

# A Trusty Campus Tree Lives On In Song

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## Trusty Campus Tree Lives On In Song



From a familiar campus chestnut tree to elegant guitar, Professor Elias Perez transform rough timber into the smooth tones and timbre of plucked guitar strings.

For decades, about two-dozen chestnut trees grew in a row in front of the Price campus along 400 East. They bloomed magnificent pink flowers with burgundy leaves every spring semester; by fall semester, hundreds of spiny-brown chestnuts littered and spattered all over the sidewalks.

As time passed, some of the trees died, while others were replaced by the construction of new buildings. The last two trees were removed when construction of the Central Instruction Building started in the spring of 2014.

Utah State University Eastern associate professor, Elias Perez, loved those trees and understood their history and connection to the college campus. When the final two trees came down, he asked if he could have the wood.

He was given permission to remove the wood and hauled it to his house to dry. His goal was to have a guitar made when the new building was completed over the

next 14 months. The guitar was finished just in time for the building dedication and Kris Krompel played it during the opening ceremonies of the CIB in October 2015.

### Guitar-making class

Perez taught a guitar-making class until 2010 when all of the CEU distance education classes were dropped due to the merger with Utah State University. "I taught the class in Carbon High School's woodshop every Thursday evening so it really did not cost the college very much. I had 12 students and that's really all I could handle, so I never understood why this fun class was dropped."

After the class was cancelled, Perez told his students he would continue meeting with them every Thursday night until their guitars were finished. "I even told the university I would teach the class for free if they would continue offering it.

"The students loved the class so much that they kept making more guitars plus recruiting more students to attend the 'unofficial' class," he said. He's been offering the class the past six years gratis.

Just how popular is the class? Steve Carlson, superintendent of the Carbon School District, made a guitar. Robert Cox, human relations for the school district, made eight guitars and Wes Thompson, a faculty member at the Lighthouse, made one for himself, one for his daughter and one for his brother. Lou Korenko, former county building inspector made four guitars and continues to work on new ones. The Wayne and Jeanette Parker families made guitar-building a family affair with their son and grandson joining their team.

### Learning the craft

One of the first photos Perez remembers of himself is when he was 2 years old. He is holding a flute with his aunt holding the back of his collar to help him stand. He asked his dad to buy him a guitar at 8, but did not get one until he was 11 or 12.

"My dad gave me my first guitar lesson," he said. "I found I could hear the notes and played by ear from the start. I could listen to a song on the radio and come home and play every note. I visualize songs before I play them."

This worked out perfectly for Perez, except he never learned how to read music. "I still cannot read music to this day," he smiled. "I can hear every note and play it without looking at a sheet of music."

## Moving to the U.S.

He was born in Mexico, earned his bachelor's degree at Benemerito de las Americas in education and moved to the United States to attend the College of Eastern Utah where he planned to learn English and run track.

"One of my first classes was a music class from Derral Siggurd. He gave me a sheet of music to memorize and I took it home. I listened to the music and came back the next day and played it for Mr. Siggurd without ever learning how to read music. I guess I am good at faking reading music because I passed the class," Perez smiled. "However, I still wish I could read music."

He had his credits from Mexico translated through the U.S. Office of Education and took classes from Brigham Young University and USU in order to earn the recency credits needed to teach in the state of Utah. He eventually earned his master's degree from Western Governor's University.

Perez stayed in Carbon County and worked for Joy Manufacturing for nine years as an electrical machinist. "I was doing something I had not planned on doing and was unhappy so I got my teaching endorsement recertified and took a job at Carbon High School."

He taught woodworking, drafting and Spanish off and on for 14 years and accepted work as an adjunct machine shop instructor at CEU in 1993. In 2002, he left the high school and taught computer-aided drafting at the college and Spanish and machine shop when needed.

## Becoming a luthier

He always wanted to learn how to build guitars so one day he stopped by a luthier's shop (a person that builds and repairs stringed instruments) in his native Mexico. "Apparently luthiers don't like to divulge their secrets because the owner closed and locked his workshop doors when I asked him questions about his craft," he said.

Not giving up, Perez found a luthier named Paul Hart in Mt. Pleasant. "I met with Paul and he had a breadth of knowledge about the craft," he said. "Paul showed me his shop, tools and explained his secrets including how to create the finishes on the instrument. I could have spent months talking with Paul, he is that knowledgeable."

"Rodney Scott, another teacher at Carbon High, makes guitars so I asked him a lot of question," Perez said. "I bought books, watched videos and read papers on how to make guitars. "I researched scientific journals on how

to get perfect acoustics in a guitar and found one needs a math and physic's background to figure this aspect out," he said. "How the plates vibrate to make the sound is simply another amazing field."

He is always tweaking the guitars he makes. "I think I can change this and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't," he said. "I use better materials now. I'm improving at figuring out the bracing patterns; these patterns make the sound and the tone of the guitar better; the highs remain high and the lows remain low. There is no merging of sounds. It's just crystal clear."

Perez is always experimenting with the construction of the guitar using thicker or thinner sides and backs or bending the sides just right in order to create the perfect sound. When he made the guitar from the USU Eastern chestnut tree, he let the wood cure, cut it thin and ordered the top wood from a spruce tree in Sitka, Alaska. "Wood from Alaska gets expensive because shipping is \$90 and the wood is \$180."

Another wood often used on the sides and backs of a guitar is Brazilian Rosewood that is getting rare. The wood is in high demand and there's low availability of it. A good guitar made of quality wood can costs upwards of \$7,000 or more, he said.

He spends 80-100 hours making one guitar and it's strictly a hobby for Perez who has finished 24-plus guitars.

On occasion, Perez sells a guitar. A few years ago he made a deal with his son. If his son sold one of his Brazilian Rosewood guitars online, they would split the money. His son was getting married and needed money to buy a ring for his fiancée. His son worked hard, sold the guitar and it was shipped to England. His son brought a wedding ring with his half of the proceeds and got married.

Most people store their cars in garages, not Perez. He customized his garage into his woodshop so he can work on projects 24/7. He is constantly searching for wood to make not only guitars, but other instruments including violins, cuatros, charangos (10-string South American instruments), flutes and quenenas, African drums and Irish hammer-dulcimers.

"There's no perfect guitar anywhere, just good and excellent ones," he said. "I'm always looking for flawless notes that have distinctive sounds. Each string retains its own personality and that is what I am creating in my guitars."

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When Perez is not teaching or building guitars, he is playing and singing in a band he has been a part of for 25 years called Los Hermanos de los Andes. “Three of the band members are from Chile, two from Bolivia and myself from Mexico,” he said. “We’re all friends and have performed at UVU, BYU, U of U, BYU Hawaii, Snow College, USU, Latin festivals and other events . . . basically all over the western United States.”

~ *Susan Polster*