

# sacconnects

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## ZORO the drummer

A Christmas gift from The Salvation Army set the stage for his career.



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Zoro, a legendary drummer, received his first drum set on Christmas morning from The Salvation Army.

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**THE BEAT**

**OUR  
MIND**

by ROBERT MITCHELL

The musician known as “Zoro the Drummer” is one of the most famous percussionists in the world, but his long career in the music business might never have happened without The Salvation Army.

Zoro, who has drummed for some of the music industry’s biggest acts, including New Edition, grew up in a family of poor Mexican immigrants. He guesses the family moved 30 times as his single mother, Maria, struggled to raise seven children on her own.

He was just 10 years old when his family moved from the rough streets of Compton, Calif., to the small mountain town of Grants Pass, Ore., in April 1971. Zoro was still going through culture shock eight months later, and his mother wanted to make his Christmas special. She went to the local Salvation Army and signed up for Zoro to receive a Mickey Mouse toy drum set, which he had seen in the Sears catalogue for \$9.99.

The young Zoro still wasn’t sure if he would get anything that Christmas until Salvation Army officers showed up with presents for him and his siblings. The Mickey Mouse drum set was among the

bag of goodies.

“That drum set is what got me started,” Zoro recalls. “It’s what got me excited about drumming. I remember destroying it pretty quickly because it was only made of paper heads, but it was enough to connect me to my destiny. From that point on, I wanted to join the school band and play the drums because I was ignited by that Christmas.”

However, stardom seemed like a long-shot at the time. When the family moved to Oregon, five members of Zoro’s family lived in a 1962 Chevy Nova. The family later acquired a tent and then a 13-foot camper, but they had no running water or electricity and lived on a small parcel of land.

Zoro and his family also experienced racism in Oregon and often scrounged through charity drop-boxes just to find clothing.

“You could say it was a pretty tough and challenging upbringing, but God had a plan for my life and used all of it to make me who I am today,” Zoro says. “Mine is like ‘Rudy,’ ‘Rocky,’ ‘Forrest Gump,’ ‘The Blind Side’ kind of story.”

### A prodigy discovered

Despite the poverty, Zoro said he felt God’s presence “as far back as I can remember.” His mother made sure the family attended Catholic churches in Compton, but a group of young 1970s “Jesus freaks” known as “The Shilohs” befriended the family in Oregon and let them take showers. A Baptist pastor would pick up Zoro and his family to attend church.

“When I look back on my life, no matter how difficult or rough it was, God sent people with the Father’s heart all along the way. It was full of hardship, but full of the faithfulness of God too,” he said.

Zoro tried many times to get into the music program at Jerome Prairie Elementary and Lincoln Savage Junior High in Grants Pass, but he was turned away and told there were already too many drummers. He soon landed a job as a custodian at his high school, where he also cleaned the band room when no one else was there.

“I could do it really fast and I always left myself 10 minutes to just jump on the drums,” Zoro recalls. “I was just sort of daydreaming while playing on the drums. God had given me an ability to play from the word go without any instruction. I could already play. I wasn’t great, but I had the rhythm. I could hear the beats, and I had some natural talent.”

One day during his sophomore year, the band director caught him jamming. Zoro thought he would be fired, but the director went to get another teacher to hear him drum some more.

“They looked at each other, and the band director said, ‘You’ve got a musical gift, kid. We could use you in various bands.’ I was discovered as the janitor at my high school,” he said.

Zoro worked two summer jobs—16 hours

**The set that started it all:** At age 10, Zoro received a drum set just like this one for Christmas from The Salvation Army. It was the spark that eventually led to a long and successful career as a musician.



a day—before his junior year and bought his first professional drum set for \$1,500. He also took some drumming lessons.

“I came back to school with my new drum set and was ready to do this,” he said. “From the moment I started, I just felt like this is what I’m going to do.”

### Hitting it big

While growing up, Zoro listened to rock music by such artists as Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, and the Doors, but he also enjoyed R&B, jazz, big band, Latin, and fusion. His early musical influences included several Motown acts such as The Supremes, The Temptations, Four Tops, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, Diana Ross, and Aretha Franklin. His mother also made sure he heard other great vocalists like Tony Bennett, Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, Doris Day, and Frank Sinatra, who he saw in concert as a child and called it “life-changing.”

Zoro’s mother also introduced him to mariachi, a genre of regional Mexican music.

“I pretty much heard everything, and that had a big influence on me before I played one note, because I heard all that different kind of music—and I loved it all. I still do.”

Zoro moved to Eugene, Ore., in 1980. After graduating from high school there, he joined a band with aspirations of being the house band at Disneyland. While his band didn’t get the gig, the move left him in the Los Angeles area, and family urged him to take advantage of the opportunity.

“I felt like the Lord gave me this idea, and I went to the lawn of Beverly Hills High School and just started jamming,” Zoro says. “I thought I would get noticed cranking Earth, Wind & Fire on my boom box. I would go there and just jam each day. I just kept going to the school every day as if I was a student. No one knew I wasn’t.”

Zoro soon met Kennedy Gordy, the son of Berry Gordy, the founder of the Motown record label that represented many of the artists he listened to as a child. He also met Lenny Kravitz, who he would later play drums behind. The two also became lifelong friends.



**More than a musician:** In addition to being an accomplished, internationally recognized drummer, Zoro is also an author, motivational speaker, and one of the pastors for Bayside Church, a megachurch in Northern California. For more information, go to: [zorothedrummer.com](http://zorothedrummer.com).

He stayed in Los Angeles and was recommended for other big gigs. By 1983, he was performing for Phillip Bailey of Earth, Wind & Fire and other Motown acts. His big break came in 1985 when he auditioned for New Edition, a group he called the “Jackson Five of the ‘80s.”

“That’s when my ship really came in, because they were huge,” Zoro says. “Soon I was playing at Madison Square Garden and all over the world with Bobby Brown.”

### Why the name Zoro?

Over the years, Zoro has also toured and recorded with Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, Jody Watley, Sean Lennon, Philip Bailey, Lisa Marie Presley, and many others. He also has been honored by several drumming magazines, including Drum! and Modern Drummer, the latter naming him the No. 1 R&B drummer in the world.

The drum magazines often highlight Zoro’s persona. His real name is Danny

Donnelly, but he explains that the nickname comes from his days in Compton, when friends would encourage him at age 7 to go into stores and steal. Not wanting to be recognized, he would don a black plastic mask. Being of Mexican descent, Zoro related to the fictional character, though he spells it differently.

“I felt like the real Zorro, robbing from the rich to give to the poor,” he said. “I felt I was like him because I always had a heart for the underdog.”

When Zoro landed with New Edition, the name and image stuck. He wore a Mexican bolero hat, and it caught the attention of popular teen and drumming magazines, where he was often featured despite being a backup musician.

“Because of my persona and my name and my image, it caught on and I became very much a celebrity of my own,” he said.

He’s toured as a musician for more than three decades and, while he admits he

didn't always lead a perfect life, Zoro didn't indulge in the negative excesses of the music industry like so many others.

"I was never attracted to drugs and drinking," he said. "To this day, I've never been drunk or high in my life. It wasn't anything for me to resist. I grew up so poor that the idea of throwing away any money seemed foolish to me. I was trying to build something in my life."

#### Music and ministry

While he shared the stage with household names, Zoro said the only place he has ever found fulfillment is in Christ. He has watched other famous musicians put their trust in fame, their careers, health, and politics, but nothing ever seemed to satisfy. Nothing filled the spiritual void in their lives—or his.

"Christ is the only thing that really has any significant meaning," Zoro says. "Life is very fleeting. You're here one minute and gone tomorrow, and nothing has any lasting value that we put our hope and trust in other than Him. The only thing that has any real depth or that makes my life full and purposeful is my closeness to Christ.

"Christ is everything. I have a lot of peace in my life, even though I live in a world that has no peace. It gives me peace, because for all the things I don't understand, I put my trust in Him."

Zoro the man is a lot more than an accomplished musician. He is also an author, motivational speaker, and serves as a pastor at a California megachurch. He sees himself as an amalgamation of several Bible characters by expressing the heart of David as a minstrel and worshiper, John the Baptist's evangelistic fervor, Paul's teaching ability, and the encouragement of Barnabas.

"I'm all of them in different seasons, and, on different days, I use different gifts," he says. "They've all opened different doors and allowed me to reach different people. God has wired me to be all of them.

"As a kid, God gave me the dream of being a drummer, a preacher, a speaker, and a teacher. I've been doing all of those things for a majority of my adult life."

Known in the music business as the

**"MINISTRY  
HAS  
ALWAYS  
CO-EXISTED  
WITH  
MY MUSIC."**

"Minister of Groove," Zoro ministers to young married couples at Bayside Church, which boasts several locations in Northern California. He and his wife, Renne, have attended Bayside for three years. The couple, married for 26 years, has two children, who are both serving Christ.

#### Everyone has a gift

It's also not uncommon to see Zoro speaking, teaching, and drumming in the praise band, featuring Christian musician Lincoln Brewster. The work is nothing new for Zoro, who has been ministering independently for 30 years, speaking at churches, conferences, seminars, and even prisons.

"I would be on tour with Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons and then, on an off night I'd be speaking at a church," Zoro said. "Ministry has always co-existed with my music."

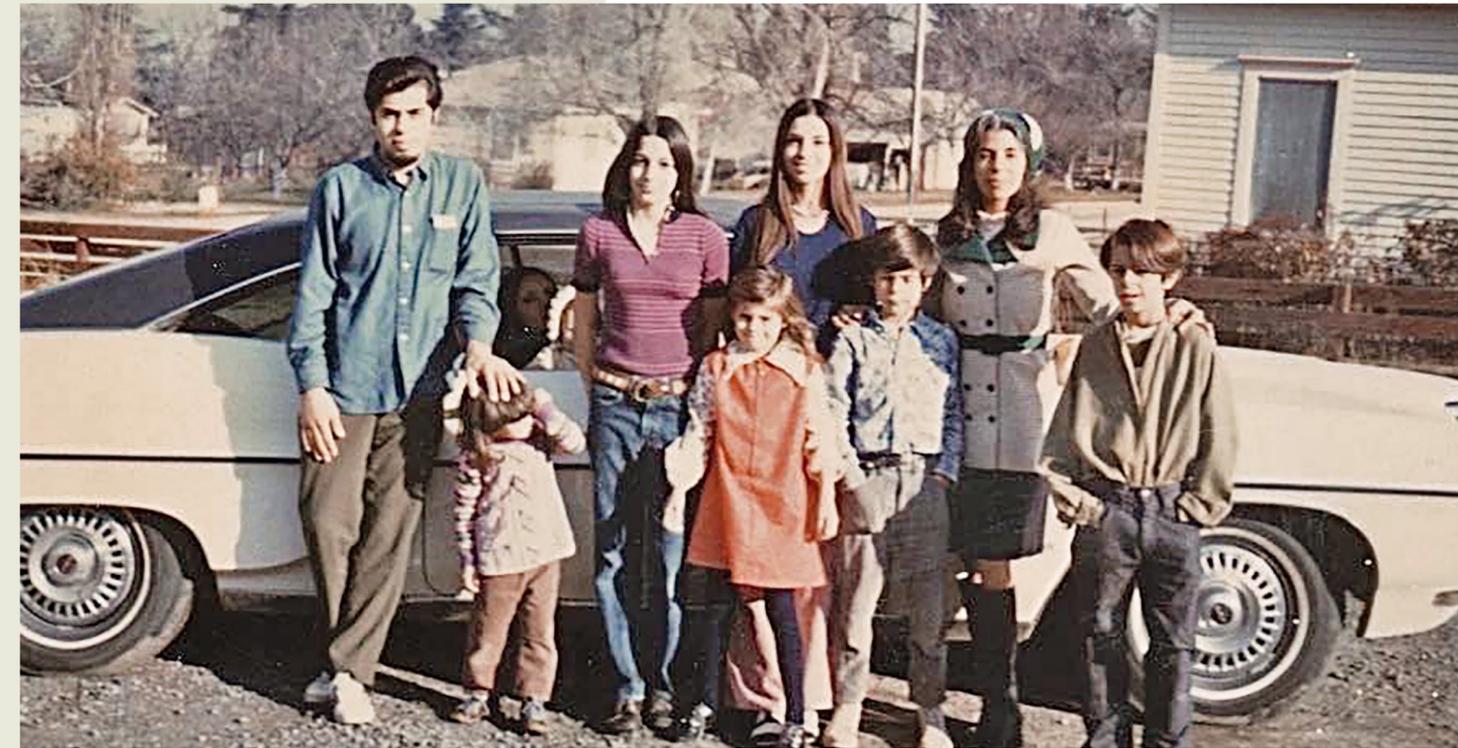
Zoro over the years has led countless people to Christ and given away Christian books, including one of his own: *Soar! 9 Proven Keys for Unlocking Your Limitless Potential*. His speaking follows a similar theme and is one of Zoro's passions.

"How do you take the gifts God gave you and develop them and use them for God? It's really about discovering your gifts and developing your gifts, so you deploy your gifts for God," he said. "It's why we're here."

Zoro said he usually shows slides from his past and tells his story when he speaks.

"That's always going to come out of me," he said. "The burning message in my heart is to equip people to reach their potential. There are many people who want to reach their potential and calling, but they just don't know how. Every preacher or speaker kind of has a burning message that lives within them. That's mine.

"I always talk about purpose, about identity, and using your gifts to make a difference. I've always been very practical and pragmatic, so I know how to do it, because the Lord has shown me these things throughout my life. I share the hardship of my life and how to have vision and tenacity and perseverance and to push through to develop what God has given you. It's always been in my heart to help people find Jesus,



**Tough and challenging beginnings:** As Mexican immigrants, Zoro (far right), his mother, and his six siblings were forced to move frequently. Sometimes they lived in a tent, in a camper, and even out of their car. For more on Zoro's story, visit: [zoroministries.org](http://zoroministries.org).

and through my story, to find hope that you never count yourself out. God always has a plan, even through the darkest stages. My life is literally an impossibility."

#### Coming full circle

In fact, Zoro said he has been reminded of his past and God's provision many times in his life.

During one speaking engagement several years ago in Oregon, Zoro told the story of a pastor who had bought him shoes when he was a boy and sent him to Camp Canby Grove. When Zoro had finished speaking, the engagement organizers told him the camp was two minutes away and asked if he wanted to go. When they arrived, he saw that the rustic camp looked much like it did back in the day.

"When I entered that same sanctuary, I had this overwhelming sense of God's hand on my life from the very beginning," Zoro says. "That's where I officially walked to the altar and invited Christ into my heart. I felt an overwhelming sense of God. I felt my life had come full circle. That's where the journey began. I guess you could say He sort of called me out."

Zoro feels the same way when he looks back to that Christmas in 1971. His family has found several photos of that visit by The Salvation Army, but no one took a shot of Zoro with his drum set. A few years ago, his brother found the exact vintage drum set on eBay and bought it for Zoro.

"I'm very nostalgic," Zoro said. "It's something I still have in my office. That shows you how important it was to me."

Zoro said The Salvation Army earned a special place in his heart, and he

thinks people sometimes forget what the organization's name actually means.

"Sometimes you hear a name so much you don't even remember what it is because it's a common phrase, but it's The Salvation Army," Zoro says. "They're about the business of Jesus, and they're about the business of God through what they do. There are no words to properly show my gratitude for just what they've done for millions of people as an organization and how they've lived out the calling of the Gospel.

"The benevolent work they do to help society and to help the underprivileged and to bring the gospel to people is unprecedented."

Zoro says he would love to reconnect with The Salvation Army by speaking at events as he does with Big Brothers Big Sisters, another organization that helped him as a child.

"I would welcome the opportunity," Zoro says "I would be very open to that. I usually open up with a big rousing drum solo and then I go into my story. I think the tie-in with my first drum set being a gift from The Salvation Army, and then me playing the drums at a Salvation Army event, I think that's another full circle moment that has to happen." 🖤