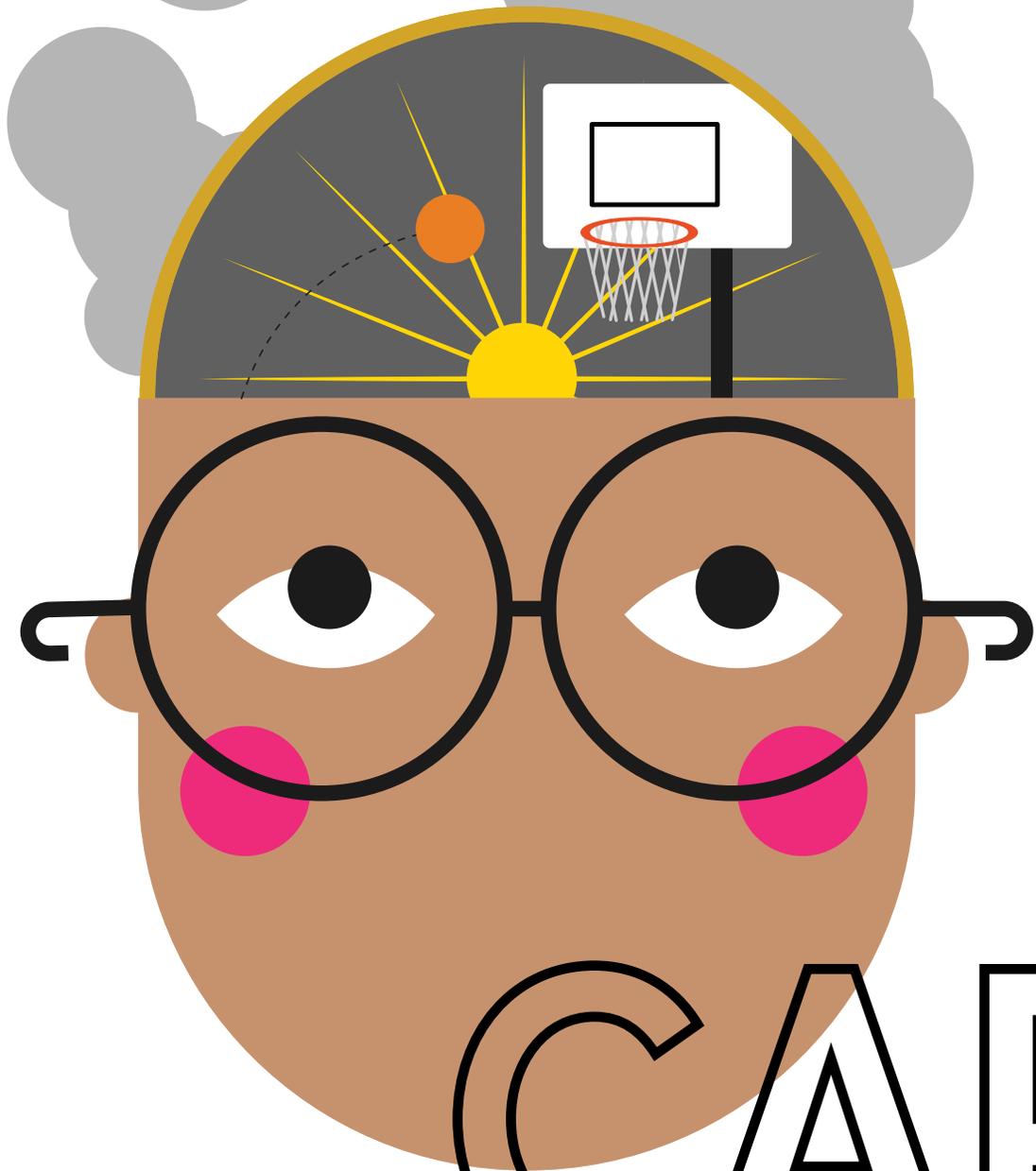


SELF



CARE

BY CHRISTINE M. HOPKINS

I did go on a run, once, before things got really bad. That's what they — doctors, friends, the internet — tell you to do when you're depressed. You need to exercise, they say. You need to sleep more, you need to eat right, you need to pretend as if everything is totally normal.

People went on runs all the time. I'd see them outside my dorm at Gonzaga University, or having just come back from the campus gym across the street. So one weekday morning following one of my first sleepless nights, I dug out my earbuds, loaded some new, upbeat music onto my iPhone, and on a cold November day, put on shorts for the first time since September. I jogged in place at stoplights, I carved out my own little loop north of campus. I even passed other runners in Gonzaga paraphernalia, and we nodded at each other as if we were part of an exclusive club of people who go running at 6:30 in the morning every day.

I got back to my dorm about an hour before class, feeling energized. *If I could do this every day, I thought, maybe I'd be able to sleep at night. Maybe I wouldn't have to worry about depression anymore.*

That morning, during an anomaly of a second wind, I felt like doctors, friends and the internet might be right. But the next morning, I woke up still exhausted from the run, as if I were still paying for my choice to

try to get well. I ate a cookie for breakfast from a box I'd stashed under my bed, my refuge from the cardboard and plastic city of trash that had accumulated over the past few months across my dorm room floor.

I never went on another run. I exercised, sure, in my short walks to Safeway over the coming months to buy granola bars and energy drinks, anything that could satisfy my hunger and keep me awake without much effort. The dining hall was closer, much closer, but the act of traveling to each meal exhausted me.

As fall turned to spring, and the occasional all-nighter turned into a nearly nocturnal existence, I fell into the pattern. I didn't want to do anything, much less *anything* that would help me. I wanted to subsist on grocery store cookies and pizza delivery and not live between those moments, but lean on them for comfort instead.

Not going to class, eventually, meant not going outside, meant not doing anything at all.

And then, the Gonzaga basketball season started.

For me, and for most people who attend Gonzaga, the name is inextricably tied with the men's basketball team, which everyone expects to see at the top of polls every season. When I joined the Gonzaga Bulldog Band as a freshman, I was excited to get to see the team up close and in-person. I knew Gonzaga was a basketball school — men's *and* women's — but the “men's” before “basketball school” was implied, and that was clear from the first game I saw, a sold-out exhibition thrashing.

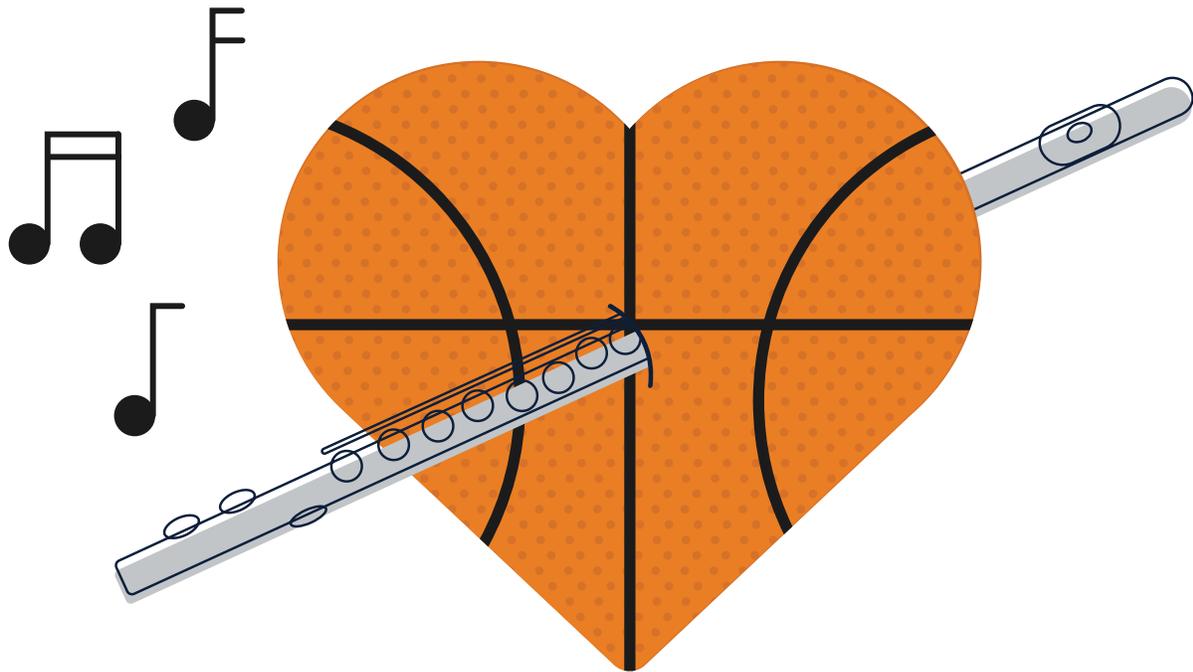
I joined the pep band in part because I wanted to keep playing music in college outside the rigors of the wind symphony, but it was also an easy way to get guaranteed seats at (men's) basketball games. Not even students are guaranteed seats — the circus around ticket distribution, which involves lining up outside the McCarthy Athletic Center (or the MAC) in numbered tents for big games, is both a spectacle and an integral part of the Gonzaga experience.

The women's basketball team, for me, was an afterthought. When I learned the pep band would play at both men's and women's games, I thought of it as a bonus — “Oh, cool, I get to see the women's team, too.” My first year, the team was a season removed from its first-ever NCAA Tournament appearance. For my freshman year — the 2008-09 season — the goal was, apparently, the Women's National Invitation

Tournament.

“Hey, you might not even have to travel if you’re in the women’s band,” our director joked during one of our first rehearsals that fall, referring to the fact that a good seed in the WNIT guarantees at least one home game. “You’ll get to keep going to class and everything! Won’t that be great?” Everyone groaned.

And then, the day after the first men’s game, we assembled for our first women’s game.



The exhibition win against Division III Whitman College was expected. My falling deeply in love with the team was not. With the pregame introduction of senior Jami Schaefer one of my bandmates remarked, “Ooh,

someone got *married!*” Another shared the story of how the former Jami Bjorklund and her husband, Drew, met in high school. I was amazed to discover that people not only got into the women’s games with the same intensity as the men’s, but knew about the players’ personal lives, too.

Soon enough, women’s games were my go-to destination. They had a friendlier atmosphere than the men’s games without dulling any edge of competitiveness. The fandom wasn’t driven by years of national success, so it felt like all of us were building something new together.

Future NCAA and WNBA recordholder Courtney Vandersloot, then a sophomore, had established herself as a force. During one game that season, she was fouled hard while driving to the basket — something she did a lot despite being just 5’8” — and when she didn’t immediately get up, the arena went silent. In such an intimate space, 2,400 people losing their voices all at once is eerie. A few moments later, Vandersloot waved off the trainer and went to the free throw line where she sank both shots. She was already the engine of the team.

“You should try a women’s game next,” I told my roommate after she’d attended her first men’s game. “Way more low-key. No waiting in line for tickets. The band are, like, the only students there. And the team is just

as good.” My fandom morphed into stringent feminist advocacy, and though not many people took me up on my invitation, I still felt more empowered for suggesting it.

Basketball was my first official Gonzaga activity when I returned to campus a day early from winter break to play at the men’s WCC opener. Before tipoff, my bandmates and I tried our best to follow the women’s away game.

When the academic side of spring semester hit, I started missing classes, staying in bed all day. Basketball became less of a fun activity and more a means of survival — the one thing keeping me tied to the world outside my own head.

I’d ruled out running after that November day, but the trek across the street to the McCarthy Athletic Center? I could handle that.

I’d ruled out going to many of my classes, but being around other people on a regular schedule at basketball games? Obviously worth it.

I’d ruled out doing much of anything besides lying down in bed, but jumping up and down to “Zombie Nation,” clapping vigorously for a

Vandersloot 3-pointer or a Vivian Frieson double-double, then laughing and waving as Frieson ran over to pretend to direct the band? Obviously, *obviously* worth it.

Going to these games wasn't just about being part of the pep band anymore, but feeling like a valued yet sly part of the Gonzaga community. You know the inside info you learn once you're on campus, the list of things to do before you graduate that one couldn't get from reading a brochure or looking at the website? That's what women's basketball games were to me. I felt like I'd earned my place as a Zag by steeping myself in this lesser-known universe.

Attending these games gave me purpose when I didn't feel like I had much, especially as I struggled with the "student" part of college. The fact that I could perform some much-needed self-care — briefly going outside, being around people, getting some cardio for a couple of hours, sticking to a schedule — without expending the impossible effort of taking a walk or intentionally making social plans, was my salvation.

But when the NCAA Tournament rolled around, I had to reckon with my waning academics. I made the cut to travel to Portland with the men's tournament band, but by then I knew I couldn't attend either

tournament without missing more class and exceeding my limit of unexcused absences. Minutes after receiving the email with the travel assignments, I emailed my director and delivered the news.

The first game of the women's tournament was against Xavier in Seattle, just four hours from Spokane. I had just gotten a TV in my dorm room that semester, so at least tuning in to a basketball game by myself felt natural.

When the Zags, on the wrong end of a No. 5 vs. No. 12 seed matchup, entered halftime with a three-point lead, I worried that they had used up their luck. They were playing just across the state in front of a heavily pro-Gonzaga contingent, but they'd never before won an NCAA Tournament game.

Enter Vandersloot, enter Frieson, enter Heather Bowman, an impactful junior who was inducted into the West Coast Conference Hall of Honor last year. Each scored in double figures in the second half, thanks in major part to their free throw shooting as Xavier piled up fouls. The Zags blew the Musketeers out of the water in the second half, winning 74-59.

Even from my bed, watching the women's basketball team notch their

first-ever NCAA Tournament win made me feel secure, like I had found something I could give all of myself to. Putting myself out there physically, emotionally and mentally, watching the team succeed and celebrating right along with them, felt worth it. At nearly 10 p.m., I pulled out some homework, suddenly motivated by the team's success. If they could pull off this win, surely I could salvage my semester.

I can't blame the lack of basketball for the sharp decline of my mental health that April; basketball kept me afloat longer than my chemically imbalanced brain had intended. But when the season ended, I no longer had anything to do.

I met with a classmate several times to put together a presentation for our poetry course, but I woke up an hour into the class when we were slotted to present. I reached out to my psychology professor and let her know what I'd been going through. She went above and beyond to accommodate me so I could keep up, even as I missed her class more and more. I stopped going to my philosophy class, which I had always disliked. I withdrew from three of my 18 credits, hoping that a small amount of relief would fix something — anything.

On the last Sunday night of April, I was messaging a friend back home who was intimately familiar with my mental health, and who had been there for my first panic attacks. But sometimes, and especially as my condition worsened, having such a supportive friend in my life felt stifling. Every new goal they encouraged me to accomplish, like seeing a therapist or going on medication, felt unreachable, and my guilt compounded each time they checked in with me.

I became hostile during the conversation and tried to push them away, finally logging off after sending a message along the lines of, “This isn’t worth it anymore.” The “*this*” was intentionally ambiguous — this friendship? my life? — but I didn’t care.

In fact, I couldn’t care, because “This isn’t worth it anymore” so easily left my mind once the anxiety attack began. I went from my desk to my bed and curled up in the fetal position, hyperventilating and shaking as every detail of the room closed in on me. The light was on, but it was so bright I had to close my eyes. Every time my bed creaked, the sound was like a gunshot, and I shook more. I felt like I was writhing on sandpaper as I lay on my blankets and pillows. My roommate was just across the room on her own bed, and I finally called out to her.

“I’m having a panic attack,” I gasped. “I need help.”

The next moments went by quickly. I later learned that my roommate first called the suicide hotline, who put her on hold, and then tried the friend I’d just been messaging with, who couldn’t help because they were panicking at the last message I sent. Finally, my roommate called 911. Campus security and paramedics crammed into our small room, bombarding my brain with new stimuli, with strangers. Someone asked if I had shoes, and my roommate retrieved them for me. Somehow I sat up and put them on, and somehow I walked out of the room and down the concrete stairs, where a gurney was waiting. I was wheeled out of my dorm, breathing heavily into an oxygen mask, and I shut my eyes tightly so I wouldn’t know how many people were watching.

Three hours at the hospital and lots of IV lorazepam later, the panic attack subsided. I learned I had the option to voluntarily admit myself to the psychiatric ward, and I took it. For a week, I adjusted to new medications, met with all kinds of psychiatric professionals and therapists, and rued that I could so clearly see Gonzaga’s campus from my room window. When I returned to campus, I medically withdrew from all my classes except two, the ones I deemed salvageable, but finished below the

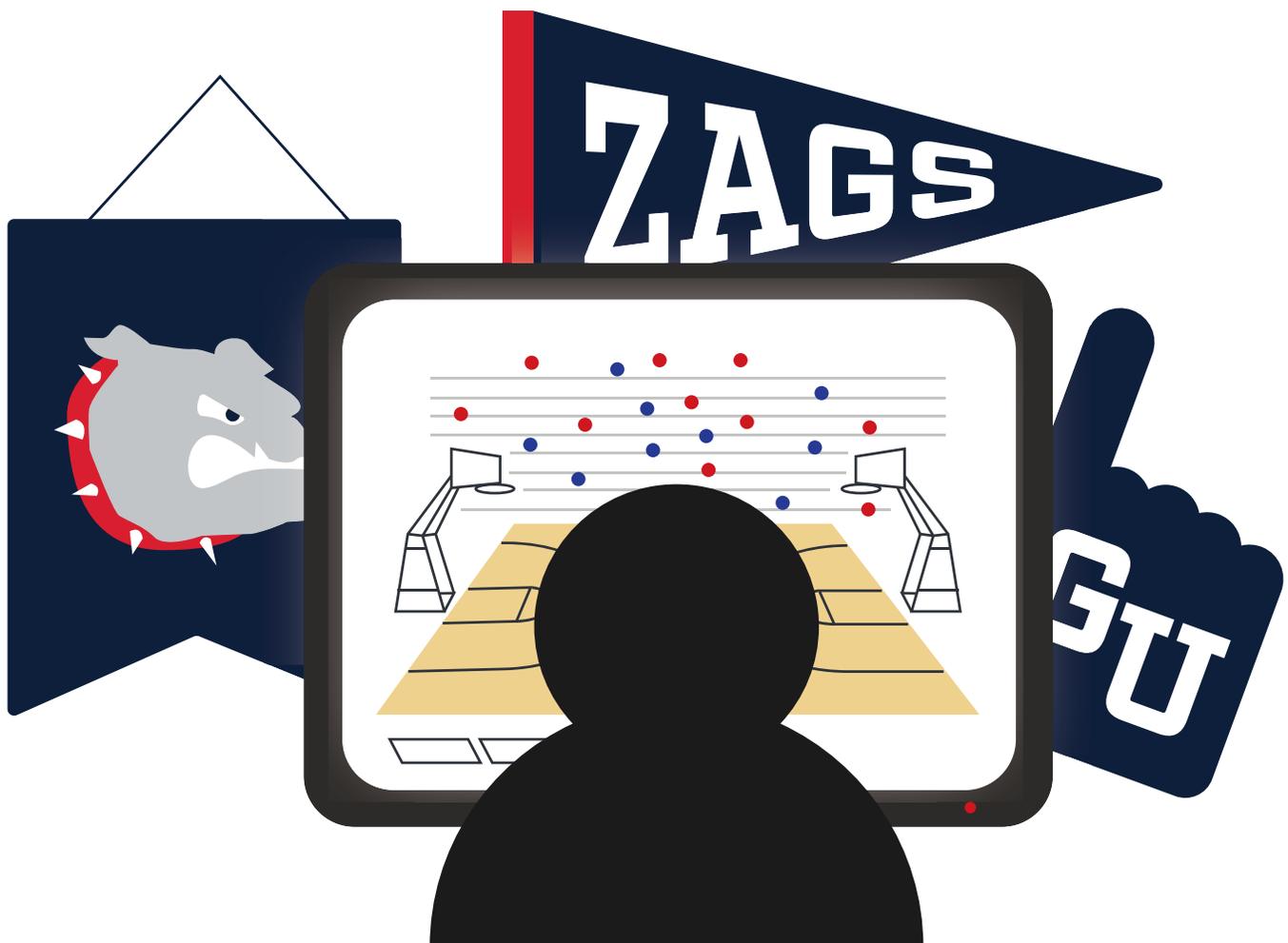
credit threshold and was put on academic probation the following fall semester. I found a psychiatrist back home that summer, and we worked together to ensure I was ready to return to school.

Even as I was tossed into the tumults of a new semester, new roommates, a new residence hall, and new classes, the first pep band rehearsals of the year centered me. The first women's basketball games, where now I was the one who knew the players' stories and what they were playing for that season, gave me mooring. I was assigned a case manager through the Student Life office to address the way my mental health intersected with my education and living situation. My case manager made me sign a behavioral contract that essentially said I wouldn't try to kill myself, something I'd never tried before.

Basketball stuck by me even as one of my medications failed, leading to a late-night trip to the hospital in October. Another medication failure soon after brought campus security to my door in the middle of the night, my terrified and sleepy suitemates watching from their rooms as I writhed on the floor crying, seeing things that weren't there. My case manager informed me these instances violated the behavioral contract. As I sobbed in her office, trying to make her understand that adjusting poorly to psychiatric medication wasn't my fault, she informed me there

was a good chance I wouldn't be allowed to live on campus anymore — “for the safety of myself and others,” she said.

It became clear despite my mental health breakdowns that Gonzaga wasn't the right fit. I had already applied to transfer to the University of Iowa for the following year. But I received word from Gonzaga's Student Life office that my on-campus living privileges were disallowed for my sophomore spring, despite an emphatically worded letter from my psychiatrist saying I was not a danger to myself nor others. I had nowhere to go except home, back to the Bay Area, for an entire semester.



Those first few weeks, I followed Gonzaga games from my childhood bedroom. I missed being in pep band, of course, but what I missed more was women's basketball.

Thank goodness the Zags play in the WCC. The Bay Area is home to three of Gonzaga's conference rivals: Saint Mary's, San Francisco and Santa Clara. I looked at the schedule with new eyes. Suddenly, so many away games were within driving distance, and that was as good as it was going to get for me.

In mid-February, my dad and I drove to Moraga, California, to see the Zags take on Saint Mary's. Vandersloot, Frieson and the rest were in my backyard, as if they'd come to play just for me. Gonzaga fans travel well, so I was surrounded by plenty of them, even though there were probably only a few hundred people total inside McKeon Pavilion. I rambled on for several minutes to my dad about how small the Saint Mary's pep band was, and how they did things differently.

Gonzaga won 88-75. Then when I traveled to San Francisco with my mom to see them a few weeks later, they won again, 83-35. We watched from courtside, under-the-basket seats that I'd purchased to get as close to the action as possible. The arena staff initially tried to make us move

because no one ever buys those seats for women's games, they said. I could hear then-head coach Kelly Graves talking to the team better than I ever could in Spokane.

My team won, twice, and I was there. They made their first Sweet Sixteen that spring, and in a small way, I got to be a part of it.

Even after I moved to Iowa City in August, I still couldn't escape the women's basketball team if I tried. Because who else should be Iowa's opponent in the first round of the 2011 NCAA Tournament but Gonzaga?

I watched with two friends in their apartment, all of us transfer students with no immediate allegiance to Iowa except academics. I dove right into describing players, explaining why the game was being played in Spokane when Gonzaga was the weaker seed (the playing sites were pre-selected back then), and why a win would be momentous for the team.

But my nervous rambling really served one purpose: I was trying to convince *myself* that a win was possible.

I needn't have worried. The Zags took care of the Hawkeyes on their home floor, and then defeated UCLA to make their second straight Sweet 16, held at Spokane Arena. A win against Louisville put them into the Elite 8 against Stanford, who they'd lost to by just six points in November. The Cardinal won the rubber match, too, but Gonzaga's run to the precipice of the Final Four was nonetheless historic.

I couldn't have asked for a better transition to my new life, far from Gonzaga, far from the West Coast.

I was still living in Iowa when Gonzaga released its nonconference schedule in the fall of 2018. One game in particular stuck out: a matchup at Missouri State. Google Maps informed me this was a short (by Midwest standards) five-hour drive, and I knew I had to go.

I hadn't seen the women's team in person since it visited the Bay Area in 2010. Several classes of players had joined and left the program, women I'd never gotten to see for myself except from my laptop screen or TV.

I bought a ticket and went as a fan, hoping the game would somewhat resemble the experience that I was trying to recapture from almost a decade

past, but mentally preparing myself in case it didn't. The moment I walked into JQH Arena in Springfield, Missouri, I ran into a man in a Gonzaga hoodie who promptly saw my own Gonzaga shirt, waved, and showed me to his group. I wasn't sure why I had worried at all.

Of course, I've kept up with Gonzaga women's basketball and watched as many games as I could over the last decade-plus. This fervent ritual — part fandom, part expanding my basketball knowledge — led to my first gigs writing about women's basketball. My intimate familiarity with and passion for a team that isn't covered much turned into work. My advocacy for women's basketball at Gonzaga, trying to get people to attend women's games, felt legitimized.

It was surreal seeing Lisa Fortier, an assistant to Graves when I was a student, in Springfield, now the head coach of the team. It was surreal seeing anything referring to Gonzaga, much less on the clothing of the fans around me, much less emblazoned on the front of women's basketball jerseys mere feet from where I sat.

When Gonzaga went into halftime with an 11-point lead over Missouri State, whose record at the time was 1-6, it felt like the WCC games of old, when the Zags blew away their competition and moved on to bigger things. But the Lady Bears came back, cutting the lead to single digits on their first

possession of the third quarter, and eventually pulling to within three points as Gonzaga point guard Jessie Loera went to the line with three seconds to play. She could have iced the game then, but missed both free throws. Mercifully, Jill Townsend pulled down an offensive rebound on the second miss and restored balance in our section — effectively, the game was over.

As I walked out of the arena to make the five-hour trek home, I realized that even if Gonzaga had lost, I would have been happy just seeing them in person again. I felt like a part of me that had been dormant for eight years had been reawakened, a corner of my mental health I never thought I'd access again suddenly dusted off. Rather than feeling exhausted — from driving five hours the day before, spending the night on a cheap hotel bed and driving even more to explore the area in the spare time before the arena doors opened — I was rejuvenated.

That moment, at an arena in southern Missouri, was when I knew that truly, no matter where I was in the world, this team could still offer me that security, that support, those good feelings that got me through even my darkest periods. The power that came from knowing I could be a person who could refer to a single entity as “life-saving” was immense, almost impossible to contend with, but impossible not to notice.

That the Zags have established themselves as a top-25 mainstay ever since,

one of the teams to beat nationwide, gives me some welcome stability, too. When my depression worsens during the winter, as is common for myself and so many others, basketball gives me something to look forward to. It is always there, even as my depression has migrated from my days at school to the evenings and weekends when it's so easy to fall into nothingness.

There's no cure for depression — even when it's managed well, it's still considered “in remission,” like other chronic illnesses. The key to fighting it is establishing healthy routines. Of course, those could include old standbys like exercise, sleeping more and eating right, and those are goals I strive for to this day. But for more than a decade now, basketball has been my steadiest rhythm. The Zags gave me a way to practice self-care without self-consciousness, a space to be myself without motive or judgment from anyone, including me and my own brain.

Depression means a lot of people telling you what you *should* do. Only Gonzaga basketball spoke to me in a voice clearer than my own.

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