

Choosing



Her Words

BY CHRISTA SKOUSEN

This 14-year-old shares her language skills to bless the lives of others.

During the week, Alba Fonseca lives a busy life as a high school student. Besides school and seminary, she manages to squeeze in time for violin, piano, soccer, and dance.

But on Sundays, Alba takes on a role unlike most other 14-year-olds. Stop by her Spanish-speaking branch in Ogden, Utah, and you may find her sitting in a side pew, whispering English words into a tiny microphone attached to headphones atop her head.

Even at 14 Alba isn't a newcomer to the world of interpreting. In fact, Alba has been interpreting for everything from sacrament meeting to stake conference since she was just 11 years old. And long before that, Alba was interpreting for parents, teachers, and students at her elementary school.

Practice Makes Perfect

Talking with Alba, you probably wouldn't even consider that English is her second language. Even though she

has always lived in the United States, Alba's parents are from Colombia, and Spanish was the first language Alba learned as a child.

It wasn't until she attended preschool that Alba first started learning English. Even though she was very young, she remembers how frustrating it was at times. But she picked up the language quickly.

When kindergarten started, Alba's teacher knew she was bilingual, so she assigned her a seat next to a boy who couldn't speak any English. She asked Alba to translate basic phrases for him such as "write your name here."

One day, a mother who couldn't speak any English stopped by the office. The staff could not find anyone in the whole school to interpret for her. When Alba's teacher learned of the dilemma, she immediately recommended her five-year-old interpreter. From then on—from parent-teacher conferences to phone calls—the school asked young Alba for help whenever they needed an interpreter.

"At least three times a week they would call me out of class," she says. "It was exciting for me. I felt special," she said with a laugh, "and I could get out of class."

Alba found that she had to learn a whole new vocabulary when it came to religious terms or words used in the scriptures.

STAYING FOCUSED

Richard Hyer, Alba's current stake president, is regularly on the receiving end of Alba's interpreting. He says that even though there are other interpreters in the stake, he often requests Alba. "Alba is fabulous! She is so focused that I find myself watching her. She doesn't miss a beat. She is usually about four or five words behind the speaker, and follows along without any breaks. She is incredible." "As a person, she is very dedicated to the gospel, very focused on keeping the commandments, and has a pleasant disposition. She always seems to experience the joy of the gospel."



In becoming a more effective translator, Alba finds that she has to really concentrate on what is being said. This focus on helping others to understand has increased her own knowledge and testimony.

Tongue Tied

Eventually Alba started translating for her Spanish branch. In the beginning, she would sit behind English-speaking visitors (such as the stake Young Women presidency), and whisper the translation to them. It wasn't until a few years later that the branch started using headphones with microphones.

Learning Church words in English was like learning a whole new language for Alba. "It was totally new for me because as a child I had never read the scriptures in English. I had never done anything that had to do with the Church in English—only in Spanish," she says. "So it was really weird for me to learn all these English words—like the different levels of the priesthood—all these words I had never heard before."

For the first few years, Alba really struggled with some of the English terms. But now she is in an English seminary class and has read the Book of Mormon in English. She says this has really helped.

Even though she still makes mistakes once in a while, Alba has overcome a lot of the self-consciousness she used to feel. She says she still gets nervous for the big events, but mostly she thinks it's fun and exciting that she can help out.

Translating Correctly

Now Alba is helping out wherever and whenever she can. Sometimes it's as simple as helping someone at the store, or sometimes it's for big events, such as the missionary conference she helped out with last year.

FUTURE PLANS

Alba enjoys serving as an interpreter for her Spanish branch so much she has decided to learn five other languages in the future—Portuguese, Japanese, Russian, Italian, and American Sign Language. Even though she stays busy with school and other hobbies, she thinks she will try to learn at least two before finishing high school. Alba says she would like to one day get a job where she can use her language skills to serve others daily.

"I had to translate for all these people! So I prayed, and Heavenly Father helped me through it," she says. "Words I had never heard before, I just said them. It was really awesome, and I could feel the Spirit."

Even though it has often been challenging, Alba is grateful for the opportunities she's had to use her language skills to serve. "It helps me to see that I can help other people," she says. "It has really strengthened my testimony of service."

Alba loves helping other people feel the Spirit and better understand the messages in sacrament meeting. She also thinks that interpreting for her Spanish branch has helped her stay in tune with the Spirit.

"It has really helped me a lot, because in sacrament meeting, sometimes it's easy for my thoughts to wander," she says. "But now I pay attention more, I am more focused, and I understand what the speaker is trying to say." **NE**

