

Zach Harris: Gridiron and business school teach alum how to build a successful business

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sopanews@tulane.edu



The skills Zach Harris gained as a starting linebacker for the Green Wave football team, a business major at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, and a graduate of the Tulane School of Professional Advancement led him to start his own construction firm, Zach the Builder.

Now, he is educating a new generation of business owners while rebuilding the city that raised him.

Harris, a New Orleans native, was a standout student-athlete at Tulane. He was a starting linebacker, the team captain as a senior and a member of the American Athletic Conference Academic All-American team. In addition to a Bachelor of Science degree in marketing from the business school, he completed a master's degree in homeland security from the School of Professional Advancement.

After graduation, when so many of his classmates were taking what he considered the more traditional route of corporate jobs, he decided to combine the experience he gained on the gridiron and at business school to go his own way. "Choosing the entrepreneurship track was something that really intrigued me," says Harris.

"I knew I had to find a niche, and I had to find where I could add value to people's lives," Harris says. "So, right out of college, I wasn't worried about how much money I could make, and that's something that professors preached about. They're like, 'find a way that you can add value to other people's lives. If you can take money out of the equation, what would you do?'"

He found his niche in construction, a field he didn't see many of his classmates entering: "A lot of people in our age group don't know how to use their hands. And that's a problem in the new generation is the fact that we're so technology-driven now, we're losing those fine-motor skills."

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-Zach Harris, Tulane SoPA alumnus, class of 2019

Immediately out of Tulane, he marketed himself on Instagram doing small handyman jobs, and worked on his family's real estate rentals. His business continued to grow, and when he encountered jobs he couldn't handle, he connected his customers to people who could do the work.

Harris started Zach the Builder about three months before Hurricane Ida hit in August 2021. Since the storm, the company has finished over 100 roofs. Zach the Builder specializes in roofing but does top-to-bottom renovations.

The strong Tulane network was instrumental to Harris when getting his business off the ground. "Tulane connections are what created my business," he says.

When Tulane Athletic Director Troy Dannen's roof was totaled by Hurricane Ida, Zach the Builder fixed it. When Dannen tweeted pictures of his new roof, fixed by a "first-class linebacker" who became owner of a "first-class roofing company," the tweet "basically went viral within the Tulane community," Harris says, leading to more business for his young company.

Harris attributes much of his success to the business school, finding that he often uses verbatim what he learned in Tulane textbooks in the day-to-day operations of Zach the Builder.

Harris has also found that the motor skills, hustle and leadership that he developed on the football field translate to running a construction business. And though many of his business and marketing skills came from his Freeman courses, football also proved a valuable example for a finely tuned organization: "A football team is the greatest-run business, just the meticulousness in everything that is done."

He said that when he started his career, there were some people who doubted him, who felt that he should go immediately into finding an existing company and moving up through the ranks.

"A lot of us are just wired this day and age into going into a lifestyle of 9-to-5 and think that's the only way to success - having to wear a suit, go to corporate America, work these traditional jobs," Harris says. "There are other ways to become successful or ultimately to be happy in life and to live comfortably than in taking that traditional route."

And he wants to build up other Tulanians who want to become "new-generation" business owners. To him, a new-generation business owner is someone who doesn't join corporate America, wear a suit and work a traditional job. "We can be our own bosses. I mean, just because I'm 26, why can I not be a business owner?"

He recently hired two former Tulane football players as project managers, bringing his current team roster to four former student-athletes. And, he emphasizes, they truly are a team.

"I tell them, they do not work for me. I don't like to look at it like that. You're not working for me. You're learning from me. So, I teach them exactly how my business runs, instruct them so they can mimic that in their own new-generation business."