“Every experience can be life changing. It really can. It’s up to each of us to approach things that way,” NIU Business senior Zach Fiegel says, echoing the perspective of a visionary or an entrepreneur.

It’s not a stretch for Fiegel and his friends who are fellow students in social entrepreneurship to have a sense of those waters. They immerse themselves in an entrepreneurial mindset—in the idea of changing the world, transforming themselves and others for the better—as a matter of course, and they do it as a team. Case in point: as members of the student organization NIU CAUSE, with Fiegel its president, the group put everything they had behind a colleague’s idea to provide other students with financial help. They raised $2,500 this semester and created a $1,000 annual NIU CAUSE student scholarship, while donating the remaining $1,500 to three different NGOs (non-government organizations). Earlier in 2013, Fiegel and another team of students in a social entrepreneurship course at NIU made an appeal to their peers that they could, and should, help one of their parking lot neighbors who had lost family members in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut.
venture class won $10,000 seed money for their business concept and then shortly afterwards invested those funds in a social venture located in Nigeria. It’s in that spirit of boldness that Fiegel applied blindly for a summer internship with the NBA, an organization whose interns and new hires tend to hail from Ivy League schools. Fiegel disrupted that pattern by landing a spot in the program. Then after the internship, he applied for and was accepted into their New York-based associates program, which serves as entrée to an NBA management career. Fiegel begins the associates program this summer after he graduates in May with an NIU degree in marketing. He hopes one of his professional rotations includes NBA Cares, the unit that manages the social responsibilities of the league and the league’s efforts in high schools.

It was on the eve of his next series of bold adventures that Zach and I caught up for a student profile. In our conversation, I asked Zach to share his reflections on his NIU experiences overall, as well as with what he’s learned both in and out of the classroom. “I’ve met so many awesome people,” Fiegel says, holding direct eye contact when he speaks. His good nature invites dialogue. His warm tone inspires confidence. He values individuals and each person’s uniqueness—he states this explicitly and demonstrates it consistently. “I’ve developed so many great friendships and relationships…had such great times doing important things. Things I care deeply about and things others care deeply about.”

One of those things includes a team effort to conceptualize a life-changing for-profit venture, then developing a full business plan around the idea and presenting the concept to angel investors in spring 2013.

To get there, Fiegel collaborated with individuals from across the university (business, engineering, community & civic engagement), each of them students in the social venture class in the Department of Management. The course explores commerce in a different way and serves
more as a business incubator than a traditional class. Answers aren’t found at the end of the book, for example, and in truth, textbooks aren’t the focus. Instead, the creative ideas of students are. Students arrive in the course first by way of an interview process and then by invitation only before they dive into workshops and conversations of discovery with their fellow students, professors, and outside experts. The context for all of this is to positively impact each component of a more complete business metric known as the triple bottom line or 3Ps: People, Planet, Profit.

At its essence, the social venture class is about “breakthrough ideation” … a perfect environment for the likes of Fiegel and many other NIU students whose hearts and minds align with doing something meaningful.

“It was an incredible experience and not without challenge,” Fiegel laughs quietly before he continues to explain. “We worked from a blank slate to come up with a for-profit social enterprise. We brainstormed so many times…we had a lot of false starts, a lot of ideas we couldn’t fully corral. The most challenging part was coming up with the ideas at all, then picking them apart, defending them, rethinking them, really holding them up and testing them. The key metric we used—it may sound corny—but it really was this: does the idea hold the promise to be life changing. The idea had to literally change lives or we weren’t interested. What came out of all that effort was a venture we called ‘Vitalert.’ Vitalert uses the cell phone as an instrument for change by alerting users to nearby danger. It’s basically an app that combines features along the lines of Twitter and Google Maps. We thought Nigeria would be the best market for its launch because Nigeria has an extremely high usage of cell phones and is also one of the most violent places in the world. Nigerians typically learn about violence by turning the corner and walking right into it only because they don’t have timely information about existing danger around them or about bad situations that may be developing around them in that very moment.”

Even 525,600 moments—or a full year—later, Fiegel still speaks passionately about the concept. He riffs off interesting stats like how more mobile phones exist in the world than bank accounts and emphasizes the group’s “a-ha” moment when they began to view the phone in a completely different way: from a device for selfies to a life-changing, potentially life-
saving instrument. From his enthusiasm alone, it’s not difficult to imagine how the entire team won the angel investors over. And in fact, that’s precisely what happened. Four teams of four students presented their social venture concepts last May, each challenged to explain and defend the soundness of their ideas, business plans, marketing plans, and revenue models as well as the impact on the three pillars of People, Planet, Profits. And in the end—after all the “really great presentations” and all the “really cool ideas, really cool stuff”—Vitalert landed the first place prize and a check for $10,000 in angel funding at NIU’s second annual Social Venture Competition.

“I’m really competitive … all of us are,” Fiegel says, “but it’s interesting how rapidly every team came to support each other’s ideas. We all listened to each other’s presentations. After Vitalert won, our team received tremendous support from the other teams. Somehow we were all competing but really in the end we were all collaborating. That seems to be the way it is in the social spaces. Everyone works really hard on a great idea. All of us were inspired by the brilliant people involved in the social entrepreneurship sector because their ideas really do reach the breakthrough level. And yet at the same time everyone is genuinely supportive of each other.”

The Vitalert student team wins angel funding to seed their social enterprise.

The Vitalert story would be compelling enough right there, but it’s what his team classmates and Zach decided to do with the $10,000 seed money that draws you in even more.

“After we won the Social Venture Competition, we took a hard look at ourselves. Two of the members—Mike and Addison—were graduate students with jobs already lined up. I was still in school. I had another year to finish and so did Kaitlin. I just really didn’t know if we could put enough into starting up a venture while completing school. We all wanted to do justice to the $10,000 seed money. So we talked about it as a team and voted and decided to invest the $10,000 in a worthy non-profit,” Zach shares.

Microfinance students visit a social entrepreneur in Mexico over spring break 2014.

Imagine it’s the beginning of May. Classes are finished: finals taken, grades reported, and barbeques begin to fire up. But instead of kicking back entirely or travelling to a beach for a couple of weeks,
you and your team members decide to develop a Request for Proposals. Fiegel describes how he, Mike, Addison, and Kaitlin switched perspectives and roles in what seemed like the blink of an eye: from pitching an idea for angel investor funding to evaluating a multitude of ideas as angel investors themselves.

“We created the RFP after looking at examples online. None of us knew how to do this. We listed the criteria we wanted the applicants to document for us. Things like measures for social impact, sustainability, revenue models. Then we researched and selected a group of finalists and sent the RFP to them. So we’re reading through all these proposals—all really good, really excellent—and it made it difficult to identify a short-list of finalists, but eventually we selected 7-8 finalists. Ultimately, the one that won was the Youth for Technology Foundation (YTF) in Nigeria. YTF brings together education and technology to help provide opportunities for young people—basically kids—who find themselves in families at the bottom of the economic pyramid. YTF appealed to the interests of our team because the venture has a focus in Nigeria, and we couldn’t imagine anything more impactful than helping kids to transform their lives so they can lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty.”

Zach pauses briefly as if in thought, then adds, “Plus YTF describes itself as a place of ‘impatient optimists.’ That really resonated. All my friends and I rally around the idea of being unreasonable enough to move past the status quo. We feel a kindred spirit with Impatient Optimists.”

Indeed, Zach and his peers describe themselves as Unreasonable Social Entrepreneurs who view the world in a vastly new way. In a different enough way, in fact, that within days they somehow connected with an organization of Impatient Optimists located half-way around the world. As he describes how this virtual meeting of the minds and hearts came about, Fiegel illustrates perfectly what the connected economy and the connected Millennials know all so well: how very small, hopeful and very personal a very, very big world has become.

“I learned about YTF because one night I was particularly distracted by my
twitter feed and came across a tweet from the various individuals and organizations I follow in the social space. I clicked on a link in a tweet and read this article about a Microsoft executive who gave up a highly successful position to work with the Youth for Technology Foundation in Nigeria. I was so fascinated by the article and the foundation that I researched the name of the former executive and sent her an email with our team’s RFP. We stayed in contact ever since that first email. Then when YTF’s proposal won, she was ecstatic; really thrilled that YTF had won the $10,000 funding.

Sounds easy enough, right? Like so many of his colleagues, Fiegel’s manner remains outwardly relaxed, yet conveys laser focus and a collaborative spirit that’s spiced with a massive dash of “why not?” Embracing transformation is simply who they and he naturally are even if there’s nothing simple about it. Still, this young man from Chicago’s northwest suburbs lives, breathes, and walks the talk of “why not?” He and his friends willingly roll up their sleeves to do the unbelievably challenging work of breaking through the status quo, and they do it for the sole purpose of manifesting something powerfully uplifting and powerfully important.

Why not? … to be sure. And equally to be sure, an open and willing heart-mind connection provides a great deal of help, truth be told, is an outright prerequisite for anyone intent upon making a positive impact.

Only don’t ask Fiegel or his friends if this is the case for them. Zach will tell you they’re all just regular people. The thing is…Zach really is very down to earth. His twitter bio includes this intention: “My goal is to increase genuine smiles globally.” He’s truly an unassuming guy who also happens to be caring enough, passionate enough, wise enough, and aware enough to know how life speaks to his heart and to be committed enough to blaze that trail in fellowship with friends the world over. Plus, he and his friends have paid very close attention to those they count as the many
trailblazers leading the way. They range from immediate family to a wide circle of close friends, professors and those individuals from a variety of countries and cultures who unapologetically and bravely live into their dreams no matter how large or many the obstacles.

In fact, Zach had visited with several of them just weeks ago.

Over spring break, Fiegel—along with his social venture classmates and professor Christine Mooney—travelled to Mexico, where they met several social entrepreneurs located in the more poverty-stricken area of that country. To paint the picture of the impact this had on him, Zach uses broad brushstrokes. He describes at length how eye-opening the experience was in terms of really understanding how big and very different the world is from what he originally thought. When he shares why his perspective so dramatically shifted, you almost sense his memories of the trip revealing themselves right there in living color as if streaming in the air from YouTube. He speaks about realizing how incomplete it is to think that life moves only in a straight line. The idea of only two options—straight ahead or falling backward—pales in comparison now for him, now that he has seen a vastly more complex, vastly more dimensional world—almost, as Fiegel muses, “a Rubik’s Cube” of incredible people of all kinds and incredible life experiences of all varieties.

“I’ve changed a lot and I’m aware of it,” Fiegel admits as the conversation pivots slightly when he answers a question specific to his own personal transformation. “I may not know all of how I’m going to change—that’s what life is about, right? But, I do know the world’s a big place with a lot of different people and situations, and I do know I don’t know everything and never will. I’m lucky to also know I’m building from a strong foundation. My family provided me with a solid base. My mom and my dad are my heroes. They were young when I was born, and they sacrificed so much so that I could have opportunities. Dennis Barsema is a great role model, another amazing person who I aspire to be like and someone who is also very important to me...someone I now also consider to be a great friend. My high school football coach, my high school basketball coach, my high school English teacher—all so important to me. Really, there are so very many people I’ve learned from, who took the time and interest in me to help me grow. The number one thing I take away from all of what they taught me is how important it is to help
others. One of my goals is to be a good role model to my brothers and sister. My parents did everything they could so I could have more opportunities. I’m so grateful to them and to everyone. I think it’s important that I pay that forward to my younger brothers and sister. That I pay it forward in everything I do.”

As he stands in the Rubik’s Cube of life’s pathways and peers into the immediate future, the past, the highs, the lows, and the many unknowns to come, Zach’s one recommendation—if he had only one to make—to a new student or really to anyone boils down to this:

“Here’s what my friends and I always say: do AWESOME stuff … with capital letters in the word ‘AWESOME.’ Don’t sit around. Be proactive. Take that first step. Explore. Whatever you put your interest or time into, put your best into it. Sometimes the hardest thing is showing up.”

Fiegel pauses briefly, then smiles as if in appreciation to a whole lot of people and for a whole lot of experiences; as if with tangible excitement for the positively unreasonably bold things to come. Then, with an energy likened to quiet confidence and with all his friends right there with him in his mind’s eye to speak in one voice, he urges:

“Make yourself show up.”

**How Fiegel & Friends Show Up in the World**

“You asked why I’ve been so active during my four years here at NIU. The world’s a big place – there are so many ways to grow and to make an impact. I guess I can sum it up best by saying that I’ve just never been the type of person to sit back.”

**Budding Social Entrepreneurs & Angel Investors**

who, along with his student teammates, envisioned a for-profit, social venture called Vitalert. Their business idea took first place in NIU’s 2013 Social Venture Competition along with seeding of $10,000 to bring their idea into reality.

Life-changing CAUSE pizza—more than 2,200 slices sold and made by your very own NIU CAUSE students.
The team then created an RFP, evaluated proposals, and invested the $10,000 in a social venture in Nigeria.

Co-founder, President (see next item) and co-member of NIU CAUSE, a university-wide student organization focused in the social entrepreneurship space that grew organically from 7 to 35 members in one year’s time.

President of NIU CAUSE for two years and humbly taking on the formal title even though Zach prefers to describe himself as “collaborator and friend.” Zach explains: “I worry about titles taking over the culture, spirit, and focus. I had to be convinced titles were necessary. Eventually, I came to recognize how they can help with structure. But I don’t place my focus on them. Trust, respect, and open-mindedness are what matter to me.”

Budding Sales Professionals and Pizza Pros who brought life to a student idea that a really good pizza can change lives. After a series of cold calls, the efforts of the CAUSE students resulted in a long-standing relationship with Arty, the owner of Pizza Pros restaurant in DeKalb, who opened early every week so Zach and his CAUSE colleagues could use the facilities to bake 20 homemade pizzas and deliver and sell them to their NIU customer base (selling them completely out each time, in fact). “Arty has been truly amazing. We’re so grateful to him for helping what must have looked to him like crazy kids,” Zach shares.

Budding Angel Investors who with all his CAUSE colleagues invested CAUSE pizza sale profits in 2013 in a social entrepreneur located in Mexico. In 2014, they invested additional CAUSE profits in three other NGOs.

Budding Named Scholarship Investors who, together with the CAUSE gang, raised enough funds in 2014 to establish an annual $1,000 CAUSE scholarship for NIU students, thereby bringing to life an idea championed by one of Zach’s fellow CAUSE colleagues.

Activists all, these CAUSE friends, sold, baked, and delivered more than 41 pizzas in one day (and in between their classes) during NIU’s food drive and then donated the proceeds to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, raising enough funds to provide more than 3,000 meals to those in need.

Visionary CAUSE Tribe that co-founded and co-led from start to finish the university’s first-ever day-long Social Impact Summit (including lining up the keynotes, all nationally regarded in the field of social entrepreneurship, and marketing the event). More than 170 individuals attended the first Social Impact Summit in 2013, and more than 225 attended the second annual summit in 2014.

Highly Engaged Students, Advisory Board members, co-ed Business Fraternity members, Club Sports members, Huskies Superfans…

All around regular people…