

FRAGILE INSTRUMENTS PLAYED WITH POWER

*One sister's frail voice and abilities
grew stronger as she relied on the Lord.*

By Janell H. Johnson

I sat in stake conference only half listening to the speaker. When he was done, it would be our turn. I was directing the choir and was filled with anxiety. I wanted the hymn we sang, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,” to mean something to the hundreds of members who filled the chapel. I wanted people to know that Heavenly Father understood their feelings. My hope was that the song would communicate the peace and comfort I received through relying on Jesus Christ. My reasons for this music selection were significant on a personal level.

Not long after I turned 14, I was involved in a car accident. My neck was broken, and my spinal cord was severed. The doctors’ prognosis was simple: I would always have to use a wheelchair. I could not move my legs and had very little movement in my arms. I couldn’t talk above a whisper due to lack of muscle function in my abdomen, and I couldn’t even speak

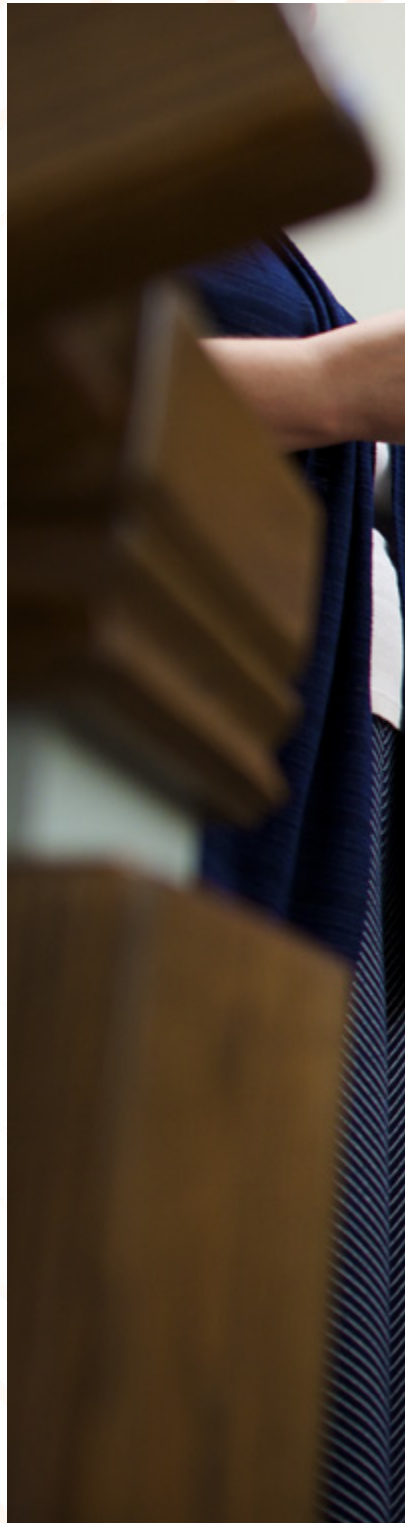
a sentence without stopping to take several breaths between words. Family and visitors had to lean over my bed and listen very carefully to hear me speak.

I set a goal to talk loud enough to be heard outside my hospital room door. My mom would leave the room and I would try to push out enough sound to be heard. After several months, I reached my goal.

One day my voice teacher visited me at the hospital and encouraged me to start practicing again. Outwardly I agreed with no hesitation, but inwardly I was embarrassed by my new inability. My vocal range at that point was no more than two or three notes, and speaking made me light-headed.

After four months in the hospital, I was allowed to go home. I began a rigorous schedule of therapy. My parents, with kind members of the ward, helped me perform a variety of exercises more than eight hours a day, six days a week. A member of my ward tutored me throughout my high school years so that

PHOTOGRAPH OF AUTHOR AND CHOIR BY LESLIE NILSSON







RELYING ON HIS STRENGTH

"The Lord often places His servants in situations with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In this manner He pushes us to humble ourselves and to rely solely on His strength. He makes us instruments of His miracles and the manifestations of His power and compassion. That is perhaps . . . the reason why so many members receive callings and responsibilities that often appear to them to be beyond their strength and abilities."

Bishop Gérald Caussé, First Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, "For When I Am Weak, Then Am I Strong" (Brigham Young University Devotional, Dec. 3, 2013), 5, speeches.byu.edu.

I could graduate with my class. And of course my diligent voice teacher came to my house to start my lessons again.

After high school graduation, I continued my musical studies at a local junior college and eventually transferred to Brigham Young University, where I received a degree in vocal performance.

Years later, I still use a wheelchair, have limited movement in my arms and hands, and am unable to move my fingers. But I have found great joy in being able to share my testimony through music. Participating as a member of the ward choir of my local singles ward has been a wonderful gift. Throughout the week, I enjoy pondering the meaning of the inspired lyrics that we sing.

One Sunday I was asked to meet with a counselor in the bishopric. Not knowing the extent of my physical limitations, he clearly felt awkward as he asked, "How do you feel about directing the ward choir?"

Strangely enough, I realized that lately I'd been thinking of ways to improve the choir, but now I didn't know if I'd be able to do an adequate job at directing, given my disability. I'd led music in meetings before, but in those experiences my arms became tired quickly. I wondered how I'd be able to successfully communicate cutoffs and crescendos when I



was unable to move my fingers.

Despite my fears and doubts, I accepted the calling.

Over the course of my calling and as further evidence of God's mercy in my life, He gave me the strength and energy to conduct the 30-minute rehearsals. Throughout my experience as ward choir director I saw the Lord make up the difference for what I lack. Doctrine and Covenants 64:34 says, "The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind." Those are two things I can offer Him.

The speaker finally finished his remarks and we assembled to sing. We may not have been perfect, but I had never heard the song performed as well as my faithful choir members performed it at that moment. We used all of our strength and abilities, and Heavenly Father sanctified and magnified our offering.

It was difficult to have an audience watching me. I felt vulnerable with my imperfections on display, but I recognized that my limitations may have added to the significance of the song. The song invites us to recognize that the Savior gives us that which we are lacking. We are imperfect instruments in His hands. But ultimately, the Lord uses imperfect instruments to orchestrate his perfect plans. ■

The author (pictured on page 71) lives in Utah, USA.