

“And You Present Me Wings”

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Several years ago one of our BYU performing groups was on tour in Riga, Latvia. As was customary, the students were assigned host families who would share their homes during the duration of our stay in that city.

Two young men were assigned to a non-member host “mom.” Despite the cultural and language barrier that existed between them and the limited time that they would be together, one of these young men felt a strong impression to share the gospel with his new friend. Even the concept of a Heavenly Father was new to her, but, somehow, with the help of the Spirit and an English-Russian dictionary, her heart and mind were opened to new ideas she could never have imagined, and she listened, learned, and believed. Several weeks later this young man received a beautiful letter from this sweet sister—written with the help of the same English-Russian dictionary—expressing her thanks and her belief in God. She concluded with these words: “I wasn’t know why or what for I lived and you present me wings.”

Now I’ve thought about that phrase a lot as I have watched hundreds of young performers go out from our campus each year to take a message of friendship and brotherhood to people all over the world. But today I would like to tell you a little about the performing

group that I have the privilege of directing: the BYU Living Legends.

The Living Legends is a unique group consisting of Native American, Latin American, and Polynesian students—descendants of the Lamanite people of the Book of Mormon.

Working closely with them for the last 15 years, I have come to love and respect these extraordinary students and their precious cultures. I am not at all surprised by the glorious prophecies that have been made concerning them during our day.

We read in the Doctrine and Covenants that “the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose” (D&C 49:24). President Spencer W. Kimball, a great friend of the Lamanites, said they would “rise in majesty and power” (CR, October 1947, 22), and he prophesied a future for them filled with culture, refinement, education, and positions of great leadership.

President Brigham Young said we should “look to see them like a flame of fire, a mighty rushing torrent, like the grand march of angels” (“A Sermon by President Brigham

Janielle Christensen was artistic director of BYU Living Legends when this devotional address was given on 2 August 2005.

Young,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 1, no. 8 (May 1890): 263; sermon by Brigham Young delivered on June 1, 1876, in St. George, Utah, on the occasion of his 76th birthday).

Seeing a “grand march of angels” is often what I feel I’m seeing as I travel with the Living Legends. These are students who dedicate their time and talents, often at great personal sacrifice, to carry forth the message of the Book of Mormon through the music, dance, and legends of their cultures.

Let me tell you about some of the times I have watched them “present wings” to people all over the world.

Due in great part, I am sure, to their ethnic diversity, the Living Legends had the remarkable yet challenging opportunity to take part in numerous activities during the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. In addition to performances at the Olympic Village and the Medals Plaza, they were featured in the opening ceremonies and, of course, the glorious production of *Light of the World* at the Conference Center.

It sounds glamorous, but in fact it meant months of long rehearsals and long bus rides between Provo and the Olympic venues in Salt Lake City. The last few weeks the students boarded buses at the Richards Building each school day at 4 p.m., returning at midnight. Saturdays started at 8 a.m. and lasted far into the evening as well.

Along with this sacrifice came many miracles and blessings, but perhaps the sweetest to me came just after the close of our last Olympic performance.

One of our greatest concerns with our schedule was that *Light of the World* would close just one week before our campus performance of *Seasons*, our 90-minute show. That meant just one week to rehearse and polish a show that we had quickly learned back in September before the Olympic rehearsals began. You can imagine then our shock and concern when Elder Robert D. Hales stood before an audience of 22,000

at our closing Saturday night performance to announce a one-week extension of the show, which would then close the following Saturday afternoon.

Shock turned to panic as we realized the implications for our campus show. Not only would we have to cancel our Friday night performance, but any rehearsal time during the following week was now gone as well. I still remember the Living Legends racing through the long underground tunnels in the vast Conference Center following that last Saturday afternoon show, gathering hundreds of costumes and props and climbing onto the buses for the journey down to Provo, and unloading right here in the de Jong Concert Hall fewer than 90 minutes before our show was to begin.

As we were making final show preparations, I noticed six Native American girls out in the tunnel rehearsing a particularly difficult dance called the Jingle Dance. It is a sacred dance requiring intricate footwork and formations while adjusting to the sound made by 350 jingles per dress that sway in a rhythm different from the drumbeat. Families and friends had traveled from reservations in other states to watch, and tradition dictated that it should be done perfectly.

Repeated rehearsals of the dance made it evident that the task was beyond their ability to accomplish, and suggestions were offered as to how disaster could be averted. Not doing the dance was discussed but could not be an option since lighting and music cues and costume changes depended on that time slot being filled. Simply going out and “freestyling” was another option to consider. But at 7:15, with only 15 minutes until the performance was to begin, the section leader quietly stood up and said:

We have fulfilled every request made of us these past months, we have represented our culture in a positive way to the entire world. We have been obedient to the prophet’s request to extend the blessings of Light of the World to thousands more people

this week. We have done all that we can do, and now we must trust in the Lord. We will do the dance as we have rehearsed it.

As the show progressed that evening into the "Season of Plenty," where the Jingle Dance is performed, every other member of the group lined up in the wings to watch as these six Native American girls walked out onto the stage. The entire company wept together three and a half minutes later as the girls walked off-stage, having performed a perfect Jingle Dance. It was certainly a miracle preceded by great faith. These same girls rehearsed that dance for a full two weeks following that show before ever performing it that well again.

Taking the Living Legends to Native American reservations is always rewarding and inspiring and always an opportunity to reach out to impressionable youth who may not realize the possibility of a better life. On one such trip we found ourselves in a high school where the condition of the gym and the graffiti on the walls made it obvious that standards, values, and morals were not a high priority. As we set up for our assembly, we suspected these students might be a challenging audience. They entered the gym with revealing, suggestive clothing, and boisterous obscenities filled the air. Our suspicions were confirmed.

The assembly was about to begin when the principal rushed backstage with an urgent request. They were having a terrible epidemic of immorality and teenage pregnancies. Would one of our young ladies be willing to talk to the students, especially the girls, about this problem? The term *being thrown to the lions* crossed my mind. I couldn't imagine one of my sweet girls being brave enough to face this group, yet I knew that Heavenly Father was giving us an opportunity to leave an important message.

I approached one of the Native American dancers—a tall, beautiful girl—with this request and in one instant saw an Indian become a "paleface." With no time to prepare

a talk or even think about her comments, Erin nevertheless consented to this daunting task. It was decided that she would speak to them just before our final number, "Go, My Son."

At the appointed time Erin walked onto the floor dressed in her sparkling white buckskin. Immediately she was greeted with catcalls, whistling, foot stomping, and yelling. She asked for their attention but received little response.

Then, standing tall to her full 5'10" height, Erin commanded them to pay attention with a power and force that could be felt to the top of the bleachers. Astoundingly, a hushed silence began to fall across the gym. She began by specifically addressing the young girls in that audience. She said, "I know you're up there with your boyfriends, but I want you to listen carefully to what I am going to say to you right now." Then, speaking on a level that they understood, Erin began to ask them some serious questions: What were they going to do after school? Go out in back of the gym for a cheap bottle of beer with their boyfriends? Weren't they worth more than that? And what about later on tonight? Were they going to spend the night with that boyfriend, and did they realize they had a choice? Did they think about the possible consequences?

As she continued, it suddenly occurred to me that in the midst of this most unlikely place and audience, Erin was teaching these girls Young Women Values: Divine Nature, Individual Worth, Choice and Accountability, Good Works, and Integrity. And she assured them they were worth more than that cheap bottle of beer or a night with their boyfriend, and she reminded them of their potential for good. Because of Erin's preparation, knowledge, courage, faith, and ability to invite the Spirit to guide her, they listened, and the Spirit bore testimony of the truthfulness of her words. The principal told me later he believed that was the most important 10 minutes the students would spend in his school that year.

Two years ago the Living Legends had the unique experience of traveling to small, remote villages in Alaska at the request of the Alaskan National Guard. More than just performing, we were to be a part of an antidrug campaign. It was an opportunity to reach out with a message of hope and encouragement, especially to the young people, who were feeling the effects and challenges of life in these isolated areas.

After intense security clearance and with earplugs in hand, we boarded the massive C-130 cargo planes for a flight over majestic Mount McKinley and the glorious mountains beyond. Then a small airstrip appeared beneath the clouds. On the runway a column of small trucks and vintage, well-traveled vehicles stood ready to transport our five tons of costumes and equipment and performers to the gymnasium at the high school. With limited time on the ground before the C-130s had to begin our return trip to Anchorage, we quickly prepared for our show.

Before the performance was to begin, one of our dancers, Tabor Rigg, who was born and raised in Anchorage, addressed the audience about his experience attending high school in Alaska. He told the story of being challenged by his older brother, who bet him \$100 that he could not refrain from tobacco, alcohol, and drugs for his entire time in high school. He accepted the bet, dreaming of all the things he would buy with that \$100. Well, he won that bet, completing all four years of high school without ever drinking, smoking, or taking drugs.

He told the audience that he didn't remember ever being paid that \$100 but that he had gained something far greater and more important to him than any monetary reward. He had gained a knowledge of his own worth, an impressive GPA, the respect of his peers and teachers, good health, and an opportunity to attend college and further his education. He then challenged those young people in the audience to make the same commitment

that he did, with a promise to them that their reward, too, would be far greater than they could now imagine.

A wonderful spirit prevailed during that particular performance. Children moved closer and closer to the stage, seemingly drawn to the dancers. Hundreds of small hands reached out to touch the performers as they sang their final song. During the encore number these children actually came up on the stage while the members of the Living Legends embraced them and, with tears in their eyes, sang "I Am a Child of God."

Smiles, hugs, and warm conversations followed that performance, and it was with great reluctance that we finally waved good-bye to our new friends. Perhaps the words of Major Mike Haller of the Alaskan National Guard best describe the window of opportunity the Lord opened up for us that day in Bethel:

In this region of Alaska young people have a real struggle with huffing, with the use of marijuana, and just a whole bunch of other drugs, and [there are] lots of possibilities and opportunities to get themselves into very deep trouble. In fact, among young men in particular, teen suicide is 16 times greater here in this part of Alaska than it is on the reservations in the western United States, [where it] is already outrageously high.

It's a real epidemic here, so anything we can do to bring some light into the lives of these youngsters — to help them understand there is a vision of tomorrow, that they can live out their passions and desires and raise their expectations for themselves higher than they've been — is a great day. And in our view, Living Legends will help to do that. It will propel it to a whole other level for these youngsters, a level that many of them never even thought of before.

Lives will change. You know, I really believe what I'm about to tell you. I believe this. It's the most important thing to me. There is going to be more than one young man, more than one young woman, who will come to this performance tonight,

who in my mind will absolutely not commit suicide, will not betray themselves in their relationship with their Heavenly Father, with their parents, with their families, because they had their lives changed as a result of what these young folks will do. So that's what I believe, and I know it. I know it in my heart of hearts, and that's all it's going to take—just that notion, that idea, that concept that there is something better out there for me.

These young people in Bethel, Alaska, didn't know what they were living for, and someone presented them with wings.

Now, why do I tell you these stories and what do they have to do with each of you sitting here today?

First of all, I want you to know and to appreciate the rich diversity that exists here on our campus. People of the Book of Mormon and of many other beautiful cultures are sitting among you today. They sit beside you in your classes, live in your dorms and apartment buildings, and attend your wards. But you may not have had the great privilege that has been mine to learn from them, be inspired by them, and witness their ability to live close to the Spirit with a faith that expects and experiences miracles and a humility and purity that allows their light to shine with clarity and power. You can draw great strength from their example. They come from a great heritage.

Second, I want you to know that each of you also comes from a great heritage. In Peter 2:9 we read: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." I want you to know that each one of you is a part of "the grand march of angels" going out into all the world in these latter days. Matthew 24:31 tells us: "And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Opportunities to gather the elect, to lift others, and to let your light shine are not reserved only for members of the Living Legends or our other BYU performing groups. Opportunities to serve, to reach out to others, to make a difference in someone's life are available to all of us if we will seek for them and have the faith and courage to accept them when they come. If we will prepare and live worthy to have the inspiration of our Heavenly Father—whatever our culture or heritage might be—He will guide us to be instruments in His hands: to stand up for what we believe in front of that boisterous crowd, to go forward with faith when adversity threatens to make us fail, to encourage by our example of goodness and obedience those around us who are struggling or feeling hopeless.

As happened in that humble home in Riga, Latvia, on that Indian reservation in New Mexico, and in that isolated village in Alaska, people will listen, for we are given a beautiful promise in Doctrine and Covenants 29:7: "And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts."

I know that Heavenly Father loves us and that He is aware of our potential for good and our ability to help build the kingdom in these latter days. I know He is even now preparing the elect to hear your words and see your example.

At the end of our show we hear the words of a wise chief. His message is, "We are of noble birth, for royal blood flows within us. We are children of a Heavenly Father, here to carry on the dreams of our forefathers beyond this generation to future generations." That you will find great joy and adventure in that quest, that you might let your own unique light shine, that you might use the spiritual and temporal education you have received here at BYU to lift up others and truly present them wings is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

