

For A Boy With Little, Learning To Love A Castoff Trombone
By NPR Staff

Gilbert Zermeno came from a big family who didn't have much. They lived on the plains of West Texas and got by on the \$100 a week that Gilbert's father made working the cotton fields. So when Gilbert wanted to join the school band in sixth grade, his parents had to get creative, as he explained to his wife, Pat Powers-Zermeno, during a recent visit to StoryCorps in Phoenix.

"I was imagining myself playing the saxophone," he says. One day, he brought home a note from school to show his mom. "The school is bringing in an instrument salesman, and all the kids are going to be there that want to be in band," he told her.

There was a huge dust storm that day, Gilbert recalls, so his mother replied, "There's no way that we can drive in this dust storm, mi hijo [my son]. It's just too dangerous."

Undeterred, Gilbert made a plan. "I took this little statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and I put her on the window. And I said, 'I really want to be in the band. Please make this storm go away.' "

Ten minutes later, Gilbert says, the storm "just stopped. And I went over to Mom. I went, 'No wind.' "

"So now, she's in a really tough spot," he laughs.

So they got in the car and drove to school, Gilbert explains. "And there's all these new, shiny instruments. And the parents are just writing checks out. And my mom looks at one of the checks — it's like, 650 bucks. That's six weeks worth of work for my dad.

"So she says, 'Where's the band director? Donde esta el director?' So we went in, and the man said, 'Well, a senior left behind this trombone.' "

It wasn't a saxophone. It wasn't shiny. And it had "a bit of green rust around it," Gilbert says. "And he opens [the case], and the crushed velvet is no longer crushed — it's like, annihilated inside. And I'm just looking at it going, 'That is so pathetic.' "

The director wanted \$50 for the old trombone, so Gilbert's mother worked out a payment plan, sending \$20 initially, then \$5 each week.

"But I was horrible," Gilbert says. "I sat on the toilet in the bathroom, because it was the only room that had a door. And my poor mother had to listen to me play the same thing, over and over again. And she would be turning up the radio as loud as she could," he laughs. "But I also noticed that, the more I practiced and the better I got, the radio was turned down a little further. And I still have that trombone to this day." And that's why the couple's daughter plays the trombone today, says Pat, laughing.

"She could have played any instrument she wanted, and I encouraged that," Gilbert insists. "I said, 'No, mi hija [my daughter]. Really, you can play any instrument you want. I could be one of those parents who could write a check out for a saxophone — anything you want.' "

But Gilbert's daughter knew her mind. As Gilbert describes it, she just said, "No, I want to play the trombone."

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Checking for Understanding

1. What character trait(s) does Gilbert Zermeno possess? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
2. Why does Gilbert Zermeno's daughter play the trombone? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Vocabulary

- annihilated
- initially
- undeterred

<http://www.npr.org/2013/06/21/193973081/for-a-boy-with-little-learning-to-love-a-cast-off-trombone>