

HOLY SMOKE! The essential guide to Texas BBQ + Recipes

AUSTIN

M O N T H L Y

111

FUN

THINGS

TO DO THIS

SUMMER

**ZACH
ANNER**

OPRAH'S
NEW "IT" BOY



MAY 2011

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CONTRIBUTORS

Anne
Lang



Following journalism school at Michigan State University, Anne Lang worked as a newspaper reporter, radio copywriter and trade-journal editor before switching to freelancing after becoming a mother. She says spending the day with new Oprah Winfrey Network travel show host Zach Anner ("The Golden Ticket," page 98) was delightful. "I now realize what Oprah meant when she told Zach that she's a better person for knowing him," she says. Lang has lived in Austin since 1980 and works primarily as a contract reporter with *People*. She's also an award-winning writer for the horse industry.

Sheri
Alzeerah



Sheri Alzeerah was born in Canada and moved to Amarillo with her parents and two older brothers in 1993. She is a second-year University of Texas journalism and radio-television-film student. As an Austin newbie, she used the "111 Fun Things to Do This Summer" (page 104) feature to discover the city's gems. "Austin isn't 'the city that never sleeps.' It's the city that always dreams," she says. "This place runs on bright ideas." Alzeerah's writing can be seen in *Texas Highways*, *The Daily Texan* special editions, *The Alcalde* and other publications. She also has a food blog, Chow, Bella!

Sarah
Wilson



Photographer Sarah Wilson explores issues of community and culture through environmental portraiture. She spent four hours snapping Zach Anner for "The Golden Ticket" (page 98). "Zach was hilarious. He had everyone in stitches at the photo shoot. I am such a big fan," she says. "His comedy and his spirit are going to have a great effect on people." After nine years of studying and working in New York City, Wilson has returned to her hometown of Austin, where she works as a photographer for such publications as *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Time*, *Marie Claire* and *Texas Monthly*.

Anne
Van Eaton



A native Texan and Austin-area resident since 1985, Anne Van Eaton came to *Austin Monthly* as associate publisher exactly 10 years ago, when the magazine had just 30 pages and was held together with staples. Having worked in magazine advertising, she helped the new owners give Austin a city magazine that reflected the lifestyles of its residents. "It's been a great pleasure to be a part of all of the growth we've seen with *Austin Monthly*," she says. Van Eaton lives in Dripping Springs with her husband, Paul, and enjoys spending time with her dogs, Rusty, Demi and Mia, and five (soon to be six) grandchildren.

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Comedian Zach Anner is flying high after winning his own TV show on the Oprah Winfrey Network



Cover photo by Chad Wadsworth
Hair and makeup by Julie Odom
Shot on location at Deep Eddy Pool

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How to Barbecue Like a Pit Master

Be the Bobby Flay of your block with our backyard grilling guide. It has all the tricks of the smokehouse trade, including tips from cook-off winners, recipes for sides from the top BBQ joints in the city, the ultimate way to make brisket and more.

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The Golden Ticket

Zach Anner has been making people laugh since he was 4 years old. Now that Oprah Winfrey has selected him to host a travel show on her new network, this young man with cerebral palsy will have the whole nation laughing and admiring his ability to overcome any obstacle.

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111 Fun Things to Do This Summer

Are you ready to have fun in this hot weather? Our 10th annual feature has 111 suggestions. From the rooftop parties at Arthouse to the Zoom Room dog gym, we've chosen activities, tours, events and places to make 2011 the best summer ever.



THE GOLD

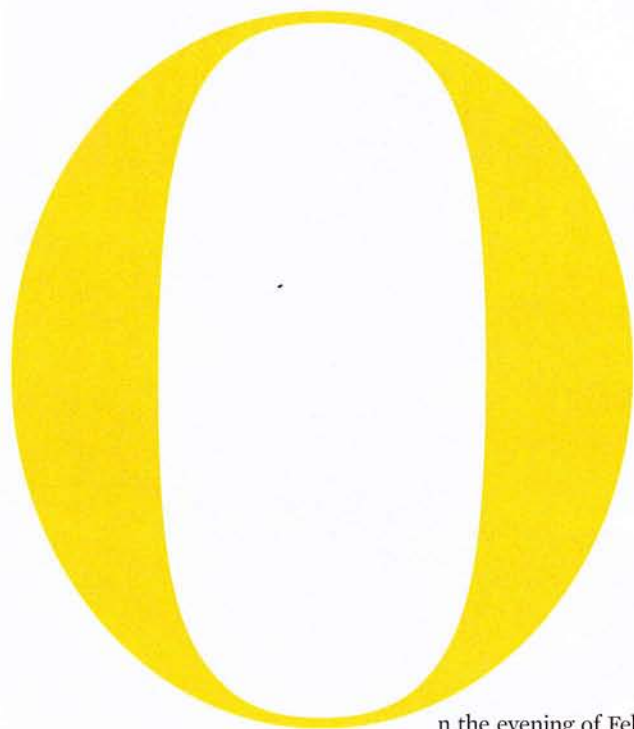


ZACH ANNER, a self-described “sit-down comic,” got the last laugh when he was awarded his own travel show from Oprah Winfrey herself

By **Anne Lang** Photograph by **Sarah Wilson**

TUX COURTESY THE TEXAS CLOTHIER
PLANE COURTESY PARADIGM JET MANAGEMENT IN TEXAS

ENT TICKET



n the evening of Feb. 25, a screening room at the Alamo Drafthouse on South Lamar was packed with Zach Anner's family members, friends and fans. The boisterous crowd had gathered to watch the final episode of *Your OWN Show: Oprah's Search for the Next TV Star*, a weekly reality show designed to crown a single winner from 10 finalists who competed to win a show on the new Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN).

Just two contestants remained from an original applicant pool of more than 15,000 hopefuls. They were Austin resident Anner, 26, a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy (CP)—which he calls “the sexiest of palsies”—whose desire was to offer a travel show for people with various challenges. And California resident Kristina Kuzmic-Crocco, 31, who wanted to host a cooking show for novices. Winfrey herself would be choosing the winner.

As the megastar faced the cameras to make her announcement, an anticipatory hush fell over the audience at the Drafthouse. Only Anner and his mother, Susan, knew what Winfrey was about to say, and they had kept the secret since the show wrapped four months earlier.

Winfrey started off by praising Kuzmic-Crocco for her talents. Then she turned to Anner. “I have to say that the courage it took for you just to send in that tape and to audition for a position that requires such stamina...” Winfrey trailed off, shaking her head in amazement. “What you have shown us in these weeks is that the wheelchair doesn’t come first. And after meeting you, I can say for myself and everybody on this crew that we no longer even see the wheelchair.”

The camera swung to Anner, who was beaming, as was Susan, who had been flown in for the finale as a surprise to her son.

“The truth,” Winfrey stated, “is that both of you have given your heart, and the truth is that both of you deserve to have your own shows. Kristina and Zach...” [she paused for dramatic effect]...I’m going to make that happen. You *both* will have your own shows on the OWN Network!”

With that, the screening room at the Drafthouse erupted in deafening cheers and wild applause. Guests leapt to their feet, clapped Anner on the back and shared high-fives. They only paused in their revelry when Anner reappeared on the screen.

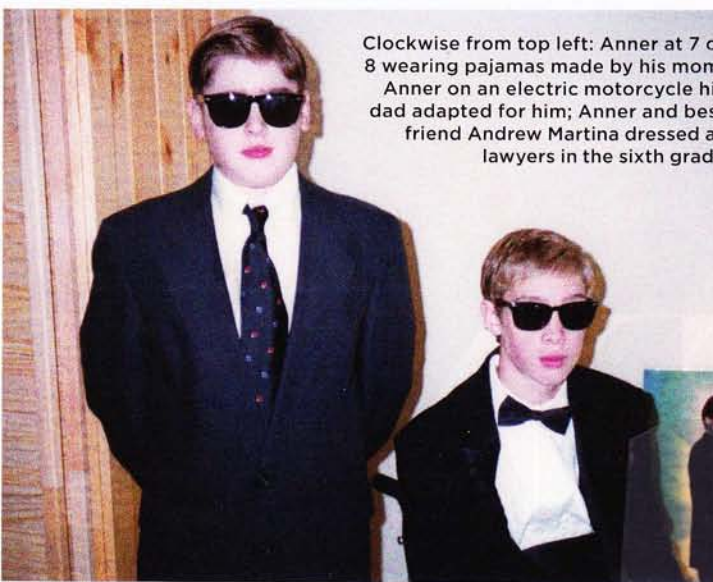
“I just got a show from Oprah Winfrey!” he shouted, grinning from ear to ear. “I could literally do backflips now. I won’t show you, but I could do them! I knew I had it in me, because this is what I was born to do. It doesn’t matter what I’m physically up against.”

Those last eight words have served as Anner’s personal mission statement for most of his life, the details of which he’s sharing one week later in the North Austin apartment where he lives with his 27-year-old brother, Brad. Dressed in a salmon-colored Oxford shirt with pinstripes and neatly pressed off-white pants, Anner greets a visitor with the same infectious enthusiasm and charm that captured not only Winfrey’s affection but that of millions of fans from the show, Facebook and the general Internet world.

Anner’s two-bedroom, ground-floor apartment is predictably decorated in early bachelor, complete with mismatched furniture and an enormous flat-screen. (Ironically, the Anner brothers’ lack of a cable subscription means they can’t watch OWN at home.)

Gazing out the window at the sunny, warm day, Anner reflects on a youth spent in chilly Kenmore, N.Y., a suburb of Buffalo. “Kenmore’s not big enough to have its own claim to fame,” he says. “So we just lie and tell people it’s a washer-dryer thing.”

Anner’s signature dry wit emerged at an early age. He remembers the first time he discovered he could make people laugh. “When I was 3 or 4,” he says, “they put me onstage at a fund-raising telethon for CP. They wanted me to open the telethon



Clockwise from top left: Anner at 7 or 8 wearing pajamas made by his mom; Anner on an electric motorcycle his dad adapted for him; Anner and best friend Andrew Martina dressed as lawyers in the sixth grade

by saying 'ladies and gentlemen,' and then introduce somebody. But all I did was repeat, 'Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen!' over and over, for probably a full five minutes.

"Everyone was laughing hysterically, so obviously I just kept going until I had to be thrown off the stage—that's how I ended up in this wheelchair," Anner says with a laugh.

Telethon antics aside, Anner had as normal a childhood as possible, given that he was born with CP. He and Brad are the only children of Jonathan Anner, who lives in Tonawanda, N.Y., and works as a bartender; and Susan, who lives in Amherst, N.Y., and is a theater lecturer at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

By the time Anner entered high school, CP-related illnesses were causing enough sick days that he withdrew and continued his studies at home, earning a GED around the same time his former classmates were walking the stage. Anner says he's since outgrown those health issues. But along the way, he found that humor helped him skate over life's rough patches. "I've always used humor to give me perspective and to get through difficult times by thinking, 'This will be funny later,'" he says, adding, "Sometimes political correctness holds people back. I want to be open about CP, and I want people to feel comfortable about asking whatever questions they might have. As long as questions come from an honest place, nothing can really offend me."

Still, missing a lot of the social activities associated with high

school was a source of relative isolation for the teen, putting his budding comedian track on hold. "I became sort of introverted because I was gone so much," he says. As for dealing with his CP, he adds, "I didn't see my challenges as challenges because of the people who made my journey so smooth. My parents and my brother always treated me as a person who had potential, and they wanted me to find my path to what I loved to do, in spite of the chair and the CP."

"My parents and my brother always treated me as a person who had potential, and they wanted me to find my path to what I loved to do, in spite of the chair and the CP."

That path eventually led to Austin. When he was 17, Anner attended the South By Southwest Film Festival with his dad and instantly fell in love with the city. By then, he had become enamored of filmmaking and felt it was what he wanted to do with his life.

Anner's goal was to enroll in film school at The University of Texas. But he missed the initial application deadline, so he



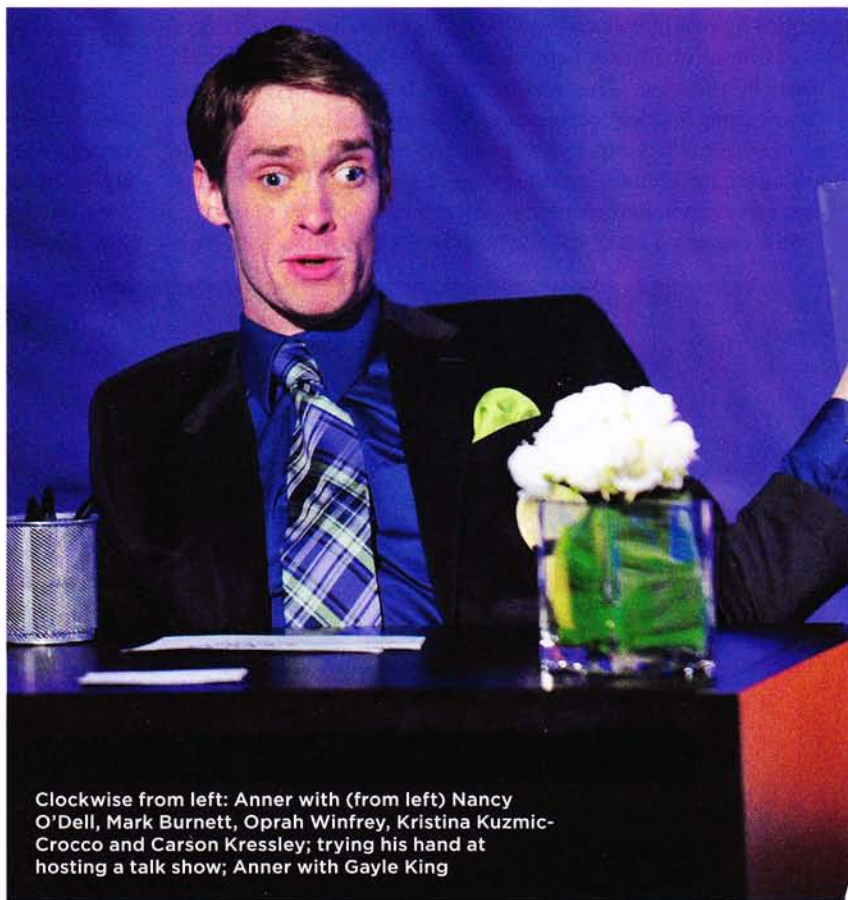
attended SUNY-Buffalo for a year, took a year off to work at Disney World's Epcot and arrived in Austin as a transfer student. He quickly immersed himself in UT's radio/TV/film department and became part of a sketch-comedy program for Texas Student Television, for which he wrote, acted, produced and edited. "It's where I developed my voice and learned where my values are," he says. "I learned how to work in a group dynamic, how to meet deadlines and put out content on a week-to-week basis."

Anner also got a chance to do some celebrity interviews in a producing class taught by John Pierson. "Zach always had the best questions for guests in Master Class," Pierson says. "His greatest moment was asking Steve Buscemi what hair care product he used and then whether he had any experience in the adult film industry. It was disarmingly hilarious and very helpful to me on an evening when Steve had been a little uptight."

he was so funny, just off-the-cuff, amazingly sharp. And he was always willing to do anything, anytime, anywhere."

Anner is still shy of some hours required to complete a degree, but he's suspended his UT studies to see where his television career will lead him. Until the OWN show, Anner's primary gig was as part of a five-man local comedy troupe called Lark The Beard. The work satisfied his creative appetite, but he'd also felt for some time that he wanted something more. So he took heed when his mom told him about a contest sponsored by Harpo Productions that was calling for video submissions from everyday folks wishing for a shot at becoming talk show hosts.

He'd been mulling a concept for a travel show since a trip to Rome with his dad at 14. "He filmed me rolling my chair on the cobblestone streets and saying to the camera, 'Rome isn't very accessible, because in ancient times, they would have just thrown



Clockwise from left: Anner with (from left) Nancy O'Dell, Mark Burnett, Oprah Winfrey, Kristina Kuzmich and Carson Kressley; trying his hand at hosting a talk show; Anner with Gayle King

While at UT, Anner also scored an interview with actor Dennis Quaid. "That's been my biggest one," Anner says. "At the end, I asked Dennis to do a bit with me for an improv thing I'd created called 'Middle-Aged British Couple in Crisis.' I used to do it with my friend Katie. We'd pretend we were a 50-something British couple whose marriage had gone sour, and we'd banter back and forth, Virginia Woolf-style. So I did that with Dennis, and he played the wife. He was great."

The humorous bit debuted at the Alamo Drafthouse's Open Screen Night and was an instant hit. "Zach is fearless, and that's what first attracted us to him," says Drafthouse owner Tim League, whom Anner credits for boosting his career at every turn. "He's also incredibly quick-witted. The things he used to do for us were shows where he would interview celebrities, and

someone like me over a cliff," Anner says. "I was trying to be funny, but it planted a seed in my mind that grew over time."

Years later, he put his idea for a travel show on paper via a treatment in a friend's producing class. "I wanted to do it for the Texas Filmmakers' Production Fund to try to get a grant," he says, "because 2010 was the year that I decided no matter what, I was going to do this travel show."

He didn't get the grant, but, by then, the OWN opportunity had already presented itself. Last June, Anner had his friend Aaron Marquis shoot him in a hilarious audition video (viewable on YouTube) and shipped it off. Not content to simply wait for an answer, Anner decided to appear in person at a June 12 audition for the show in Dallas. He drove north with his brother and a couple of friends for the tryout—but didn't

get a callback. Agreeing that the experience in itself had been worthwhile, the group spent the night in Dallas.

At 2 a.m., Brad got a call from his girlfriend back in Austin, and she said Zach's audition video had gone viral and racked up nearly 2 million votes. Later that morning, the men headed back to Austin, and halfway through the trip they learned that John Mayer had posted Anner's video and a message of support on his blog. Soon afterward, gossip blogger Perez Hilton and David Hasselhoff jumped aboard the Anner bandwagon. As a result of all the exposure, Anner's vote tally eventually reached more than 9 million, easily winning him a spot on the reality show in Los Angeles.

On the show, Anner set himself apart from many of the other contestants who were depicted (at varying levels) as cutthroat-competitive. "I wasn't going to undermine rivals because I knew I needed the support of my teammates to look good and

live on no sleep, but when I was in L.A., I made sure to get as close to eight hours of sleep as possible, because I didn't want to take any chances of being tired and screwing up. I know my limitations and how to work around those."

Metzger says that what impressed both Winfrey and himself was Zach's extraordinary work ethic and perpetually sunny disposition. "This guy doesn't complain about a thing," Metzger says. "You spend some time with him, and you think, 'I should be working harder, because this guy works harder than me.'"

All that hard work paid off when Winfrey announced that Anner and Kuzmic-Crocco had both won a show. "I thought, 'WHAT???' Anner says. "I got all tingly and felt like I was having an out-of-body experience."

Shortly after the winners were named, Winfrey made a tearful on-air speech. "Being around Zach makes you a better person," she declared. "I've never seen anybody with that kind of heart, that kind of humor, who has all the challenges that he's had to deal with from the time he was born. And I've met a lot of people. I've never seen anybody like him."


Along with the show, Anner also took home a \$100,000 cash prize from Kohl's (the store will give an additional \$100,000 to a charity of his choosing), and a 2011 Chevrolet Equinox, which he's physically unable to drive, even if the car were to be outfitted with hand controls. "My reaction time isn't fast enough," he explains. "I'd hate to run over a little old lady or something; that would be depressing." Anner says he'll likely keep the car to ride in as a passenger, with a family member or friend at the wheel.

Speaking of wheels, the working title for Anner's travel show is *Rollin' Around the World with Zach Anner*. But Anner stresses that the show will not just focus on potential travelers with physical disabilities. "It's a travel show for everybody who has excuses for why they're not traveling," he says. "We'll try to show everything that can go wrong when you travel, rather than showing the perfect scenario, like so many travel shows do. The reality is that when you travel, you have to adapt to unexpected situations."

Anner himself experienced one of those unexpected situations while traveling west to audition for the OWN show's final 10 spots. When Anner flies, his chair has to be transported in the plane's cargo hold. Upon landing in L.A., Anner and his pal Andrew Martina, who has been Anner's best friend since third grade and served as his helper during the show's run, discovered that the motor of Anner's chair had been smashed to bits during the trip.

"We had to rent a temporary replacement," says Anner, "and I ended up going in for my audition in this old grandma-type wheelchair. But it made the concept of my proposed show that much stronger when I was able to tell that story to the producers."

If all goes well, Anner's show will air this summer. OWN has committed to a six-episode minimum with Mark Burnett Productions at the helm. Anner and Kuzmic-Crocco worked with Burnett himself, creator of *The Apprentice*, *Survivor* and other hit shows, during the final episode where they filmed mock pilots for their respective shows. And John Mayer has offered to write the show's theme song.

Despite all the changes happening in his life, Anner is keeping perspective. "I've never bought into the whole fame or celebrity thing," he insists. "I never want to get wrapped up in that part of it. When something like this happens to you overnight, you start to think about how you're going to keep a good head on your shoulders and maintain perspective. For now, I just want to enjoy the ride, because I don't know when it will all be over. You just have to be grateful every step of the way." 

ANNER SOUNDS OFF

PRINCE WILLIAM'S WEDDING

"I have a commemorative mug! My friend brought it to me from England. So even though I didn't attend the wedding, I can drink out of the happy couple."

LADY GAGA

"I don't know about her music, but her clothes are delicious. She's the only woman I would take out to dinner in order to eat her outfits."

TWITTER

"I've never seen so many people posting so much stuff about so many pointless things."

JUSTIN BIEBER

"I want his haircut, but I don't think I can pull it off."

THE PERFECT WOMAN

"I don't know—I haven't met her yet! Though lately I've gotten a lot of marriage proposals on Facebook."

DANCING WITH THE STARS

"I'm still waiting to be called for that. I guess I'll have to wait for *Sitting with the Stars* instead."

BOTOX

"As someone whose movement is restricted already, I can't imagine doing that to my face. Giving myself an intentional palsy would be terrible!"

AIRPORT SECURITY

"I'm fine with the pat-downs, because I like the intimacy."

do well," Anner says with a shrug. "It was easy for me to keep a positive perspective, because I just felt so lucky to be there."

A mixture of elements contributed to Anner's staying power on the show, as his fellow contestants were voted off one by one. OWN's Lee Metzger, an executive producer of the show, has high praise for Anner. "There's no question that Zach had a really good understanding of what it takes to make a show," Metzger says. "But I think he was underestimated at some level, because people tend to see the chair. And as Zach himself said on the show, you shouldn't judge people who are in a chair."

Even the grueling schedule, which required 16-hour days on the set, didn't faze Anner. "I don't have a stamina issue, because I've produced so many projects that require filming all day and editing all night to meet a deadline," he says. "I've learned how to