

A Musical Gift

Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.

~Anthony J. D'Angelo

From my small apartment, the tune of “Good King Wenceslas” blared from my son’s shiny brass trumpet. My eight-year-old son, Jimmy, was practicing for his first Christmas concert in the school orchestra. Jimmy is autistic, and his music teacher recommended he play an instrument to improve his attention span. He had noticed his musical aptitude.

The cost of the trumpet was steep for me, but by carefully budgeting and cutting coupons, I was able to make the monthly payment. No sacrifice was too great to help my son improve his skills.

School was difficult for Jimmy. He’d often get lost on the way to and from the building. Sometimes, he would mentally withdraw during class to escape from difficult social demands, typical of kids on the autism spectrum. He had special accommodations in the classroom to help keep him on target, including a personal aide.

The Christmas of 1998 was going to be lean as usual. I had been a single parent for the past few years, and my income had been drastically reduced since my divorce. Money became even tighter when I was laid off earlier that fall.

I was good at making do with what we had. We had seen hard times before. To cut costs, I packaged homemade cookie gifts in decorative tin canisters that I had been collecting throughout the year. My freezer was packed full of cherries, which Jimmy and I had picked in the summertime from my mother’s orchard. Mom lived nearby, and we visited her farm home often. Putting Mom’s cherries to good use, I made pies for gifts. Focusing on the true meaning of Christmas, I thanked God for everything he had blessed us with—my parents, friends, and Jimmy’s music. My

mother had given me a few toys she picked up so I would have gifts for Jimmy on Christmas morning. I was truly grateful. While most people enjoyed the rush of Christmas shopping, I was content to make do with what I had.

The smell of warm vanilla and sugar filled my apartment as I frosted the last batch of cookies. And then the phone rang. I licked the buttercream icing from my fingers before reaching for the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Jagow?”

“Yes, this is Ms. Jagow.”

“This is the collections department attempting to collect payment for your son’s trumpet.”

The instrument was almost paid off, but I had gotten behind in payments since losing my job.

“Ahh... how much is the current payment?” I inquired.

“You would need \$100 to make your account current,” she explained.

It might as well have been \$1,000 because I didn’t have it. My heart sank as I thought of having to take from my son the only source of motivation he had for going to school.

“Well, you see... I lost my job and have not been able to keep up with the payments. Will you accept a smaller amount until I can get caught up?” I asked.

“No, ma’am,” the woman said firmly. “If the \$100 is not paid in full, we will have to repossess the trumpet.”

I hesitated a moment. “That would be just awful as my son loves playing, and music gives him a reason to go to school.” I sighed. “You see, he is autistic, and school is very trying for him.”

The tone of the conversation shifted. “What is his music teacher’s name?” the woman asked.

“Mr. Volpe,” I answered, somewhat confused by her inquiry.

“And the school I have listed here is Starpoint Central,” she went on.

Was she going to send someone out to the school to get the trumpet? Then the woman asked if I would wait on hold.

Several minutes later, the woman came back. “Ms. Jagow? I just spoke with your son’s music teacher, and he tells me your son is quite talented.

Please accept the trumpet as a gift from us.”

I hesitated a moment. Did I hear her correctly? “You can consider the trumpet paid in full,” she reassured me. “Merry Christmas!”

As I hung up, tears of gratitude fell from my eyes.

The evening of Jimmy’s first school concert performance finally arrived shortly before Christmas. My mother accompanied me to the show. The curtain opened, and Jim proudly walked out on stage with the rest of the band, his treasured trumpet in hand. Nervously, I twisted my purse strap around my hand as I wondered if he would remain focused and follow the bandleader’s directions. Musically, he had a good ear, could read notes and had a good sense of rhythm. However, he was unable to follow the direction of his classroom teacher without the help of his aide.

The conductor raised his baton, cuing the band. All eyes were on the conductor; mine were on Jimmy as I watched with anticipation. The band broke into a rendition of “Sleigh Ride,” with Jimmy following along in perfect time. Gabriel himself couldn’t have sounded more beautiful to me in that moment. My mother and I, wiping tears of joy from our eyes, sat back and enjoyed the show. The band continued with many familiar Christmas classics, one after another, and Jimmy didn’t miss a beat.

Many Christmases have passed since then—some more abundant than others. But I will always treasure the gift of music my son and I both received the Christmas of 1998.

Now, twenty years later, I am looking forward to attending Jimmy’s Christmas concert at Berklee College of Music.

—Lori Carpenter Jagow—