

CHAPTER 7

Bitten by the Trumpet

"Know who you are and dress accordingly."

- Dr. Mike Gervais

Some people spend their entire life trying to find their passion. Mine consumed me during my junior year in high school. I knew with great clarity what I wanted to do for the next *forty* years of my life. Forty was a significant number because I later found out that the maximum number of years you could serve in the armed forces right out of high school is forty. I wanted to spend my life making music in the U.S. Military. My drive and vision became clear immediately after the U.S. Air Force Jazz Band, Airmen of Note from Dayton, Ohio, came and played a concert at Liberty High School. There was only one black trumpet player in the band and his sound was big and brassy. I was awestruck. He made what he did representing the U.S. Air Force around the world both intriguing and inviting. I sensed that he was not operating for his own self-gratification. Instead, it was like he viewed his role as an honor and privilege to represent his country.

As the concert was nearing a close, the band leader asked the students for final song requests. Several students shouted, play the "Sesame Street" theme song. Based upon the crowd's unanimous decision, the band agreed. The band leader provided a disclaimer that they had never practiced it before, but he was willing to give it a try.

At that moment, with the flawless version of the “Sesame Street” theme, as performed by the famous Maynard Ferguson and his orchestra blaring in my head, I set my sights on plans to make it where the sole black trumpet player was in life. I made a decision to do whatever it took to get into the U.S. military band program to serve this country doing what I loved more than anything - playing the trumpet and making great music. My only challenge was to prove to the military that despite my rare genetic disorder, I was strong and able-bodied enough to pass any physical, and intelligent enough to pass any written test they threw at me.

Never one to waste time, while the Air Force Band was still on stage and bowing for their second standing ovation, I went straight to the band room to imitate the life-changing performance I just saw. It was as if I was watching a musical magician. The black trumpet player performed something I had never seen done live. During a ballad, he played two trumpets at once, with each trumpet playing different notes and rhythms at the same time. Besides the minimal light backing of the band behind him, he was almost accompanying himself.

I spent the next few minutes in the band room with my trumpet and a school-owned old cornet. I tried to play them both simultaneously as I had just witnessed moments before. I had very little luck with getting much of a buzz out of either instrument. I tried a few more times and the sound equated to nothing good. I took a deep breath and convinced myself to try one more time. Just as I blew the cornet, the magician trumpet player, along with a few other Air Force band members walked through the band room because it was connected to the school auditorium. They

chuckled when they saw me and pointed to the trumpet player, “See, look what you did!” as they strolled through to their bus out back. That brief encounter became one of the most memorable moments in my life.

From that day on, graduating from high school could not happen soon enough. My entire junior and senior year were centered around going straight into service with the U.S. Military as a musician. An even bigger challenge that I did not foresee was that my mother did not want any part of military service for me. She wanted me to finish college first. She did not believe the military pitch that I could just play the trumpet. She said, “you can’t be in the military and just play trumpet for Uncle Sam! They’re tricking you and you will have to carry a gun!” To appease her and stop the banter which went on for a few weeks, I caved in, “Ok mom, you win. I’m going to college.” I was still determined to go into the military. I just carved out a temporary detour. Even though I later found out that she was right. After basic training, everyone has to be assigned to some form of duty requiring using a gun, other weapons and being adequately prepared for war. At 17 years old you really think you know more than your parents. I was extremely naive and blinded by the magnitude and prestige of playing trumpet for the U.S. military.

Either way, I still had to focus on my music, so I was involved in three different bands simultaneously. I played for my high school band, and two other community bands: The Warren Junior Military Band and the Stambaugh Youth Concert Band. I also

played trumpet for many churches in the area. On some Sundays, I played at three different churches, for three different denominations all on the same day.

I also dressed for my role as a band member. I never wore clothes that were less than business casual. I eliminated all jeans and shorts from my closet. This was all influenced by the many music professionals I was surrounded by in all the bands I played. They said, "Don't wait until you get older to be a teacher, a scientist, or whatever you want to be. Do it now! Act the part, learn what someone did to get there and do it!" I constantly tell my students to take steps toward their future today. There will never be a perfect time to start; tomorrow is not promised to anyone!

"You can't have change without process."

I was doing the college thing against my will and I only applied to *one* school down the road from my house. I admit, the college process was challenging, as I had no guidance from counselors at school. I knew music was what I wanted to study and the best and one of the oldest music schools in the country was a mere 3.2 miles away from my home; Youngstown State University (YSU) Dana School of Music. The campus was literally a 5K run from high school. The school's close proximity to home certainly made my mother happy.

I was blessed to have Dr. Christopher Krummel as a trumpet teacher in high school. He gave me trumpet lessons during my junior year, and into my senior year. He was the trumpet professor at YSU. Dr. Krummel began preparing me for the audition to gain acceptance into the music school. I met with him for months, once a week for free

lessons during the evenings after school. He guided me through the process of applying to both parts of the school. I did not realize that there was a two-step admission process: I had to apply academically and be admitted into the university first, and then audition for entry into the music program. I was accepted into both programs and received a partial academic scholarship. Looking back, it was all part of my predetermined life's journey. I never gave a second thought that I would not be admitted to YSU, so I did not have a back-up college or alternative plan. My confidence and determination to succeed despite the odds are what keeps me moving forward to the next goal and has made me tougher with each step.