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GILBERT ORTEGA
The Story of the Man Behind the Name
by Patricia Bezunartea
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A real-life southwestern saga that shines with irresistible spirit, the memoir of the late Gilbert Ortega is an inspiration to anyone who has ever aspired to follow their dream

It took many years for Gilbert Ortega to come full circle from his humble beginnings in the family's Route 66 trading post to establishing his sophisticated Native American galleries in Scottsdale. And it wasn't easy. Ortega's rags to riches story is packed full of pioneer spirit, adventure, ingenuity and struggle, showing his perseverance and burning desire to succeed against all odds.

A fourth-generation Arizonan born in Holbrook in 1936, Ortega's fascinating story provides a glimpse into another era and recreates a nostalgic history of the region. As a youngster in the 1940s growing up at the family trading post—in the midst of the Navajo reservation in Lupton, Ariz.—he pumped gas with his brothers, and he learned to work in the store. He loved basketball, guitar and country music. He started a band in high school and dreamed of recording in Nashville, a goal he achieved many years later. At 21, he was married and pursued his own trading post dreams. By 1959, he was broke. His car was repossessed, and he and his wife and their four small children had to live with his mother-in-law in Gallup, N.M. All he had left was his Indian Trader's license.

Failure was a strong teacher, and after a few years of endless hard work and limitless perseverance, in 1966, he built an improvised highway store off of a new stretch of I-40 and marked a fresh beginning. Harder work brought him further success, and he added two more highway stores and filled them with even more souvenirs and Indian jewelry. Then, raising his expectations, he opened a wholesale operation in Gallup in the early 1970s and profited from the best time the Indian arts and crafts business had ever seen.

He became unstoppable. Like a turquoise tornado, he opened stores all over the West. Then, he sold his chain in 1977 and recorded an album in Nashville. But the business he loved called to him, and he concentrated his efforts in the Phoenix-Scottsdale area. There, he challenged his creativity and merchandising skills to the maximum and his work ethic led him to the pinnacle of success becoming a premier Native American art dealer.

Gilbert Ortega Family Publications

Ortega spent the year prior to his death telling his story to Scottsdale writer, Patricia Bezunartea. He died September 30, 2003, at 67, from complications of diabetes. After his death, the author and Ortega's family worked to produce the book that had been his final wish. The hardcover 8 ½ x 11 memoir showcases numerous photos—from Arizona Territory to modern-day Scottsdale. It also includes a CD of Ortega's country music album "The King of Indian Jewelry Goes Country," that was recorded in Nashville in 1977.