Zachary McNish is the 2006 recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan award from Duke University. This award seeks to perpetuate the excellence of character and humanitarian service of Algernon Sydney Sullivan by recognizing and honoring such qualities in others.

Why would a student who has already secured his own independent fellowships and funding for public interest work spend literally hundreds of hours to raise thousands of dollars to provide fellowships for his classmates? If one were to ask Zach, he would probably shrug his shoulders shyly and smile. Fellow students, however, are more eager to describe Zach’s selflessness. As a third-year student explained: “He has not been content to bide his time at Duke, merely waiting to cash a law firm check upon graduation. Rather, Zach has taken the last three years as an opportunity to be an active, concerned, informed, and dedicated member of the community.”

As the co-chair of the Law School’s internal student non-profit, the Public Interest Law Foundation (more commonly known as PILF), Zach has combined his leadership and interpersonal skills with his internal drive to make a difference, with truly remarkable results. Although Zach neither sought nor received a penny from PILF, he nonetheless applied to serve as co-chair of this active student organization because he believed that financial concerns should not prevent any student with a desire to work in the public interest from gaining firsthand experience.

Perhaps Zach felt so strongly about this because his own personal experiences have been so remarkable and diverse. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his work as the president of the international nonprofit organization he founded, Native Future. Having spent three years as a Peace Corps volunteer before coming to Duke, Zach’s time in Panama working with the remote Wounaan community helped inspire him to form Native Future, an organization whose mission is to protect marginalized indigenous cultures like the Wounaan to help conserve the ecosystems in which they live.

Especially impressive about Zach is the fact that he has demonstrated his character not only through some of his major activities—like PILF or Native Future—but also through the simple activities of his daily living. One of his classmates offers an especially eloquent description of Zach’s character: “At a school that prides itself on a sense of community, Zach McNish is a model that we should all admire. It is a privilege to be able to call Zach my classmate, my peer, my friend, and it has been an honor to work with him over the past few years. Zach is an invaluable asset to the law school and the greater Duke community. As hyperbolic as it sounds, I have no doubt that his impact will reverberate through the institution for years to come. There is little of significance at the law school that Zach is not personally involved with.”

Honoring a man who “reached out both hands in constant helpfulness to others,” the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award is a fitting tribute to recognize and reward not only Zach’s involvement with the immediate Duke University community, but also the impact he has had on the greater Durham and international communities in which he has served. Clearly, like Mr. Sullivan, Zach has no concept of a “narrow circle of self-interest,” but rather, has linked a wide variety of
citizens who will be forever touched by his spirituality, selflessness, service, character, and integrity.

Associate Dean for Public Interest and Pro Bono, Carol Spruill states: “I cannot believe Zach will soon leave us and move halfway around the world to [pursue a clerkship] in his home state of Hawaii. We will miss his cheerful and positive presence next year, but I have no doubt he will continue to make us proud.” Given Zach’s track record, neither do we.