I had these huge ambitions, and we both knew she didn't want to leave home.

As she was crying and trying to figure out how to make this thing work, I was stone-faced and expressionless. My idea of comforting her was to say things like, "I think we are too young to make compromises for one another. Let's do a test of what it would be like to break up. Let's not see each other for a few days." I was so stubborn about it being a test and not a break because breaks have no purpose. This was a test. I promise things were actually really good for a long time. But this was the peak of not caring. So, we did the stupid test.

I was fine during the test. I felt like I was happily hopping and skipping my way to becoming the next Elon Musk. We broke up; then I got to feel what truly being alone feels like. Because she was so socially connected, I hadn't hung out with my friends in proolly half a year, maybe longer. But when she left, so did her friends. It was as if all my social ties were cut

off instantly. Soon after, I was the one bawling in her car. But it was too late. She had a supporting group of people around her and was better off without my cranky self around. And I mean truly better off because I was seeing her as more of an obstacle than anything there at the end.

I think looking back, this was a good thing; I think both our lives are better for it. But I broke. I broke real hard for a long time.



SURVIVAL MODE

12th Grade

I'm not an overly emotional guy. In fact, I'm probably more emotionless than anything. But, for a month straight, I looked like Will Ferrell in the "I'm trapped in a glass case of emotion" scene from *Anchorman*. Doing any kind of work was out of the question; I was emotionally unstable. Rational thought wasn't something I was capable of during that time, and words aren't a great vehicle for extreme emotions like this. It was rough.

My senior year of high school started around the end of this awful month. This was in the thick of COVID, so it was all mandatory masks and optional online classes. I was physically at school, but I was in survival mode – like a zombie, going through the motions, trying to stay busy and keep myself from dying. I only had three classes, but they were full of people in grades below me, nobody I knew all that well. Football had lost my interest the past summer, and I had quit despite a decent 11th grade season.

My daily routine was going to class, baseball practice till 4:30 or 5ish, then relaxing/eating for an hour. Next I'd read for an hour, watch/do CS50x assignments, hit the gym, come back home and watch 30 to 45 minutes of the Deep Learning Specialization lecture on Coursera while I ate, and finally some TV before bed. This was my life the entire fall semester.

In December, I completed my CS50x final project and finished the lectures for the Deep Learning Specialization. It felt good. But, still, I was in survival mode.

When baseball season started, things got better. Practices got longer, and games were after school too. So with less time, I wasn't doing as much. I think I was working on the assignments for the deep learning stuff during this time too. We didn't have an 11th grade season due to COVID. But we made up for it this year. We were a focused and deadly group of ballplayers. It's interesting that my best season came only after I'd decided I didn't want to pursue college ball.

At the end of the season, I had a batting average of .419 and an on-base percentage of .528. Our team was ranked #1 in the state in 4A baseball for the entire regular season, and we were the best in the state. But baseball is a funny sport. We lost a fluke game in regionals and never even made it to the state tournament – tough for sure, but still the most fun year of baseball I'd ever played. Our coach is a phenomenal leader, and I'm so thankful I got to play for him. Because being around him was a masterclass in leadership. I really love those guys.

And you know what? I ended the season with an average higher than my equally competitive friend from earlier. Although, I'd be lying if I said I was a better baseball player than him.



REAL BUILDER

Summer of 12th Grade

For non-computer science people, "Rick Rolled" is an internet joke where you trick someone into clicking on a disguised link that redirects them to Rick Astley singing *Never Gonna Give You Up*. I didn't get it at first, but it has grown on me over time.

Before my first semester of college, I decided I was going to do an NFT project. I saw the Bored Ape Yacht Club's massive success about a month before working on mine. I didn't care much about these silly Ape NFTs, but I wanted to learn more about the blockchain and web3 and all that after spending a long time focused solely on AI. So I figured this project would be a great way to actually build something and learn at the same time.

Building this gave me so much confidence. I knew I could make a website because I'd done it for my CS50x final project. However, this one had to interface with the blockchain, and that was new enough that there weren't a ton of traditional courses on it like there was with web development. Every creator knows that feeling of waking up and knowing you have a problem to solve and no roadmap or even the slightest hint as to how you might solve it. But I did solve it and the rest of them.

The project shipped but failed. Nobody wanted my NFTs, and I don't blame them. But it was real. I spent like \$900 dollars in Ethereum gas fees creating the smart contract. And I guess it is still there, waiting around on the blockchain.

This was especially fun because every image has so many references to things that I find funny. If you go to the website (which I keep running on free servers, <https://bloge.li/r> will redirect you there), and click on "variations" in the navigation bar, you'll notice that each item in the drop-downs is directly linked to something silly.

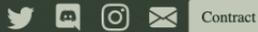
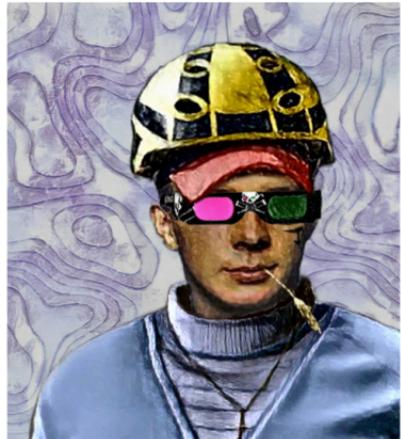
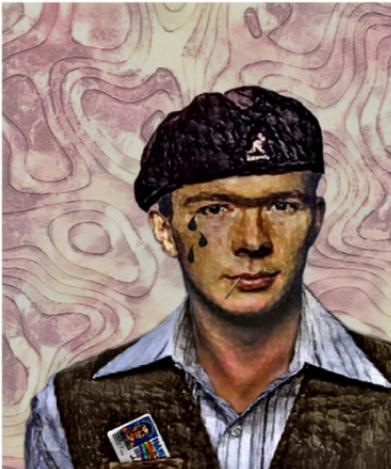
This took me about a month of 10 hour days to build, and by the time it was finished, there had been a 50x increase in the number of NFT projects out there. With the summer winding down though, it was time to see what college was all about.

Avant-Gardes

The Never Ending Art Project

v1

Join



[Contract](#)

Wildier Change Productions

Avant-Gardes

COLLEGE, KNOWLEDGE, SHMOWLEDGE, BLAH BLAH BLAH

1st Semester

I was a little skeptical, yet generally open-minded, about how good college could be. Between scholarships and living at home, I had everything paid for and wouldn't graduate with any debt; my only cost was the time itself. Seeing how far I'd come in only a year and a half of programming, I was really excited to meet smart people with similar interests as me.

For my first two years there, I didn't meet someone that could program as good as me, and even now, I think there might be only one or two, and nobody was even passionate about it either. This was so depressing. And turns out there are a lot of problems with college too. For me at least, it is a poor way to learn. I don't want to get into ranting about college. If you really care, I wrote a paper on it in my free time a few semesters later that you can find on my website under / projects. I'm about to graduate, so I'm done discussing it. There just weren't any people with the same ambitions as me.

Don't let my distaste for college fool you, though. Over the years, I met a small number of great people and some smart ones too, just fewer than I'd expected. I'm thankful to call many of these people friends. College also provided me a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have otherwise had.

WINNING

2nd Semester

Once college started, I officially quit detailing cars. It was time to take a leap and figure something else out. I was confident in my programming abilities and wanted to find something more aligned with my goals.

About three months into the semester, I caught a break by hanging around before and after classes, trying to meet people and make connections. My first-year experience class professor said he was spinning up an AI project to help dyslexics with reading. After being very vocal about trying to find computer science work, he asked me to meet with him about it.

I had made version one of my personal website, displaying a list of all the computer science things I'd already done like CS50x, the Deep Learning Specialization, and most importantly my Rick Rolled website. He checked it out and was impressed. I had the job. It was perfect.

Without getting too technical, I'd like to explain what this project is. The thesis was to use a generative adversarial network (AI model) to create the most optimal font for dyslexic readers. It was split into two parts.

In part one, dyslexic students from Kindergarten to 6th grade take a modified version of the DIBELS test. In short, DIBELS is a common dyslexia test, but ours features a variety

of fonts that change with each new question. We test students and collect the resulting data. I had to build the entire website that this is taken on.

In part two, we use this data to train an AI model that generates fonts. We hope there is a correlation between correct test answers and highly readable fonts, so our AI model generates increasingly good fonts for dyslexic readers. I had to build the AI model that does this; although, we were only making additions to a model from other research, so this wasn't all me.

Getting this job was a huge turning point. It was validation that I desperately needed. It felt so good to have someone believe in you after a year and a half of working alone. This was really the first time since the breakup that I felt maybe things had happened for the better. I keep a clone of this website running, <https://bloge.li/m> will redirect you there.



Start new test

Continue old test

Log Out

Start Testing

Guidelines

Maze Image

Maze

Question 6/25
Submit

Larry was coming riding a horse.

typing

20%

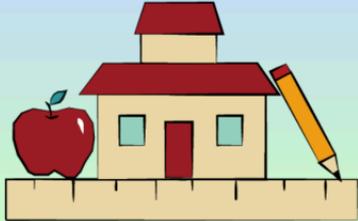
Image

Question 1/25
Submit

school

turn

blue



SUPERSPEAKER

2nd Semester

I was almost finished with the website, and we had a student conference scheduled in Louisiana to present this research. Personally, I thought it was odd we were presenting research we hadn't finished yet. But I was looking forward to it.

Public speaking is a very useful skill, and I've had oral comm classes and spoken in some small, informal situations like that, but never about anything I cared about in front of strangers. I wasn't nervous, but I took this very seriously because, to me, it was going to gauge how good or bad a speaker I was.

I learned later my outfit made the other people I was with uncomfortable, but all that matters is I delivered – like really delivered. In the most un-humble way possible, I gave a really great presentation.

Of course, the first threshold is I had to think I did a good job, and I did. But you can also tell by watching the crowd during a presentation; as the speaker, I had a pretty good view. Lastly, people came up afterwards and told me it was good. And there is a noticeable difference between an obligatory "good job" and a genuine one.

My confidence was validated again during a real conference down the road where I gave roughly the same presentation.



BUILDER'S BLOCK

2nd Semester Summer

The spring semester had mainly been spent working on Modified Dibels stuff, and summer crept up on me. I started applying for internships through online job boards a little later than I should have. Turns out it wouldn't have mattered much anyways because it is extremely hard and unlikely to find a job that way. Nothing worked out, so I really didn't have much to do. I kept trying to commit to a project, but I was stuck in decision paralysis. I didn't want to do another project that I would throw away; I was searching for the perfect thing, but it never came. This was a good lesson in deferring to action.

We needed the Modified Dibels website running on the college's servers. Commercial servers are costly and too vulnerable for the sensitive data we were collecting. I had no idea how to do this, but luckily, an IT employee dove head first into this process with me. He had never deployed this particular web framework either, but we sat around in his office, putting in the hours in to figure it out. Working on a team where I didn't know more than my partner was a first, and his shared excitement towards this problem made this short week a lot of fun.

I fell down the rabbit hole of decentralized finance. It was interesting, and I spent a lot of time reading the smart contracts (basically the code) of some of the popular DeFi applications. A lot of them are actually really simple. I even got in contact with some of the people from SushiSwap on Discord. After their CEO was ousted, everything was kind of in disarray.

I respected the work of BoringCrypto's BentoBox, a feature of SushiSwap, and briefly planned on contributing to BentoBox v2. But ultimately, I wasn't that excited about it. The point here is, it was cool to see that these were just people, though; people building something cool even though the site feels big and official. Summer came and went without building much of anything.

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For the adventurous, crazy and scary things are bound to happen. And you might find yourself with friends in an extreme state of paranoia and anxiety, the world set to fast forward, with two guys you barely know literally fighting naked and yelling, "D*** to d***!" in the living room of a home you're unfamiliar with at 3 am, wondering if anything in front of you is actually real – um, er, I mean, hypothetically speaking, of course. So yeah, take that how you like it.



HERE I AM

3rd Semester

I had started blogging, and it felt weird to share deep pieces of my brain with my friends. I was writing about things that you often can't bring up in conversation. It took awhile to feel comfortable, but I'm glad I did it. Not only do I get to share important things with my friends, but also I feel very heard. I don't think very many people read them. Getting ideas out of me and into the open made, and continues to make, me feel really good.

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Macroeconomics with an old dude who made the content even more boring than it had to be was actually my favorite class. The only reason I showed up at all was because I had made a new friend, a beautiful Hispanic girl, during the first couple weeks. She was so great and always in an energetic, good mood, and actually broke her wrist and messed up her knee in a skateboarding accident. Still, I'm not sure I once saw her upset.

Before her, I never shared the music I was into with anyone. It was a very real fear, but since I'd been blogging, I felt a little more comfortable with myself. Over time, we realized we have almost identical taste in music. If I loved a song, I'd send it to her, and she would love it too. She would send me stuff, and like magic, it would be amazing. We

clicked on a lot of different levels, and I'd never felt such a strange connection with another person who liked so much of the same stuff, even beyond music.

I was still pretty emotionally reserved, so it never became anything romantic. Besides, she had to go back to Mexico in the Spring. She softened me up, though, and I had needed it.



BLOGE.LI

CREATIVITY EXPERIMENT

4th Semester

I began experimenting after reading a few books on creativity back in the Fall. Obviously, I'd built stuff before, but in some ways, those things had felt like construction rather than art. I had been struggling to build much of anything anyways and wanted to further explore creativity, so for the entire spring semester, I engaged in my creativity experiment.

There was a storage unit about 5 minutes away from our house that I had decided to rent for \$85 a month. It was 10 by 10 with a single overhead light, my desk, and a chair. Oh, and a small heater because on average, it was about 40 degrees outside, and this unit was not insulated at all. Every day for 3 hours before school started, I'd drive my car or ride the electric skateboard over to my sheet metal shed or "The Cave", as I liked to call it. There, I'd follow whatever creative impulses I had. Often, that just meant sitting there, thinking, and jotting down any interesting ideas. Other times, I'd write or draw or program or whatever. The only rule was I couldn't go down there and do school work or watch YouTube and stuff. I was there to create.

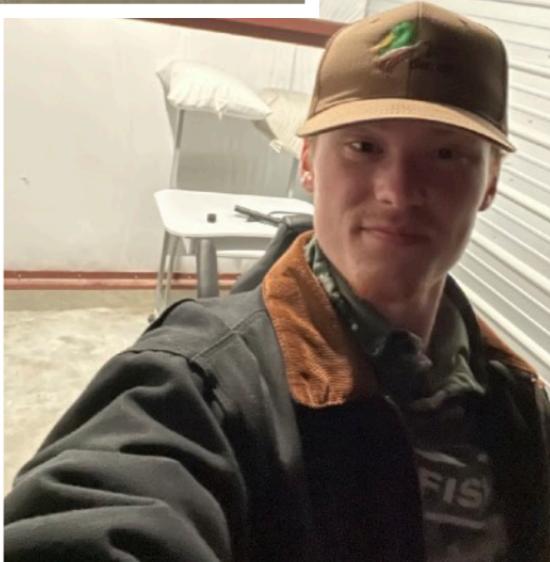
I wish I could have invented something really great during this time. That'd be a cool story, but I was so spread out across many mediums nothing much came of it – externally, anyways. I learned a lot about wrestling with the metaphorical

blank sheet of paper. I felt like I was more in tune with myself. I felt good about it, and that I had become a better creator. Measuring something like this is super hard, but I'm really glad I did it.

Creators know this: a natural force of the world does not want us to create. There is a term for this that I'll talk about later, but part of the reason I knew I had to wrestle with this creativity stuff was this force was trying extra hard to keep me distracted. Here is a journal entry a couple months after I'd decided I needed to do this.

"In the past two months my Dad lost a finger, my Brother totaled his car, my Mom's boss died, her job was at stake during a merger, I've had a giant rash for the past two months, a really pretty girl (but terrible for me) tried to seduce me, my Brother's new car had its check engine light come on after 200 miles, I can't get a summer internship to save my life, and I fell off my skateboard going 25mph."

See what I mean? The world was doing everything in its power to try and get me to push this off. And this experiment led to a huge change in my core beliefs that I would only notice later on.



ONLY THE WORK REMAINS

4th Semester

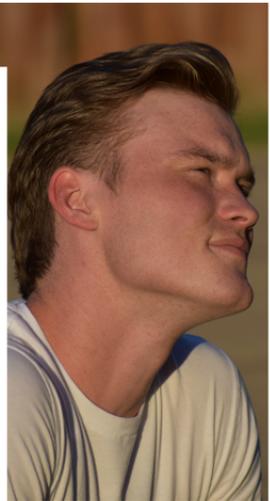
If we care about creating the externally, extrinsically greatest thing we can, then there are only two outcomes: success and failure. Either it was regarded as great by whatever external measure we are using (i.e. number of copies sold, views, likes, awards, etc), or it wasn't. Success or failure.

With these core beliefs, the most likely case for all of us is that we never sell enough copies or win enough awards to ever consider our creations successful. If we value this success and never get it, we won't last. For the few that do succeed, winning awards and getting lots of views or whatever, they will realize that there was never actually any meaning at the end of that road anyways – try grappling with that crushing collapse of purpose, I dare you. And for the still fewer group that succeeds and happily drowns in the joys of attention and ego, the work will suffer, the attention will fade, and coming full circle: failure.

Extrinsic opinion kills, and in the end, only the work remains.

For me, when the art is finished, if I made it the best it could possibly be, with no limitations, then it is maximally great – end of story. We won. We will last. By changing the

definition of greatness to something internal, we have found sustainable meaning.



CATCHING A BREAK

4th Semester

I wouldn't say I get stressed so much as extremely focused to the point of degradation in other areas of my life. This was one of those times because last summer was awful, and I didn't want to repeat it.

Around November, I started applying to all kinds of computer science internships. Rejection after rejection makes you start to think twice about your confidence. For the past two and a half years, I lived and breathed AI and programming, so it was tough getting rejected repeatedly because it's like can't they see how hard I'm trying. Can't they see I'm not some average dude going through the motions of getting a degree? I live this stuff.

I didn't get a single interview from any online job board applications, but I did make it to the final two candidates for Nucor, a local steel manufacturer. They didn't choose me. I would've accepted if they had, but truthfully, on my hour-long drive home from the plant, all I could feel was dread. Nothing makes you feel more like an industry cog than touring a giant steel manufacturing company; although intellectually, I found the whole thing wildly interesting.

There had been a flier sent to my college email address about an REU (Research Experience for Undergrads) from East Carolina University that I applied for. A \$6000 dollar

stipend, with housing and meals paid for, to work on any software engineering research of my choice sounded pretty sweet to me.

About a month before summer started, I caught a break and received an acceptance email; for about a week, it felt too good to be true. I wouldn't let myself get too attached to my good fortune. The main guy over this ECU program was older and not real detailed about things over email, so it almost felt like a phishing attempt – I get a lot of these in my school email. But, after some further correspondence and talking to some of my college's professors, it was official. I'd be heading to North Carolina for the summer, and a huge weight was lifted off my chest.

ECU REU



GREAT SUMMER, THE BEST

4th Semester Summer

When I think about college, I actually think about my summer at ECU because it was everything I'd hoped college would be. It felt like an adventure; It was my first time living away from home.

The most important thing that made this whole thing so amazing was the people. This program was a filtered group of smart and ambitious students. So many of them were thoughtful, intelligent, interesting, and genuinely good-hearted. The professors/research mentors were also super intriguing. They were very engaged with their work, computer science, and life – the kind of wisdom you wanna be around. Of course, it wasn't all positive. We are dealing with humans here, so everyone had their hang-ups. But overall, it reminded me of my senior year of baseball, and I loved these people.

Another great part about this was something I had expected to dislike: the communal living aspect of the dorms. My roommate and I got along very well, and we both generally just wanted to be left alone when in our room. So, I always had that place where I could go and feel alone – this was a necessity. But I really underestimated how much I'd love the common areas, where you could easily go talk to other people and hang out. It was great to sit around, having real conversations without anyone being distracted by phones

and TV and entertainment. And, I wrote a blog post that went into detail about this and how I felt something was missing now that I was home and didn't have that place to go. I thought this was just me being weird, but surprisingly, many people reached out after I wrote that and agreed. There might be more to unpack there. Of course, all of this was propped up by the work I got to do on super interesting stuff.

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The way this REU worked was that we more or less had free rein to work on whatever computer science-y research we wanted. As someone who had been working on self-guided projects for a long time, I knew how hard it would be to actually ask a good research question, so I took this contemplation phase very serious because this program was only a summer long. It was super helpful that I'd been ruminating on all kinds of things for 4 months in my shed, so I had a pretty big head start. About a week in, I was 95% sure I had an idea that I could execute on, but often you can never be 100% percent sure till you dig into the details. Luckily, it worked out.

Again, I don't want to get too technical here, but I worked on trying to train a small large language model (LLM) transformer – think something similar to ChatGPT – to use tools. In my case, it was a calculator. I chose the calculator because vanilla LLMs can't calculate; they can't crunch numbers, so they end up being pretty good at mathematical reasoning, but they often don't give you the correct mathematical output. I called my AI model Sourceformer.

My approach was interesting because it leaned into the future of these transformer models. This specific AI architecture can only hold so much information in their

analogous short-term memory, but this memory will undoubtedly grow larger and larger in the future. With my approach, it would take advantage of this future growth.

These models also use a lot of data, and eventually, we will max out on the amount of data we collect. This point of maximum data collection will be when we are collecting everything that happens in real-time because that is the limit. My approach would be able to train on every interaction a user has with their computer, their tools, enabling it to take advantage of the real time data collection – if only my model had worked. As with most research, it didn't succeed. But it was so awesome that I had the opportunity to be paid for working on it. This whole experience might be the highlight of my life up to this point. It was that great.

If you want to check out the paper, head to <https://bloge.li/s>

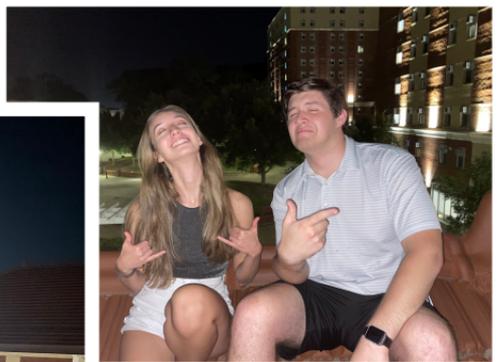
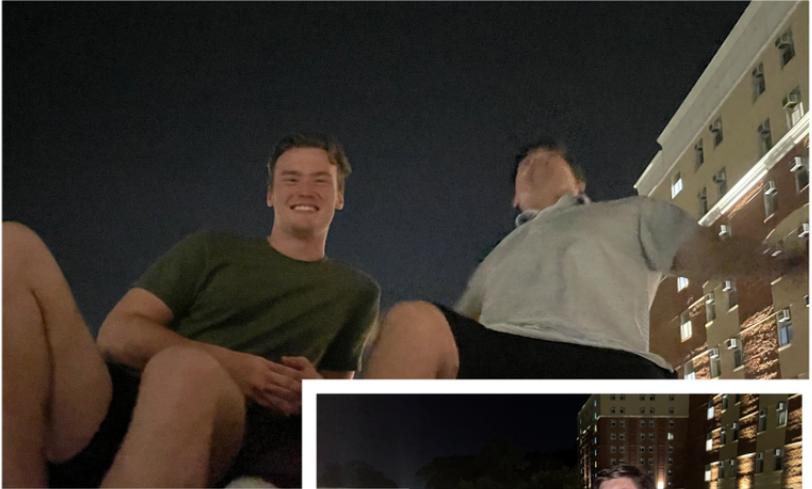
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Part of becoming a creator is having this realization that you can change things. During our first day in the dorms, I realized we had hit the jackpot of dorm rooms.

We had four people from our program staying in this building, and our two rooms were right next to each other on the 3rd floor, with windows facing out the front of the building. Our windows were the only two rooms that opened up to a small roof sticking out from the front of the building. Immediately, I had to figure out how to get on that roof.

The windows had a metal piece that would only allow it to open like 3 inches, and a screen that shielded the whole thing. Ha. It would take more than that to keep me inside. After a trip to Walmart and pulling out a toolset my Dad insisted I

take with me (thanks Dad), I was outside enjoying the elevated view next to a removed screen and a fully open window.



I FEEL CRAZY

Now

In Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*, he talks about the battle with "Resistance": The force that distracts us and prevents us from doing the work. I love this description.

"There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance."

If you have created anything, you know this feeling.

I say this to distinguish the broad term "Resistance" from what I'm talking about when I say I felt crazy or friction or pushback. During these early years, sitting down to do the work hasn't been as hard as dealing with all the adults, friends, and family telling me an idea is crazy or stupid; although, parents never tell children they can't achieve something – they say, "Have a backup plan." Sometimes, nothing is ever explicitly said, but you can feel their discomfort and doubt at a glance. I think this problem is more unique to younger people because we are still largely dependent. By the time those of us who did push through and succeed as adults, we have already forgotten about this challenge. Or maybe it sticks around; we will see.

I'd like to share a few short thoughts on each specific moment where I felt friction. But the truth is, unless you are doing something mind-numbingly conventional, you'll always feel some amount of craziness.

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I told y'all that I had felt some opposition when I first started working out and eating right because, being that it was my first time experiencing that, it was unexpected. You'll hear this a lot in this chapter, but my parents couldn't understand my obsession and focus. Note that the same people who will tell you to have a plan B will also contradictorily cut down your plan A at the same time. It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't go away. The friction is constant.

When I decided I wanted to detail cars instead of working at Bills, people didn't understand what was so bad about having a normal minimum wage job. This pushback wasn't as intense as trying to become a professional athlete though. And this tracks because washing cars is more conventional than being an athlete.

Next was the break up. If you've ever met the special lady, you'd agree with everyone else that I was stupid. I even thought I was stupid post-break up. This was a serious gamble on myself that would take a decade to fully play out; high rollers feel the friction, like a soul-crushing-butthole-clenching amount of friction.

When I was in survival mode, spending ALL my free time reading, taking courses, and working on projects related to those courses, my family didn't understand. My baseball friends wanted to know what I did outside of school, but I'd avoid the question. I was embarrassed. Mom was again

concerned because it was obsessive, but of course, this was more like survival than obsession.

I didn't feel too much friction while working on the Rick Rolled NFT project; although, with 10-hour work days, it was still there. I remember hearing many times, "You don't do anything but play on that computer all day." Yet, I don't even play video games at all, and this person knew that. Statements like this are only said to demean our work. It got really bad when it was time to pay nearly a thousand dollars to make it real. Keep in mind, this was my money, and I couldn't think of anything more fitting to spend it on, but others did not agree. And yes, it failed, but that is how risk works.

I felt no friction while working on Modified Dibels. Post-success, when you are getting paid to do what you like doing, the friction seems to dissolve. But before that, when I made the decision to quit detailing cars with no plans as to what would come next, I felt extreme levels of friction. The funny thing was, I had plenty of money from doing it for so long, but the thought of anything other than convention was too much for people. The rational thing to do would be to find a job then quit, but I trusted my gut. The combination of this, Rick Rolled, and all that time learning in survival mode directly led to this opportunity.

When I started blogging, I felt a lot of internal friction. At first, nobody knew I was doing it because I didn't share it on my social media accounts. I still felt really crazy for expressing myself, even to an empty audience. Eventually, I was feeling so good from doing it that I did share it with friends. I just thought, man if they can't accept me then, as Goggins says, Merry Christmas.

Explaining to my parents that I was going to rent a storage shed to create in for three hours every morning in 40-degree weather before class caused a lot of friction. Again, this was my money. Their argument was that I had my room to create in, and it was free. It was a good argument; again, a lot of friction is sound rational advice. I felt I needed a consistent, quiet, safe space where I could follow my whims without anyone questioning me, the TV blaring, or Mom reminding me about this, that, and the other thing. I trudged through the friction, did the work, and found that it was a massive success in a hard-to-measure internal way, but also, it directly impacted my work the following summer while creating my AI model, Sourceformer.

I think one reason my summer at ECU was so great is because there wasn't any friction. I was only around strangers, and there was nobody to judge whatever crazy thing I felt like doing. But, much like working on Modified Dibels, this was kind of a post-success project. It is hard to tell a professional athlete that has already made it that they are crazy.

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I don't want anyone reading to think my family is unusually unsupportive. They are really great parents, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. They are just normal people who want the best for me. The same goes for friends and everyone else I've run across in life so far.

The world – which sounds like this big shapeless thing but is actually just the people you encounter everyday – will guide you with the invisible hand of social convention into a very specific and normal kind of life if you let it. This is not a bad thing for most people, but for the ambitious, it will kill you.



FIGURING OUT FORWARD

Now

I've wanted to start a company that allows me to build great things since the 11th grade – though, as you know, my definition of greatness/success has changed since then. All of my decisions are filtered through this lens, which, in turn, makes the world simpler and easily digestible. As I'm about to graduate, I've got some very big decisions to make, and boy, am I ever feeling the friction.

I have been applying to all kinds of computer science-related jobs, and I hope after reading this, you will agree that I am qualified to do basic coding, at the very least. Nonetheless, online job boards continue to be a poor solution for finding a job. And since I don't know anybody in Austin, Texas, or the Bay Area of California, I'm not sure I'll be able to find work. However, I'll continue to do everything I can to maximize my options.

Recently, I read about a different kind of startup. Usually, for these huge, world-changing startups, you show some traction and try to get a gazillion dollars in VC funding. And honestly, I want to do something big enough to require VC funding one day, but this traditional kind of startup feels very all or nothing; you get one shot, and it either works or it doesn't. In a bootstrapped startup, the goal is much different. Software costs almost nothing other than the time it takes to

build it. The idea is to identify a software product that will solve a very niche problem, and build it quickly in only a month, and ship it. If people start paying for and using it, great – keep adding features. But if it doesn't work, and it likely won't, then build another thing the next month and ship it. Hopefully, by the brute force of building a ton, you'll find something that people are willing to pay for. The beauty is, this doesn't have to gain mass adoption to be successful, like it would if you had millions of dollars worth of backing. If it can make enough to cover rent and basic living expenses, then you win. You get to keep building. And the work is everything.

Ideally, I'd find a job and bootstrap my company on the side. But sometimes life doesn't like to play nice, so I'm not counting on it. As of right now, I have two main ideas on how I can make this work.

Idea number 1 is to sell my car, buy a truck, buy an old RV, and move to a cheap RV park anywhere I'd like. If I can keep my monthly expenses as low as I think I can, then I'll have about a year to try and bootstrap a small company. Living alone near a beach or something for a year sounds alright.

Idea number 2 is to move to San Francisco and live in a pod. This is a communal living type of apartment where a bunch of tech people are staying – mainly people like me who are trying to start companies. The rent is somewhat cheap, but you only get a bed, access to a large common area, showers, internet, etc. The environment is super attractive to me, despite the fact that most people find paying rent for only a bed absurd. But my time here would be more limited than option 1 because my cost of living would be higher.

I'm not dead set on living in a pod, but every other option I've seen in Austin and San Francisco costs more than I can afford. Truthfully, all of this is subject to change, and by the time you read this, I might have an idea number 3.

This will prolly be the hardest thing I've ever done, and I imagine the friction I encounter will be too. But I've made it this far, and I'm not going to stop now. I'll leave you with my high school senior quote.

But before that – I wanted this to be free because the message is really important to me; however, if you liked this, consider paying whatever this is worth to you. It will fund my future craziness.

Cash App & PayPal: eerichmond33

And now for my senior quote from a poem by Robert Frost.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Thank you for reading.

