

# Woman Warrior

Starting a business helped Jennifer Gilbert heal from a near-fatal attack.

▶▶ **WHILE WORKING** for an event planner in Manhattan during the 1990s, Jennifer Gilbert saw an opportunity. In that post-recession era, corporations were reluctant to pay someone to plan their conferences and holiday parties, even though the companies were short-staffed and needed the help. Gilbert envisioned a business model in which clients didn't have to pay: Venues were desperate for business, so *they* would pay her to bring in events. At age 25, Gilbert launched Save the Date, an event-planning service that matched clients with event spaces and vendors.

But the young woman had a dark secret: About 2½ years before starting Save the Date, she had survived a random, near-fatal attack that scarred her physically and mentally.

Gilbert's zeal in growing her company was part work ethic, part self-preservation. Feeling she would never experience joy again, Gilbert surrounded herself with other people's happy moments. Within a few years of its launch, Save the Date was a multimillion-dollar business. Today Gilbert and her New York-based staff of 14 women plan roughly 1,000 events around the country every year for clients such as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Google and Disney. "I think I just stopped ramping up last year," Gilbert says with a laugh.

Work also was a refuge from her demons. "She's always been smart, creative, driven and a natural leader," says family and relationship therapist Laura Berman, Ph.D., Gilbert's best friend and host of *In the Bedroom with Dr. Laura Berman* on the Oprah Winfrey Network. "Where for a lot of people traumatic experiences might set them off-course, work in many ways became Jennifer's savior."

### The Attack

Nearly two years ago, Gilbert opened up about the attack in her memoir, *I Never Promised You a Goodie Bag*. She writes that on May 30, 1991—when she was

entering a friend's New York City apartment building—a stranger stabbed her with a screwdriver almost 40 times and left her for dead.

The emotional wounds ran deeper than the flesh-and-blood punctures, which remain as faint white lines on her body. Gilbert became depressed and grappled with questions like, *Why did he pick me?* and *What did I do to deserve this?* She recalls experiencing "a really, really hard time for a very long period."

Railing against the victim label, Gilbert decided to shut out the experience. In January 1992, she accepted a job with a small event-planning company in Manhattan and threw herself into her work. "I created this whole sort of new person, this new life," she says. "It wasn't even a year since my attack, and I literally put it in an emotional box. I never told anyone." For years Gilbert rarely spoke about the stabbing; her parents avoided the subject to spare her, and she did the same for their sake. The silence "brought shame onto me," she says, and caused harm that would be revealed years later.



On our CD and @ [SUCCESS.com/Rediscovering-Joy](http://SUCCESS.com/Rediscovering-Joy), Gilbert describes her attack and recovery.

With the lid clamped shut on her secret, Gilbert started Save the Date in 1994 and ran it alone for two years. "I was at my desk every day at 7 a.m., and I was out every night until 2—with clients, working the spaces, talking to the managers." Her recession-proof business model was practically an overnight success, so she soon had seven employees, all women in their mid-20s. Having no previous management experience, Gilbert felt insecure and gravitated toward a brusque style. Her laser focus meant she often skipped saying hello in the morning before rattling off questions and commands. "I felt like my fingers were in a dam, and if I let one emotion out in front of them, the whole dam would break."

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Between her family and her event-planning business, Jennifer Gilbert has a full, happy life.

That began to change in 1998, after she won Ernst & Young's "Entrepreneur of the Year" award. Standing onstage in front of 1,500 people, Gilbert saw her parents and employees, and it struck her that she was not alone: "I realized that these women wake up every day and come to work for me. I needed to come clean." After that, she held the company's first off-site meeting and finally discussed the attack with her employees.

Today her team describes a different Jennifer, one who's both hard and soft, business-minded and sensitive to their needs. "The environment she creates is pro-women," says event planner Ariana Stecker, who joined Save the Date last year as senior vice president for operations and business development.

### The Healing Process

Rebounding from depression and rediscovering joy came in stages for Gilbert, now 45. "It was kind of like shedding layers. Through a lot of these weddings, parties and other happy events that I did, I started to think, *When is it going to be my turn?* That helped me...." In 2002, she married and now has a 9-year-old daughter and 5-year-old twin boys.

But the attack's emotional scars resurfaced a few years ago. Gilbert had difficulty coping with her son Grey's alopecia, an otherwise harmless condition that made his hair fall out. Her daughter, then 5, tearfully confessed

she had broken the "rules" by talking about Grey's hair loss. Gilbert realized she was repeating the mistakes her family had made after her attack, so she held a family meeting on the spot to say that talking about Grey's condition was not taboo. At that moment, she experienced an epiphany: "We cannot control the things that may happen to us in life, but we can decide who we want to be afterward."

To fully let go, Gilbert went public with her story. Publishing her memoir exposed her secrets in uncomfortable ways. Gilbert had to tell people she had known for years that there was something, a *big* something, they didn't know about her. But the book also provided a platform for her to inspire young female entrepreneurs—sometimes women overcoming traumas similar to hers—over a cup of coffee or at speaking events such as Fordham University's Women in Business Leadership Day and the TEDxWomen conference at Barnard College.

She has plenty of knowledge to share.

Berman says Gilbert's resilience, drive and intellectual curiosity made her a survivor rather than a victim: "She used the experience to really push herself farther and gain a new lease on life."

And Gilbert's take: "We're not curing cancer and it's not brain surgery, but we're around people celebrating at the end of the day. We create joy, and that's beautiful." **S**