

The CHALLENGE That Changed My Life

By LaNelle Sheridan Simons

The lump in my throat continued to grow as I slowly walked to the front of the room. I was a senior in high school, and this was my last Young Women in Excellence presentation. As I faced the audience of young women, parents, and leaders, I realized that my years of theater and speech experience were not going to help that night.

What I was about to repeat was different from some script or prepared speech. This was when I had to demonstrate that I had completed the challenge that was more difficult than I could have ever imagined.

The challenge began about six months earlier on a Wednesday night as the young women in my ward sat in the gym at our building and focused on Personal Progress. The excitement I had about Personal Progress as a Beehive had faded, and as a 17-year-old Laurel, I had adopted the belief that I had better things to do. I just wasn't interested in picking my last two value projects, but that didn't stop my Young Women president, Sister Widener, from trying to motivate me to get them done.

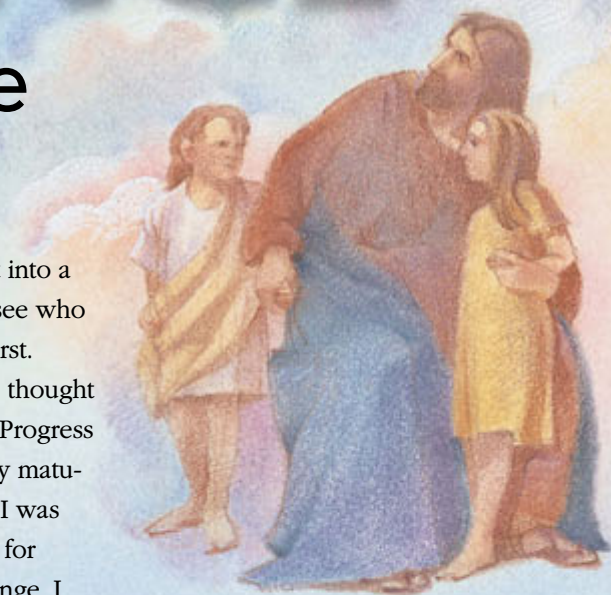
As I flipped through the Personal Progress book just to make Sister Widener happy, I came to the suggested projects under Faith. I read the suggestion to memorize "The Living Christ" and explained to Sister Widener that I could easily do that. I had memorized plenty of lines to plays in my life, so memorizing "The Living Christ" would be easy. It would never take 10 whole hours. My dedicated Young Women president took this as an opportunity to challenge me. She told me that it might not be as easy as I thought it would be. I would do it, she would do it too, and we

could make it into a challenge to see who could finish first.

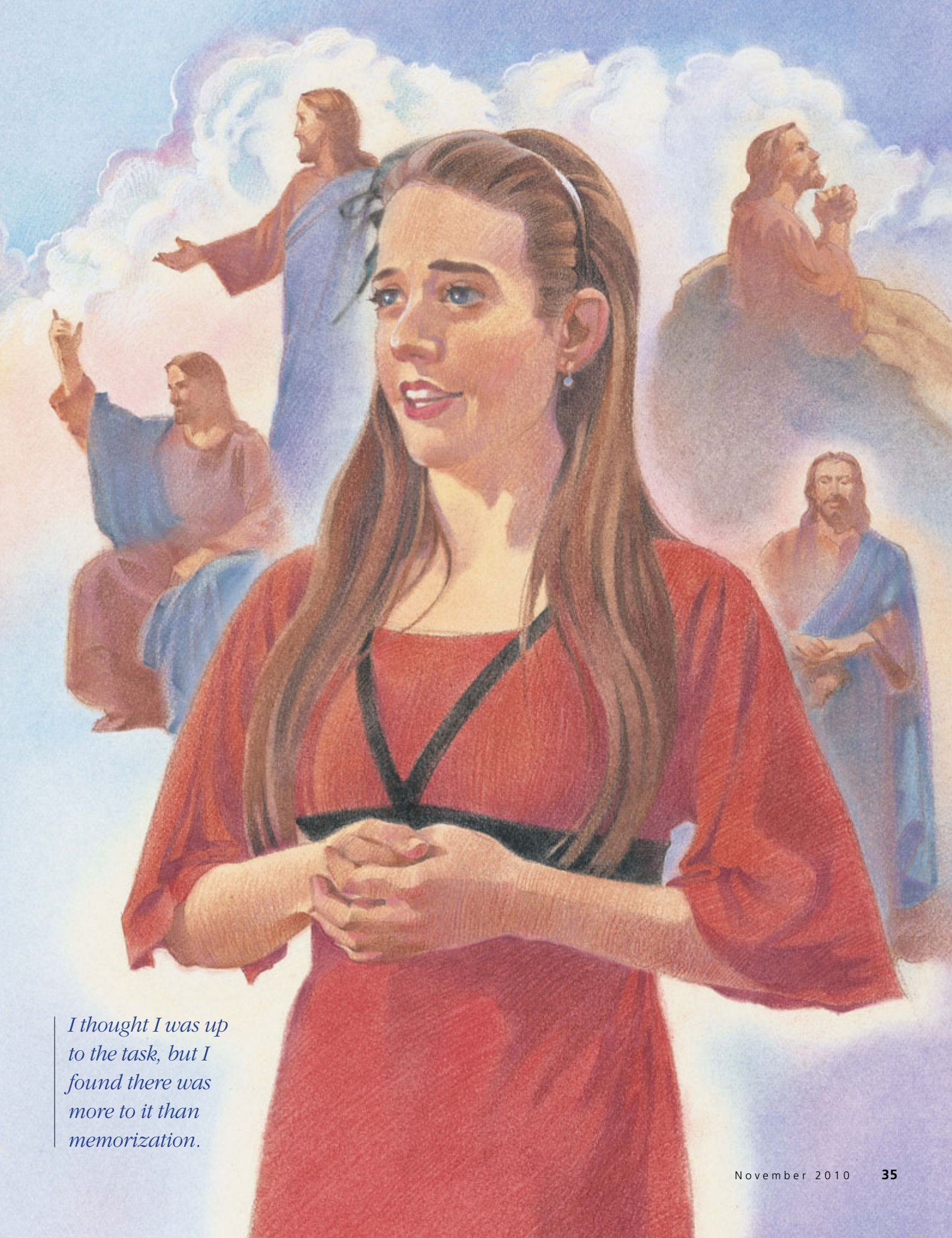
I may have thought that Personal Progress was below my maturity level, but I was never too old for a good challenge. I agreed to the challenge and memorized the first paragraph by the end of Mutual that night.

Though I never forgot the challenge, I got distracted during the summer months and put memorizing at the bottom of my list. Sister Widener stayed focused and completed the challenge in a just a few months. Sister Widener promised me that if I would commit myself again to finishing the challenge, it would change my life. I didn't really believe her, but I didn't want to be viewed as a loser either. So I decided that reciting "The Living Christ" would be my final Young Women in Excellence presentation.

As I stood before the audience that night, I was confident that I knew the words well enough to recite them. It had taken many more hours than I had expected, and I was happy that I would finally be able to prove that I could do it. As I got to the third paragraph, I began to realize that this was not going to be as easy as I had expected. Tears filled my eyes as I repeated the words:



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DILEEN MARSH



I thought I was up to the task, but I found there was more to it than memorization.

After I fulfilled the challenge to recite "The Living Christ" from memory, my Young Women president gave me a framed copy as a remembrance of that momentous night.

"He was arrested and condemned on spurious charges, convicted to satisfy a mob, and sentenced to die on Calvary's cross. He gave His life to atone for the sins of all mankind. His was a great vicarious gift in behalf of all who would ever live upon the earth."

The tears began to fall, and though I knew the words, in front of the audience that night I stopped and couldn't say a thing. Those words truly meant something to me. I wasn't just reciting lines to complete a challenge—I

was testifying of Jesus Christ. I was testifying of His life, love, and sacrifice for me and for everyone else in that room. And I knew it was true, because I could feel the Spirit stronger than I ever had before as I bore that testimony.

I looked at Sister Widener, who smiled as she wiped away her own tears. I finally understood what she meant when she told me that if I would just finish the challenge, my life would be changed. I took a deep breath and completed my presentation. The tears didn't stop falling until I had finished speaking and was back in my seat.

The simple challenge extended to me by a loving Young Women president had changed my life. That night I gained a testimony of Personal Progress. I realized that the challenges presented to me as a young woman could provide me with experiences to learn and grow through the Spirit. I had felt the Spirit in a way that I had never experienced as I recited the testimony of Jesus Christ given to us by our prophet and Apostles. That testimony became my own. I had gained a real and true testimony of my Savior Jesus Christ. I better knew and loved Him, and I knew that He knows and loves me.

Sister Widener gave me a framed copy of "The Living Christ" that night. Six years later it still hangs on my wall and reminds me of the night that I came to better know my Savior and the love He has for me. And I still know, just as surely as I did when I repeated the words that night, that "He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world. His way is the path that leads to happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come." **NE**

