

INSPIRED LIFE

# He died before seeing every MLB field. His sons completed his mission.

U.S. Air Force Col. Erick Gilbert and his family had visited 28 of the 30 MLB stadiums when he died in January 2020.



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In 2019, the Gilbert family visited Nationals Park, one of the last stadiums they saw as a family of four before U.S. Air Force Col. Erick Gilbert died unexpectedly in 2020. (Photo courtesy of the Gilbert family)

It was a first pitch Dane Gilbert and his late father had dreamed of since the teenager's T-ball days.

Dane stood on the pitcher's mound at the Miami Marlins' stadium earlier this month and threw the first pitch as the team prepared to take on the Cleveland Guardians.

The stadium was one of 30 that U.S. Air Force Col. Erick Gilbert had set out to visit with his family nearly a decade ago. Erick had proposed that seeing every MLB field would be a good way for the family to bond before Dane, his elder son, turned 18 and headed off to college.

But the Gilberts only made it to 28 fields before Dane's father died unexpectedly in January 2020, at the age of 43.

For years, the idea of visiting the last two stadiums after Erick's sudden death was unimaginable for Dane, his younger brother and their mom. Then, this season, a program that assists military families organized the Gilberts' last two trips — to the Tampa Bay Rays' Tropicana Field and the Marlins' LoanDepot Park — just weeks before Dane's 18th birthday.

Dane — alongside his brother, Chase — stepped up to the mound on June 9. He wore a white Marlins jersey that had been signed by players, with "Gilbert" across the back above the number 30, marking the completion of their dad's dream.

Under the stadium's bright lights, the brothers threw out dual honorary first pitches.

"That was where we felt him the most, right there," Dane told The Washington Post.

The Gilberts have loved baseball as long as they can remember.

Erick, who was raised in Southern California as a Los Angeles Angels fan, coached Dane and Chase through their Little League games, signing them up for sports teams as soon as they were old enough.

Though Dane doesn't remember those early games, family photos show Erick bonding with his boys over baseball at an early age. One photo shows him and Dane behind the fence of the field, Erick holding a baseball glove and wearing a maroon jersey and cap to match his son's uniform. Another shows Erick crouched beside Chase on the diamond, his arm around his son as he gives a pep talk.



Erick Gilbert coaches his younger son, Chase, during a baseball game. (Photo courtesy of the Gilbert family)



“He was just always willing to help,” Dane said of his father. “If I just wanted to go hit, he’d always come throw to me or he’d always go hit me groundballs at the local field.”

For the Gilberts, baseball games were a favorite family outing, whether Dane and Chase’s recreational games or major league playoffs. Dane still recalls talking to his father about what it would be like to walk through a major league team’s dugout or to stand in the dirt on a professional infield, he said.

Erick was about to deploy to the Middle East in 2014 with the Air Force’s 95th Fighter Squadron, when he proposed an idea to his sons and his wife, Kasia. They’d just watched the Atlanta Braves play at Turner Field, their last vacation before his deployment, when he said: “You know what would be really cool? We get to every major league ballpark before Dane turns 18,” Kasia recalled.

The question became how they would fit in the stadium visits around Erick’s deployments and training schedule. But Erick, a meticulous planner, took pen to paper.



Col. Erick Gilbert, then the 95th Fighter Squadron commander, opens the cockpit of the F-22 Raptor in 2014 at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Dustin Mullen)

He made a list of stadiums next to a U.S. map and began planning dates and routes for each visit. He marked each stadium with a symbol of a baseball glove holding a ball.

“I think he just wanted to do something that we’d always remember,” Dane said.

They began checking fields off during a 40-day road trip in 2016. The family made it to 17 stadiums on that vacation.

While Erick planned the trips, the rest of the family was tasked with other assignments. Chase scouted out the best ballpark food, Dane researched stadium history and tourist sites near each field, and Kasia captured photos and videos of it all, preserving each step of the family’s baseball pilgrimage.

Over the next three seasons, they found time between Erick’s assignments to see a dozen more stadiums. They usually cheered for the home team — unless Erick’s beloved Angels or the Kansas City Royals, Kasia’s family’s team, were playing.

Erick went on to serve as commander of the 95th Fighter Squadron, then vice commander of the 57th Wing, before the family moved to the D.C. area in 2019 for what would be his final assignment.

In Washington, they visited Nationals Park — one of the last stadiums they saw as a family of four. That year, the Nationals won the World Series.

Every visit to a new field felt just as fun as the last, the Gilberts said. They filled road trips with games of car bingo and sang along to personalized playlists. They collected hats, jerseys, tickets and other keepsakes from each stadium along the way.

Erick marked each visit on his handmade baseball map, which the family used as the basis for a framed canvas version, placing thumbtacks at the location of each field they’d visited.

By January 2020, the Gilberts only had two more to check off their list when he died suddenly.

Suddenly a trio, Kasia and her sons were left grief-stricken. Their stadium tour came to a standstill.

The Gilberts decided to leave Washington almost immediately and moved to Colorado, where they’d gone skiing every year. It was one of the last places they’d visited as a family.

Since 2020, they have found ways to honor Erick. Every Father’s Day, they’ve gone out for pizza or wings — his two favorite foods. They celebrate his birthday with trips to Top Golf and Dave and Buster’s, which were always his top picks.

But completing the 30-stadium tour felt so final, Kasia said. In a way, leaving the goal unfinished helped her hold on to a time when her husband was still with them, she said.

“I think it was a subconscious thing where I didn’t want to close another chapter,” she said.



Erick Gilbert with his sons, Chase (left) and Dane (right). (Kasia Gilbert)

But this season, as Dane’s 18th birthday loomed, the Gilberts knew Erick would have wanted them to finish.

Working with the Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors, a group known as TAPS that supports military families, they planned this month’s visits to the remaining Florida stadiums.

It was bittersweet but an “amazing tribute” to her husband, Kasia said.

“I feel like he was looking down and had a hand in that,” she said.

When they returned to Colorado, the Gilberts pressed the last two thumbtacks onto the canvas map of stadiums.

In the weeks since completing their dad’s dream, Dane and Chase have discussed what might come next. Someday, they want to take their own children to all the MLB stadiums, Dane said.

But in the meantime, he said the brothers are considering another idea: “Going to all the minor league stadiums.”