





A LIFE

IN

Angel Zhong has risen to the top of gymnastic competition, but she's done it in an unconventional way—by honoring the Sabbath.

BALANCE

By Amie Jane Leavitt
and Richard M. Romney

Watching Angel Zhong gracefully glide through a floor routine, spin perfectly on the uneven bars, and pirouette, leap, flip, and hand-spring effortlessly on the balance beam, it's hard to imagine that anyone would have predicted that this 18-year-old champion gymnast would grow up to have poor health.

"I was born in China," Angel explains. "There was a one-child policy at the time, and girls were not always wanted. When I was born, the doctors said I would have health problems. They recommended that my life be terminated." Angel's parents were repulsed by such a suggestion

and rushed their firstborn child to the safety of their home. The doctor's ominous prediction proved false. Angel grew up strong and healthy. When she was six, her family emigrated to Canada. Today, Angel has one younger brother and three younger sisters.

DRAWN TO THE GYM

When Angel was eight years old, she was introduced to gymnastics. "I had always loved sports. I had tried swimming, soccer, kung fu, skating, and ballet," she says. But she felt none of those sports were challenging enough to interest her.

At her first gymnastics class, however, she was presented with a variety of feats that seemed physically impossible. Her interest was piqued, and from that point on she was drawn to the gym like a magnet. Angel had finally found a sport that matched both her energy and her athletic abilities. "I wanted to excel in gymnastics," she says. "I knew

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Angel's family has supported her since before she was born.

God gave me an amazing gift. He gave me a healthy body and the talent to do gymnastics. So, I set my goals high and worked toward them with intensity.”

LIKE ESTHER AND ABINADI

Two of Angel’s favorite stories in the scriptures are Esther in the Old Testament and Abinadi in the Book of Mormon. “They had so much courage,” she says. “Someday I hope to be like them.” Examine Angel’s life, however, and you’ll find that the choices she has already made reveal that she doesn’t have to wait for someday to be like them. She is *already* like them.

In the early days of her gymnastics training, Angel decided she would honor the Sabbath day by not practicing, training, or competing on Sundays. In gymnastics, such a commitment is considered at least unconventional if not downright crazy. Many important competitions are scheduled on Sundays, and gymnasts rarely take a day off from training—they’re afraid they’ll lose their edge.

Angel’s parents were proud of her decision to honor the Sabbath day. However, many others in Angel’s life were not so thrilled, particularly her teammates and coaches. They didn’t understand why she would forego important parts of her gymnastics career just to go to church. “You have your whole life to go to church,” they’d say, “but you only have a few years for gymnastics.”

“I often felt persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Angel says (see Matthew 5:10). People ridiculed her and laughed at her. Her friends talked about her behind her back. Coaches refused to spend as much time training her as they did other athletes. She even changed



At the Canadian Gymnastics Championship, Angel took first place in the floor exercises.



from a prominent to a less-recognized club at one point to alleviate pressure about practicing and competing on Sundays.

The blessings of keeping the Sabbath day holy certainly weren’t obvious right away, and sometimes it was a struggle for Angel to keep her commitment. “It was heartbreaking for me to see my friends bring their medals and team uniforms to the gym and know that I could have had a chance for those things too,” she says. “I missed many opportunities that would have helped me gain national team status. I even missed a trial to go to the Canada Winter Games, which is like a mini version of the Olympics.”

BLESSINGS ALL AROUND

Yet, over time Angel has learned to recognize the many ways keeping the Sabbath day holy has benefitted her. For example, because she was active in Church both on Sundays and for weekday Young Women and Mutual activities, she developed friendships she wouldn't have had otherwise.

"Most of my good friends are from church and my leaders have been wonderfully supportive," she says. "Young Women was a safe haven for me. It strengthened me spiritually and I look forward to the time I spend with my ward family every week." Angel has served as Laurel class president, received her Young Women Recognition and Honor Bee, and attended early morning seminary.

As she observes the Sabbath day, Angel also noticed that her physical body benefitted by having a day of rest. Her athletic abilities weren't diminished by the day off. In fact, during high school, even though she trained one day less than her teammates, she remained as strong in the sport as others.

From the beginning of her gymnastics training, Angel's dream has been to represent Canada in the Olympics. Even though she didn't compete on Sundays, she was still able to achieve success in other important competitions held on different days. She was named the Canadian champion on floor exercises and the western Canadian all-around champion. And even though a knee injury eliminated her chance of trying out for the Canadian team for the Rio 2016 Games in Brazil, she still has her sights set on the 2020 games in Tokyo.

Angel also noticed that as she kept the Sabbath day holy, she was able to get more



Angel loves spending time with her friends on Sunday.

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done during the week. For example, many of her teammates struggled to keep up their grades. Angel not only earned straight A's with a perfect 4.0 GPA, but she also advanced her studies by taking online courses during the summertime. It was those online studies and her stellar GPA that helped Angel achieve one of her other goals—to earn a gymnastics scholarship to Brigham Young University. And she did so a year earlier than planned! At BYU she plans to major in neuroscience with a minor in family studies. Eventually she plans to go to medical school to become a neurosurgeon.

BALANCED AND BEAMING

“I’m proud of my identity as a Latter-day Saint,” Angel says. “The Church has blessed my life in every way possible. It has given me the strength, courage, and faith to accomplish my life’s journey but to still have balance in my life.”

She beams when she says, “On days when I feel like giving up, I turn to my Savior. He never fails to comfort me. He always carries me through my trials. Knowing that He and Heavenly Father want me to succeed has given me the inclination and desire to accomplish difficult goals in my life.”

It’s also allowed her to share the example of a balanced life with her three younger sisters. They’re all gymnasts, too. And all of them know that when you keep the Sabbath day holy, there are blessings all around. **NE**



Angel feels grateful for team members who support her standards.

