

Stir-n-Serve



By Cindy Savage

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“Being a teacher, especially a middle school teacher, is a thankless, low paying, low-status job,” my father declared.

“Especially in a depressed neighborhood,” Mom added.

“High workload.”

“Dangerous.”

“No upward mobility.”

The list of diatribes went on and on. I had been expressing my joy that I’d recently discovered in teaching and learning Spanish, thinking that my professor parents might at least understand a little, but their reaction was completely negative.

They would never give me permission to animate the Junior Youth group now.

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Chapter 1

“I love Red Grammer’s music. I loved it even before I became a Bahá’í,” I signed to Lian as we looked over the lyrics to ‘See Me Beautiful’.

Lian smiled and I knew she appreciated that I signed as well as talked to her. Speechreading was about 30% at best, and Lian, having been deaf since birth, was a native speechreader, but so many words look the same on your lips. I remembered her telling me about the sentence, “Buy my pie.” Every word is shaped the same. Or “queen” and “white”—what hearing person would ever guess that?

“I know it’s off the subject,” I said, “but I really have learned a lot in your sign language class. Learning about the Deaf Community has really opened up a new world for me.”

“You’re my best student, Janae,” Lian signed. “You’re the easiest Youth Wave member to have a conversation with even though I’ve known some of them all of my life. Trying to read people’s lips all day is pretty exhausting. I can’t blink for a second and I still miss most of it. If I don’t know the context, I’m lost. There’s no such thing as a relaxing class or a relaxing conversation, so I really appreciate your efforts to sign when you talk. It gives my brain a break.”

I smiled back. “Well, this song is very relaxing and easy to sign,” I said. “And it has deep meaning. I think that everyone wants people to see the beauty inside them and not just look at the outside.” I looked down at my wheelchair. “Sometimes it’s hard to even get people to look me in the eye since the accident. They think

they're being polite not to stare at the chair, but it's sooooo obvious how uncomfortable they are."

Lian laughed. "It's actually a very cool chair. People should take a closer look."

I spun around in a quick circle. "This Quickie chair is light years ahead of the first one I got. That one was designed to push around a sick person. This one is state-of-the-art, a lightweight sports chair. I think I might be ready to try basketball again."

"I'll come to all your games and so will the rest of Youth Wave. We can be the Janae Booth cheering section."

I faked a pass into an imaginary hoop. "And, I'll be sure to give you something to cheer about."

She nodded and pointed to the first line of the song. "See," she said, tapping her middle finger to her cheekbone with her pointer finger extended.

"Me, of course," I said, touching my chest.

"Beautiful," she said, circling her face with her hand and then touching both cheeks with her closed fingers.

We played the song on the CD and allowed Brandon Olson's newly invented light box to show the rhythm in colors on the screen. Lian sighed and smiled. "So slow, so peaceful, like meditation in song."

"What dance moves would you like to add? There's plenty of time and we've never actually danced and signed at the same time. When Youth Wave performs, it's usually it's one or the other."

"New style," she said, leaping up to grab a bamboo stick wrapped in colorful satin ribbon. "What do you think of adding the Chinese ribbon dance to the signs?" She shook her hands and the ribbon spun around her in perfect circles. She signed "See me beautiful" with her right hand and managed to keep the ribbon twirling harmoniously with the other. "Want to try?"

It took about thirty seconds with the ribbon for me to love it. Here was something I could do, despite my chair. We spent the next half hour signing, twirling

circles, spirals and snakes and even tossing our ribbons back and forth to each other. I added a spin or two with my chair.

A loud thump from upstairs jarred the ceiling and my spiral floated gracefully down into a puddle of rainbow silk on the floor.

“What was that?” Lian asked. “The vibration would get anyone’s attention.”

A second later, Lian’s mom, Mrs. Yuan, popped her head around the stairs into the basement. “Could you girls come up and help me? Children’s class is over and I need a hand corralling the kids while I prepare the snack.”

“No problem! We’re on the way,” I answered for both of us, signing to Lian for confirmation. A few minutes later we had wheeled around the outside of the house on the ramp and entered the garage door. I was pretty used to being carried up the steps by now and had stopped protesting when people wanted to help me. I had a momentary moment when I thought back to the first time I’d come to Lian’s house and had almost not gone in because I saw the stairs and copped an attitude. A lot of prayer and becoming a Bahá’í had helped me see their offer as kind instead of condescending. I’d had a major shift in attitude in the last couple of months. What a relief, because I don’t think I could have kept up the “angry at the world” Janae personality that I adopted after the accident.

I didn’t have much time to think about the old me, because the second we were in the house, the kids surrounded me and plied me with questions about the chair and how I got it and what happened and what I could do with it and if they could have rides.

I love kids. No restraint. They’re just curious and they ask. I’m a person who happens to get around in a wheelchair, not a wheelchair with a person in it. Big difference.

“Stand back and I’ll show you my new moves,” I told them. The tile floor in Lian’s entry was perfect for

the spin I'd been practicing from the Full Radius Dance video I watched.

Two spins on just the two back wheels and a little cha cha move earned me a round of applause.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Mei, Lian's little sister cried.

"I want to try!" Saba's little sister, Niki exclaimed.

"Increíble!" said a little girl I'd never seen in Spanish.

"¿Cómo te llamas?" I asked with the phrase I'd heard often on children's TV shows.

"Julia, y él es mi hermano, Lukas," she said, pointing to a young boy who looked enough like her to be her twin. I raised one questioning eyebrow.

"Gemelos," she said. "Yes, we are twins."

Mei introduced the other boy, Jakob, who was good friends with Lukas and who could also speak Spanish. Boy, I was really behind the curve on this one. I had barely understood that Lukas was Julia's brother and the twins thing went right over my head. I needed to learn to speak Spanish before our border teaching trip in the summer or else I'd be wheeling along and watching everyone else teach the Faith.

"How long have you been dancing?" Jakob asked.

The kids all gathered around while Lian and her mom took the opportunity to escape to the kitchen.

"Actually, I just learned that move last week. I've only been in this chair for a few months and for a while, I didn't want to believe I'd never walk again, so I was mad and I just sat here feeling sorry for myself."

I could see that I had their attention, but they were looking at me with interest, not pity. That was a plus.

I continued. "Now that I've more or less accepted that I'm going to be stuck in a wheelchair for life, I really want to be more active. I'd never tried dancing before since it seemed kind of a sissy thing to do since I was a serious basketball player, but after watching a video with the guys in wheelchairs doing handstands

and busting some incredible dance moves, I changed my tune.”

Mei grinned. “Are you still going to be a serious basketball player? I saw some guys playing wheelchair basketball on TV and they were wild! You have to be really good to wheel yourself around *and* shoot the ball. You’d have to step up your game, wouldn’t you?”

Kids are so direct. No one else had ever challenged me that way. They were too afraid of hurting the feelings of the “new fragile Janae” instead of just talking straight. I laughed out loud. “You’re absolutely right. I would have to step it up, because I’m not good enough to play on their teams yet. But, I just got this new sports chair and I’m starting to work out again.”

“My mom says that you can’t keep a good athlete down,” Niki said.

“I guess you can’t keep a good eleven-year-old down either,” I joked. “What was all of that thumping going on up here?”

“Lukas jumped for joy when he learned we’re graduating from children’s classes.”

I tilted my head and looked at the group. “So, you’re Junior Youth now, hmmm?”

Mei nodded. “Junior Youth without an animator. We’re too old for children’s class and not ready for Youth Wave.”

“Tweeners,” Jakob agreed. “Stuck in the middle.”

At that moment, Lian came around the corner with a big platter of fruit, some homemade muffins and orange juice. “It’s true,” she said. “They’re finished with all of the children’s classes and they’ve reached the age of Junior Youth, but there’s really no one in the community to animate the Junior Youth group.”

The kids took their muffins and ran over to play a fast-paced game of Unity Jenga, leaving Lian, me and Mrs. Yuan at the serving table.

“What about us?” I said, biting a small bit of muffin and swallowing completely before I continued so that Lian wouldn’t have to read my lips with food falling out

of my mouth. “Youth Wave just went through the animator training up in Chico. Isn’t that why we did it? Why stir us up if we can’t serve the community?”

Mrs. Yuan shook her head. “The Local Spiritual Assembly did consult about it, but we didn’t want to burden Youth Wave with even more service. You’re busy with school and have many upcoming performances, the first of which is this next weekend for Ayyam-i-ha. And then there is all of the preparation for the performances during the border teaching trip and the Spanish lessons Emilio is talking about starting. We’re not sure when any of you would have time to animate a Junior Youth group.”

As the three of us ate and talked, I kept glancing at the five Junior Youth playing Jenga, laughing and helping each other try to build the tower as high as possible instead of trying to trick the others into knocking it down.

“You know, Julia and Lukas are from Chile where the new Bahá’í Temple of Light is being built. Their family lived in Santiago, but they didn’t hear about the Faith until they got to California. There are many families in their apartment complex that would like to study the Faith, but their English isn’t as good as the Francos,” Mrs. Yuan said.

“So many opportunities to serve, but so little time,” Lian signed.

“We should talk about some of them at the next Youth Wave meeting,” I signed back. “There’s no harm in that.”

We ate our muffins, all lost in thought.

Chapter 2

“¡No me digas!” Emilio exclaimed. “You’re amazing! España durante el verano!”

I rolled up to Emilio, Cory and Anthony, a boy from my homeroom, who were hanging out in the hall before class began. “What’s so exciting? I picked out something about Spain.”

“Anthony just got accepted into the intensive Spanish program in Madrid for the summer,” Emilio told me. “Isn’t that great!”

“Smooth! Congratulations Anthony. I guess we’ll all be speaking Spanish this summer.”

Anthony grinned. “I know. Cory and Emilio told me that Youth Wave is heading to the border to perform for six weeks. What a great opportunity to practice your Spanish.”

“If I had any Spanish,” I said and grimaced. “So, Emilio, when are we going to start those Spanish classes? I keep running into people that I want to talk to and can’t.”

Emilio snapped his fingers in that particularly loud way that they do in El Salvador, which I had also not managed to learn, and scowled playfully. “The trouble is that when you learn how to speak Spanish, the rest of us won’t be able to talk in front of you anymore. You’ll know all of our secrets.”

“Are you saying something I shouldn’t hear?” I asked, folding my arms and tilting my head for emphasis. I squelched that old nagging feeling that people actually *were* saying things about me, because I knew I wasn’t really the center of everyone’s universe. *That* realization had taken a while, but swimming

across the lake in Chico had pretty much washed away all of my animosity.

Cory laughed. “No, mostly we’re talking about food.”

“It’s a guy thing,” Emilio confirmed and Anthony nodded.

Emilio opened his hands in what Lian and I would use as the “what” sign. “Actually, no matter how good I become in English, it’s still more comfortable to say deep things in Spanish. Cory and I talk all the time, but it would be nice to have more people to talk to—especially my best friends.”

Wow! I still wasn’t quite used to Emilio being so frank. Most American guys wouldn’t be so straight up about their feelings, but she’d realized, that just like signing, when speaking in a language not your own, you dispense with a lot of the fluff and just hit the substance.

“I’d like that, too,” I said sincerely. “And, it will really help when we’re near Mexico for six weeks this summer. There are some Junior Youth I’d like to talk to as well.”

The bell rang. Emilio and Cory took off to their homeroom promising to let me know the times they were free to start a class at our Youth Wave meeting.

Anthony walked into homeroom with me. “Nice chair,” he said, admiring my shiny, new, ultralight, aluminum rims. “Can you tell me more about Youth Wave and these Spanish classes? Your group sounds very organized.”

“Thanks,” I said, amazed that I wasn’t even the least bit upset that he’d mentioned my chair. I would have been a few weeks ago, but I’d come a long way in my attitude since then. I looked up at Anthony and he was smiling. It seemed a perfect opportunity to elevate the conversation. “How about you meet me at lunch and I’ll give you the brief version?”

“Deal,” he said, walking over to the far side of the room by the windows. I parked in my spot nearest the door which I now sat in in all of my classes—the

wheelchair spot. I chuckled under my breath and I realized here was another thing that no longer bothered me a bit, because I was the first one out. Sometimes teachers did have your best interests at heart.

As the teacher began the announcements, I kind of zoned out thinking about how much had happened since I met the Baha'is and joined Youth Wave a few weeks ago. I had been in pretty bad shape, not just physically, when Lian had convinced me to go to her house for a Youth Wave meeting. After the hit and run driver wrecked my chances of continuing in my self-centered pursuit of basketball fame, I had lived on my anger. I took it out on my parents because they wouldn't let up about my grades, my ex-teammates for their insensitivity and especially my teachers. I couldn't take it out on the driver, because they never found him. Anything anyone did to reach out to me, I rejected outright and maintained my untouchable attitude. I assumed that if I stayed aloof, no one would find the hurt, sad, depressed Janae inside. She was still there sometimes, but now when I was upset or feeling sorry for myself, I picked up my prayer book and thought about all the things I had to be grateful for—like my friendships with Lian, Will, Tracy, Brandon, Emilio, Cory, Duncan and Saba and becoming a Baha'i.

I looked up from my doodling of myself in a wheelchair shooting baskets to note that the teacher was still talking about the new cafeteria rules which had to be implemented because some idiots had stirred things up by putting extra chili peppers into the soup before the cooks served it. A bunch of kids burned their mouths and their parents threatened to sue the school. What a waste of precious time. I sighed. Learning Spanish, teaching Junior Youth Classes, Youth Wave performances, teaching Anthony about the Faith—plenty of ways to stir things up and serve without resorting to chili peppers.

After Mr. Livingston's history class, which I now loved and usually went overboard to be nice in after I

gave him so much grief in my own leg grieving period, I found Anthony waiting for me at my locker. How he knew that was my locker, I wasn't sure, but I smiled and said, "Eager for information, I see."

I opened my locker, found my thermos of soup—no way was I eating in the cafeteria again, rules or no rules—and the chunk of homemade bread my mom had included. Okay, so my mom wasn't all bad. She had my best interests at heart, too, but riding me all the time about my grades and my future career possibilities was getting a little old. If she'd just stick to bread baking, we'd all be happier.

"The gazebo?" I suggested. "It's covered and out of the wind."

Anthony walked along beside me and started the conversation right away. "Emilio was telling me some of the principles of the Baha'i Faith, like equality of men and women and universal education. It sounds too logical for a religion."

I laughed as we went out into the weak mid-February sunshine. "There's even more logic. We believe that there's only one God and that all religions come from the same God, so there's no essential conflict between religions. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh says if religions are the cause of conflict, we would be better off without them. Bahá'u'lláh is the founder of our Faith," I added when I saw his questioning look.

Anthony sat down on an empty bench so that we were eye to eye. "But religious wars continue to this day. Look at what is going on in the Middle East."

I unwrapped my bread and took a thoughtful bite. Heaven in a grain medley. *Thanks, Mom.* "Now, I'm not an expert," I said, "but I have some theories and we could look it up in the Bahá'í Writings to find out the answers. When God sends a new Messenger, like Buddha or Jesus or Mohammad, these Manifestations renew the spiritual foundation of religion, but they bring new laws and customs for the age they appear in. So, the people who are really strong proponents or

leaders of the previous religion deny the new Messenger, because they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.”

“In other words they don’t want to give up the power and control they have to let the new guy have His say.”

“The more I read, the more I realize how brilliant God’s plan is, and that’s not even an adequate word since God is way more brilliant than any definition humans could come up with for brilliance.” By this time, I’d taken the lid off of my potato leek soup, canned, but organic, and had taken the first steaming bite. No chili, thank goodness.

“How so?”

I said a small inward prayer and asked God to help me find the words to share. “Well, God made a promise a long time ago to Abraham. He said he’d never leave mankind alone and he hasn’t. He keeps sending Messengers like universal educators for people to make progress.”

Anthony was eating and listening, chair forgotten. “Progress?” he prompted. “Why do we need so many? Wasn’t the first one good enough?”

“Think about education,” I said. “If we didn’t have teachers, would we learn anything?”

“Probably not. Well, we at least need a foundation and then once we can read and write, we can learn stuff on our own,” he commented. “But, I guess even learning on our own we have some kind of teacher like a tutor or a book or a mentor.”

“Right, now think about school. When teachers train to be teachers, they all learn the same things. The kindergarten teacher knows the same material as the sixth grade teacher, but she wouldn’t teach pre-algebra to five-year-olds.”

“They’re just not ready.”

“Exactly, and when Abraham first received the Covenant, or promise, from God, mankind wasn’t ready for a lot of things either. At that point it was just

getting people to recognize that one God exists. Over time, the Messengers add to the knowledge while keeping the same foundation.”

Anthony nodded. “Makes sense. Give me an example.”

“During Moses time, the law was that people shouldn’t eat pork. Jesus changed the law, because by his time it was possible to preserve pork and not get sick. Jesus told people to unite their communities. Mohammad united nations and now Bahá’u’lláh has come to bring unity to the world.”

A few bites and swallows and some moments of looking off into space later, Anthony said, “So Jesus could have suggested world unity, but half the world wasn’t discovered yet, so what would have been the point? No one would have gotten the message.”

“Precisely. So, Bahá’ís believe in progressive revelation—the continuing Covenant with God to inspire mankind to greater and greater spiritual heights through His Messengers.”

I kept the prayers going in my head like a drum as Anthony and I finished our lunch and hit such topics as science and religion being in harmony and the need for a universal language, besides our mother tongue, that could be used for communicating with all the peoples of the world.

“Speaking of learning a new language,” I said as the bell rang and we prepared to go to our afternoon classes. “I’m sure you’d be welcome to come to Emilio’s basic Spanish classes—maybe you could even help all of us newbies out. Also, you’re welcome to come to a Youth Wave meeting to ask your questions of the more knowledgeable people. I’ve just become a Bahá’í, but some of the members have been Bahá’ís all their lives.”

“I’d like that, and I’m going to do some research online as well. Thanks for giving up your lunchtime to tell me about it.”

It kind of felt like we should shake hands or hug or something, but we didn’t.

“My pleasure,” I said and gave him a little wave.

Great lunch, I thought as I rolled off to my math class. I used to spend my lunch hours running impossible scenarios in my head about how the outcome of the accident might have been different, if only . . . Those usually resulted in me feeling much worse about myself and my situation.

Elevating conversations beats rumination any day.

Chapter 3

“Sometimes I think that we need these meetings daily,” Will said as he propped his skateboard in the corner of Lian’s basement and joined the rest of the group. “Or else I need an administrative assistant.”

“Who said that service was easy?” Brandon joked. “I’m much busier now that Youth Wave is performing all the time.”

“Plus practicing your budding skateboarding skills,” Tracy reminded him.

“More than budding,” Brandon declared. “I did a fakie the other day.”

“Nice move,” Duncan put in. “We are going to have to incorporate more of the two of you skateboarding in our dances. The audiences loved it last time.”

“No time before the Ayyam-i-Ha performance this coming weekend,” Saba mentioned. “We need to rehearse. Janae and I want to show you a new song we’ve been working on incorporating sign and a ribbon dance.”

“Don’t forget the Spanish class,” I said. “And Junior Youth.”

Lian took out her prayer book which was neatly covered in cloth with an embroidered Greatest Name on the cover. Its beauty reminded me that I wanted to do some Aboriginal themed fabric painting to cover mine. The dots and symbols were so meditative. I also needed to fashion some sort of pouch to hang on my chair to keep my prayer book close at hand.

From inside her book, she took out a folded paper and read,

“Wherefore, O ye illumined youth, strive by night and by day to unravel the mysteries of the mind and spirit, and to grasp the secrets of the Day of God. Inform yourselves of the evidences that the Most Great Name hath dawned. Open your lips in praise. Adduce convincing arguments and proofs. Lead those who thirst to the fountain of life; grant ye true health to the ailing. Be ye apprentices of God; be ye physicians directed by God, and heal ye the sick among humankind.”

The stillness after the quotation silenced the persistent thoughts of too many things to do and not enough time. Unravel the mysteries, grasp the secrets, inform ourselves of the evidences, open our lips in praise, lead others to the fountain, grant true health, be apprentices of God. Got it. No problem. Piece of cake.

“Wow!” Tracy said, effectively putting a proverbial lid on my inner sense of being overwhelmed.

I leaned over and asked Lian if I could look at the paper. “Just one of these things—like unravel the mysteries of the mind and spirit—would take more than a few lifetimes. Just when I think there are a lot of physical projects to finish, I realize that our spiritual state is far more important.”

Duncan leaned back on the sofa and laced his fingers. “Being an apprentice is a learning process. It’s not automatic or instantaneous. No one learns to be a choreographer without first being a dancer. And no one becomes a good dancer without years of practice and lessons in the basic foundational skills.”

Duncan Earl was attending the university on the way to getting his degree in choreography and, as far as I was concerned, every time he opened his mouth he had profound things to say.

“However,” he added, “knowing the steps and executing them correctly isn’t enough. Good dancers *feel* the music. It’s not just something that they hear. The music is in them, part of their souls.”

Brandon picked up his guitar and started playing the slow intro to 'See Me Beautiful'. "I hope that one of the reasons people are attracted to the Bahá'í Faith through our performances is because we're exuding the meaning of our beliefs through our songs and dances."

I pulled the electronic keyboard over in front of my wheelchair and added a lilting counterpoint to Brandon's single notes. Connected to the piano, the light box signaled Lian and right on cue she began the simple hand signs for the song.

It didn't take long for everyone to join in, adding dance moves with ethereal spinning ribbons in the musical interludes between the words. Though Lian was leading with the moves we'd come up with the other day at her house, the spontaneous outpouring of unified spirit created a dance that was better than the two of us had come up with on our own.

"Wow again!" Saba said as the song finished and everyone sat down amidst the rainbow ripple of ribbons.

A moment of silence and then clapping exploded from the bottom of the stairs. Anthony was there, grinning like a maniac. "That was outstanding!" he said. "How long did it take you to practice that?"

"First time," Emilio told him.

"Even more stellar," he added, coming into the room.

"Welcome," I said. "Glad you could make it."

"Sorry I'm late. On Mondays, I tutor a kid in English at the ESL Resource Center. I'm practicing my Spanish and he's practicing his English. It's a win-win."

Duncan moved over on the sofa so that Anthony could sit and he introduced himself all around. Somehow I'd had a good feeling he would come. Our talk at lunch had gone so well and he seemed to already hold the same beliefs as the Bahá'ís. Perhaps I could loan him my Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era Book.

One step at a time, I thought as I pulled my mind away from the "success" of teaching and remembered that we were all supposed to be unrestrained as the

wind—blowing the breezes of God everywhere and not being concerned with results.

“Anthony has the idea that we’re really organized,” I said only half-joking. “We’d better get busy planning or he’ll think I lied.”

“Let’s do a quick list of all of the topics we need to cover and then put them in priority order,” Tracy suggested.

I grinned. Order established. Leave it to Tracy Griffin—the queen, and not in a bad way, of focused action.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Anthony said, settling in as if he’d always been part of the group. “I’m kind of waiting to hear about Emilio’s Spanish Corner.”

“Good name for it,” Emilio said. “I don’t want to be thought of as a teacher, exactly; more like a friend to practice with.”

Saba Farzaneh stood up next to our newly installed white board and wrote, “Spanish Corner”. She held the colored markers out to everyone and one or two at a time people leaped or rolled up to add items to the agenda. It was a good way—saved time.

In the end, the list looked like this:

- Spanish Corner
- Junior Youth Group
- Ayyam-i-Ha
- The Fast
- Naw Ruz
- Feast of Loftiness
- Summer Trip—new numbers
- Teaching Campaign

Brandon wrote that last one. No one was sure what he meant by it, so we let him explain before prioritizing.

“My mom and dad told me that the Local Spiritual Assembly consulted with the Regional Teaching Team and has decided to reach out to the neighborhood where Mei’s friends, the Francos, live. The neighborhood is mostly Hispanic and other immigrants.”

“I know that neighborhood,” Emilio exclaimed. “I’ve got lots of ideas for service projects there.”

“That’s the neighborhood where my student lives,” Anthony said. “It’s a friendly place, but it needs some sprucing up. The buildings and parks are pretty run down.”

Tracy, ever diligent, jumped up and wielded an orange marker. “Let’s put these in order. Think time and importance. Ayyam-i-Ha is this weekend and we’re performing for sure at the picnic. Feast is on March 2nd. Are we offering a performance of some type?” She drew a number 1 and circled it next to Ayyam-i-Ha. Swiftly, an orange circled number 2 was drawn next to Feast.

The new order, after some discussion interspersed with Anthony’s questions such as: “What’s a Feast? Is there food?” and “Are any of you on this LSA you’re talking about?” was:

- Ayyam-i-Ha
- Feast of Loftiness
- Teaching Campaign
- Spanish Corner
- The Fast
- Naw Ruz
- Junior Youth Group
- Summer Trip—new numbers

“Snacks?” Lian’s little sister, Mei, offered as she came down the stairs.

Cory leaped up to help her carry the tray of watermelon, noodle cups and green tea.

“Today the snack is all Chinese. We’re learning about China in our Junior Youth class.”

“Who’s teaching your Junior Youth class?” I asked, suddenly feeling a little jealous.

“Well, we’re just calling it that, but it hasn’t officially started,” Mei said. “So, Mom bought this cool workbook called the World Ambassador Program which teaches all about different countries, their cultures, their foods and has stories and stuff. Today, we’re reading this story about a little girl from Africa who

goes to China and makes a new friend. She shows her that no matter how we look on the outside, or what language we speak or where we live, we're all the same inside—like one big family.”

Mei flitted back upstairs and Anthony just grinned. He put his hands behind his head, elbows out, as he leaned back in satisfaction. “I think I’m going to like it here. If I can join, that is.”

“Anyone is welcome,” Will said. “Can you skate?”

While we were eating the snack, and the guys were grilling Anthony about his talents, I couldn’t stop thinking about the kids upstairs. I wondered about the World Ambassador Program and how it taught kids early on to think of the world as one human family. Think of the prejudice that could be avoided if every kid had that program in elementary school.

“Lost in thought, I see,” Anthony said, sitting down in the chair in front of me.

“Just thinking about what the kids are doing upstairs. I really get along well with them. They’re fun to be around.”

“Sounds like you’re a natural teacher.”

“It’s in my blood, I suppose. Both of my parents are professors at the university.”

Anthony laughed. “Smart genes.”

“Maybe. You wouldn’t think so if you saw all of the extra homework my parents make me do so that I’ll have an academic edge.”

Anthony expertly handled the chopsticks as he slurped his noodles into his mouth. “Aren’t you already number three in the junior class or something?”

“You’re checking my scores, Torres? Why are you interested, and why do you have a name like Torres, but you aren’t fluent in Spanish?”

“One question at a time, Booth,” Anthony said, laughing as he copied my coach voice. “First, I’m always checking out the competition, but I have a ways to go to catch up with your standing. I’m currently

number six in the ratings. I'll have to step it up and try to pass you by the end of the year."

He wasn't really serious. I could tell by the way he shrugged his shoulders in defeat even as he was challenging me with his words.

"And your name," I prompted, totally ignoring his challenge. The more my parents pushed, the more of a "whatever" my academic standing was to me. Especially if it meant getting a full ride scholarship to law school. Being an attorney was absolutely unappealing, despite my penchant for arguing and my frustration with a legal system that didn't track down hit-and-run drivers and punish them for life like they'd affected their victims. I shook my head to clear the negative thoughts as Anthony launched into his family heritage.

"I'm second generation Guatemalan," he said. "When my grandparents on both sides came to the U.S. as immigrants, and they had the opportunity to put my parents into school, they forced them to only speak English as much as possible. When my parents met each other, it was in an English environment. By the time I came along, my parents didn't even talk to me in Spanish, even though they can understand and talk to their parents. For them, success was tied to speaking English and it has worked for them. Unfortunately, I lost the chance to become fluent at home."

"You decided to study it on your own?"

"I got tired of people talking to me in Spanish and expecting me to have a clue what they were saying. I want that part of my identity back."

"Identity is important. You have to pray and make your own decisions about who you are." I realized that I was thinking out loud and focusing on my own situation more than Anthony's.

He looked at me with a little question in his eyes, but didn't pursue the matter. "Yeah," he said, just agreeing.

Chapter 4

“Which numbers are we doing at the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic this weekend?” Lian asked, since Ayyam-i-Ha was our first priority.

“I really like the See Me Beautiful dance and sign language song, but we haven’t had much chance to practice it. What if we put that one off until Naw Ruz?” Saba suggested.

Anthony looked at me quizzically.

“The Bahá’í New Year on March 20th,” I whispered back.

He smiled.

“We only need a run through on “Listen”, the unity dance with Lian and Duncan, Will’s skateboarding routine and Brandon’s guitar solo while we teach sign language,” Saba said. “What else?”

Tracy produced the list of all our numbers so that we wouldn’t have to dredge them out of memory and before long we had six that we could do several times at the picnic without too much rehearsal.

We ran through the numbers with Anthony clapping as our sole audience member.

“How about a prayer in Spanish?” Emilio said. “I got a new CD the other day with several tunes for prayers like the Unity Prayer and the Healing Prayer”. I think that would attract passersby.”

“Can you sing them?” Duncan asked.

“I’m not such a great singer—especially not alone—but . . . Anthony and Cory both are.” Emilio looked at Anthony. “¿Quieres?” he asked.

Anthony’s perpetual smile grew even bigger. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Could teaching be any easier? I asked myself.

While the new trio was practicing the new prayers with Brandon, Lian and I went around to the front of the house. Usually, we went in the garage, but she insisted that she needed to show me something?

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A surprise! Do you like it?” Lian asked.

“Like it? I love it,” I said and shoved myself up the small ramp that the Yuans had apparently installed since yesterday to get me up the stairs. It was a portable one like I’d seen at Youth Week in Chico and I was really grateful. No more lifting me up the three stairs out front or the ones in the garage. I could get in the house myself.

“Your family is super thoughtful,” I told her. “Where is your mom so I can thank her, too?”

“I’m not sure why we didn’t do it earlier. You’re part of our family now.”

I felt a tear prick behind my eyes and thought of the definition of family that I’d recently read: Voluntary bonds of mutual history. It hadn’t taken long for the Bahá’ís to fall into that category. Sometimes I struggled with my blood relatives, but my Bahá’í family was incredibly supportive.

Before I had the chance to really start crying, there was a crash in the kitchen and we rushed to the scene.

No one was hurt, but Mei and Julia were sitting on the floor with crayons strewn all around them.

“What happened?” Lian asked, putting out two hands to help the girls to their feet.

“We were going to do an art project for the picnic this weekend and I went to get the crayons, but ran into Mei on my way back and we both landed on our bottoms,” Julia said.

Lukas and Jakob were working hard at not laughing out loud.

“Are you both okay?” I asked. “Where’s Mrs. Lian?”

“A couple of ladies came over to get organized for the picnic, so we’re on our own.”

“We’re old enough to take care of ourselves,” Jakob declared, bending down to start scooping the crayons back into the box.

“Of course you are,” Lian said. “Just watch where you’re going.”

“What art project were you going to do?” I asked, nodding my head toward Lukas so that he would help Jakob with the crayons.

“Posters,” Mei said. “How are people going to know that they can come to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic if they aren’t invited?”

“So true,” I said. “Want some help?”

“Sure!” several voices said together. Niki rushed to clear a space on the dining room table so that I could roll right underneath.

It wasn’t long before the five of them had a plan and were busily making posters inviting passersby at the park to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic and performance.

“We really want to serve, you know,” Niki said.

“We’re not kids anymore,” Lukas added.

“But, we’re not youth either,” Mei said. “What are we supposed to do in the middle?”

Jakob sketched out the words, “Happy Ayyam-i-Ha! Come to the Picnic” on his poster board and outlined them in black. “The World Ambassador book is neat. I like hearing stories and learning about other countries.”

“You know that there are stories and books for Junior Youth as well. We learned about them in our youth animator training,” I told them. “The first one is called ‘Breezes of Confirmation’. There are stories about kids who have a Junior Youth group in South America.”

“I like stories, but I like doing stuff, too. Cooking Chinese food was fun today and I can’t wait to try some African food, too,” Niki said. “Maybe we could make some for the picnic.”

The conversation went on and Mei started taking notes on all of the ideas. Soon the posters were all made and they had started on decorations for the

picnic—folded tissue paper flowers, Mexican style, to attach on the corners of the tables and hold down the tablecloths. Every now and then one of them would run in to the meeting with the adults and get permission.

“This is fun!” Julia said. “I feel like I’m really doing something to contribute, not just taking lessons. Besides, we don’t have a teacher for the Junior Youth materials anyway.”

I was having fun, too. Not just fun. I was learning a lot about how Junior Youth acted and what they wanted out of life. I decided to explain what I knew about Junior Youth groups from our animator training.

Jakob cut three lengths of tissue paper, passed them to Lukas who laid them on top of each other, then passed them to me and Niki. We started folding them, accordion style from one end to the other. “Junior Youth don’t really need a teacher,” I said. “The Junior Youth are really in charge of their own group. It’s just helpful to have an animator to help you learn, grow and be of service.”

Julia took my folded tissues and wrapped a pipe cleaner around the middle to hold them together. She passed it to Mei who started spreading the tissues and reached over to Niki to the next folded paper. We had our assembly line going and the colorful flowers were piling up.

Mei added another flower to the pile. “What can we do to serve? I don’t even know where to start.”

“You’re all serving right now,” I told them. “Beauty is a virtue and you’re making the picnic beautiful.”

I let that settle in for a moment and saw smiles creeping onto all of their faces as they completed their tasks in the flower making process. “If you don’t know how to do something, how do you usually find out?” I asked.

Silence. I waited. I had my own ideas, but animators were supposed to be about enlivening a group, not giving all the answers.

A few flowers later, Mei said, “We could pray and ask God for ideas about how we can serve.” She held up the list she’d written down from our ideas earlier. “Maybe these ideas are already answers to our prayers.”

“I have an idea,” Lukas said suddenly. “What if we had craft tables set up at the picnic so that the kids will have something to do while the grownups talk?”

The animated chatter following that suggestion pulled the picnic planning committee out of the study. By the time the Junior Youth got done explaining their idea, the adults were smiling and grateful.

“That’s one of the best ideas I’ve heard,” Mrs. Yuan said. “We were just in the other room trying to come up with ideas which would draw people to the picnic. Art tables are fabulous.”

“No one can resist a good art project,” added Katie Olson, Brandon’s mom. “And they take a while, so the parents will have time to ask questions.”

Saba and Niki’s mom, Sherry Farzaneh, agreed. “What about making more of those flowers? They’re big and colorful and wherever the families walked in the park afterward, they would be advertising the picnic.”

“We have lots more ideas,” Mei said, handing them the list, which they read and exclaimed over.

“See, you’re more valuable than you thought,” I whispered.

“I think that the five of you make a very nice Junior Youth Group,” Mrs. Farzaneh said. Then, she looked a little sad and I could tell she was thinking about how important it was for the junior youth to keep up their Bahá’í studies, but there was no one to lead the group.

“Can Janae be our animator?” Niki asked. “She’s great!”

I opened my mouth to . . . what? Protest? Offer? I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t get a word out.

“She helped us get organized today,” Mei said simply.

“She asked a question and didn’t rush to give us the answer,” Jakob added.

“She worked with us rather than telling us what to do,” Lukas chimed in.

Julia grinned. “She’s one of us—just a little older.”

“Thanks,” I said, truly touched. “I like being with you, too.” I stopped talking, not because I didn’t want to be their animator—I did. I stopped, because my mind was reeling with the reaction I’d get from my parents if I told them I was going to add a volunteer teaching job to my schedule.

“Well, Janae is pretty busy,” Mrs. Yuan put in, filling the awkward silence I’d created. “Let’s give her some time to think about it.”

“I promise I’ll think about it,” I told them. I knew that I wouldn’t think about anything else.

Chapter 5

No matter that it had been months since I'd resigned myself to my wheelchair, it still took me twice as long to get ready for school in the morning. No one realizes that I dress in my bed. I got tired of having to have my mom help me, so I figured out how to do it myself with a lot of rolling around. It's not so easy lifting up my dead legs and trying to cram them into underwear, pants and socks. Transferring myself into the chair from the bed was the second hurdle. First, I had to sit up and lift my legs off the bed and onto the floor. I always keep the chair right there, but I also always give it a shake to make sure the brake is on. The last thing I need when moving from the bed to the chair is for the chair to take off without me. I reached over, braced myself on the arm of the chair and moved over in two motions, adjusted my legs on the foot flaps and rolled to the bathroom.

Next problem—using the toilet. Ever heard of X-Front pants? Sheesh, if my friends only knew the stuff I go through to look as if everything is normal when I roll into school in the morning. I just say, thank God for the Shewee and that I can still feel when I need to go. My injury is called “Anterior Cord Syndrome” which means that my spinal cord wasn't completely cut in the accident. I have some feeling below my Lumbar 5 vertebrae, where the damage occurred. I can still feel some temperature changes and firm touch. I can also tell where I am positioned in space and can feel vibrations, so in many ways I'm lucky. People with complete spinal cord injuries have no motor or sensory function below the level of the injury. Actually, at my last doctor appointment, she told me that it was

possible for some people with this type of injury to regain some movement later in the recovery process. I hadn't told my friends, yet. It was better not to get anyone's hopes up, including mine, in case I wasn't "some people".

"Hi Mom, Dad," I said as I rolled into the dining room. I knew that they were happy that I'm as independent as I am.

"Good morning, Janae. Glad to see you up and about. A lot of mail came for you yesterday—scholarship applications," Mom said.

Indeed, there was a pile of large, flat envelopes stacked next to my breakfast plate. The stack of pancakes looked more appetizing. I buttered and syruped and took a bite before picking up the top envelope: Stanford Law School. The next envelope: U.C. Berkeley School of Law, ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship Fund, Endangered Environmental Law Student Writing Competition.

"You seem to have my whole education planned out for me," I said, taking another bite of food to bite off any other cryptic comments. I was really working on getting along with my parents, because I knew that they loved me very much despite their pushy ways.

My dad gave me his professor look over his glasses. "Well, it's the spring of your junior year and this is the opportune moment to begin applying for scholarships. With your grades, the fact that you're African American, female and have a disability, we think you have a pretty good chance of a full-ride to a prominent law school."

"Why law?" I asked, instead of just telling them I couldn't imagine a career more boring.

Mom smiled. "Well, you do like to argue a point," she said and I had to laugh a little, because everyone knew it was the truth.

"What if I don't want to roll around in a courtroom like the guy in that old time TV series, *Ironside*?"

"Law is a flexible career. Most attorneys aren't in a courtroom all day. They stay behind the scenes,

helping people with their problems. And law is a perfect career for someone with your . . . um . . . challenges,” Dad said. “It pays well and your future would be set in case you never marry.”

I shook my head and sighed. “People in wheelchairs get married, Dad. I don’t necessarily have to be single for life.”

“Of course you don’t, Janae,” Mom was quick to put in as she swatted my dad’s shoulder in warning. “We just want to make sure that you have a career which would provide you with enough income to remain independent.”

“Are you worried that I’ll be dependent on you for life?” I asked, feeling that familiar stirring in my gut that precipitated a rage of indignation for the injustice of it all.

“You’re misunderstanding our motives,” Dad began.

“Am I?” I jammed a couple more bites of pancake in my mouth so that I wouldn’t say more. I pasted a curious expression on my face that I hoped looked less mad and more inquisitive.

Dad smiled, completely unaware that he was upsetting me. *Pray!* I told myself. “Absolutely.” He shuffled through the papers. “Now, if law isn’t of interest, investment banking is always an option.”

It was hard to curb my sarcasm and I’m sure they heard it in my voice. “Gosh, I just can’t think of anything I’d like better than to sit behind a desk all day, hidden away from the public, staring at a computer and talking on the phone to clients who will pay for my expertise in a field I have zero interest in. Actually, I was thinking of becoming a teacher like you two.”

“What gave you that idea?” Mom asked. She was still acting neutral; I had to give her that.

I took a breath and willed myself to just talk normally. “Actually, I’ve been thinking about it since the Youth Gathering in Chico. I learned a lot about the kind of person I should be and how to help young people grow up with good moral values. Then, lately,

I've been helping with Mrs. Lian's children's class, but the kids are getting too old to be in children's class any more. They're really the age of Junior Youth and want to be of service to the community."

"What does that have to do with being a teacher?" Dad asked with half of his attention still on the stack of scholarship applications.

I automatically signed the back and forth "F" shapes for "explain" as I launched into my explanation. "It just seems so natural to talk with the kids and help them come up with plans and make decisions. They're so smart and capable. I like being around them and I'd like to volunteer to be their Youth Group animator. In fact, several of them speak Spanish, so I've been thinking about learning Spanish just so that I can help more kids in need."

I was going on and on about the posters we made and the flower assembly line and didn't really notice the tandem looks of alarm on my parents' faces.

"What?" I asked and signed at the same time. Sign was really becoming a part of me.

"Being a teacher, especially a middle school teacher, is a thankless, low paying, low-status job," my father declared.

"Especially in a depressed neighborhood," Mom added.

"High workload."

"Dangerous."

"No upward mobility."

The list of diatribes went on and on. I had been expressing my joy that I'd recently discovered in teaching and learning Spanish, thinking that my professor parents might at least understand a little, but their reaction was out of proportion with the situation.

I put my hand out to stop the tirade.

"Why are you so upset? You're both teachers. You're both good teachers. I've seen you teach and you love it. Isn't it natural for me to want to be like you two?"

My dad put the papers down that had been dangling uselessly in his hand and faced me fully. “We’re concerned that you’re selling yourself short. With your grades and ability, you could be a lawyer, a scientific researcher or *anything* that would pay more and have higher status.”

Suddenly I realized why the words “high status” kept coming into the conversation. I had known that they had high goals for me, but I hadn’t been aware of how high. They were trying to get me into a career that would lift me above my disability so that people would respect me no matter what. My quick interpretations of their words started forming bullet points in my head:

- They really don’t want to be saddled with caring for me.
- They don’t expect me to ever get married, because no one will want me.
- They are ashamed of me, because I’m in a wheelchair and feel I have to go overboard in the status category to compensate, kind of like Steven Hawking—no one sees him as burden.

“We suppose that you don’t have to be a lawyer,” her mother said by way of conciliation, “but you might want to find other ways to spend your time rather than teaching kids or learning Spanish. Why don’t you at least go down to the legal aid office, if you want to help the underprivileged, and volunteer on some community issues? That will look good on your scholarship applications.”

Suddenly, I just lost it. Even the prayers weren’t working.

“The only thing that will waste my time is filling out those scholarship applications,” I said. “I plan to have a career, and I promise I’ll be independent, and I’ll let you know if I ever want to get married to make sure that the guy has enough status to keep people from feeling sorry for me—including YOU!”

I tossed an apple in my mouth, laid my backpack on my lap and rolled out the door to the waiting bus with the lift that the district had provided for me. I was sure that my parents were still staring at my retreating back, mouths agape.

Good thing I hadn't mentioned the upcoming 19-Day Fast as that was sure to set them off even more.

"In case I never marry," I muttered to myself as the lift engaged and I maneuvered onto the bus.

"I'll marry you," Stewart, my little bus companion from the middle school, piped up. "I think you're beautiful. You just have to wait a few years for me to get a little older."

I grinned at my buddy who had been born without legs, but who got around a lot better than I did because it was a birth defect called amniotic banding that put him in his chair, not an accident. "I'll keep that in mind," I said and gave him a high five.

"Anything interesting going on in your life?" he asked. "Besides not getting married until I'm old enough?"

"Yep, Youth Wave is performing at a park Sunday and I'm thinking about becoming a teacher."

"What park?"

"Rosalia Paz from 1:00-4:00."

"Rolling distance from my house."

"You should come," I said. "The Bahá'ís are having a picnic, arts and crafts tables and our performance."

"I'll ask my parents. Will there be any kids there my age?"

I looked at Stewart as if for the first time. He was just about the same age as Mei, Julia and the others. He was a Junior Youth if I'd ever seen one. I nodded. "A group that I'd like you to meet. In fact, we're starting up a club for Junior Youth to talk about meaningful stuff and do service. You could join if you like."

"Will you be there?"

“I’m the teacher—well, we call it an animator—at least I will be when I convince my parents that I don’t want to go to law school.”

Stewart laughed. “My life is a whole lot less complicated than yours,” he said as the bus pulled up to the junior high school. “Maybe I’ll see you Sunday at the park.”

“Hope so.”

Chapter 6

I kept thinking about Stewart and how I saw him on the bus every morning and never thought to invite him to a Bahá'í gathering. He would be a great addition to the Junior Youth group. They were quite accepting of me and my chair, so I was sure they'd welcome Stewart. And, I happened to know that Stewart was quite the artist. I'd seen some sketches he'd done of kids in his classroom and they were nearly perfect. Thinking about Stewart only partially helped me distract myself from the issue at hand, though.

Why was communication with my parents so difficult? I would rather think about teaching and serving in the community by being a Junior Youth animator. Thinking about teaching brought me back to the home front. Of all the people I should be teaching the Faith to, my parents should be the top two on the list. If they understood my motives for service, maybe they'd be more reasonable when it came to supporting me in a college major. Fat chance we were ever going to have that conversation, though.

"Thanks, Mr. Morris," I told the bus driver as I wheeled out onto the platform, locked my wheels and prepared to be lowered down to the sidewalk in front of the school. He stood next to the platform to make sure I didn't overshoot and that I got off okay.

"Whatever's bothering you; it will get better," he said perceptively.

"My troubles are that obvious?" I asked.

"Usually you talk to me," he said.

I smiled. "You're right. I've got a lot on my mind—mostly the future. Sometimes I just want to be a kid and not have to think about going off to university,

getting a job and getting married. For heaven's sake—I don't even have a boyfriend."

"Yet!" he said and winked at me. He moved to the side as I rolled myself onto the sidewalk. There was Anthony, waiting for me.

Anthony's smiling face was an incredible treat. Seeing Anthony made me realize that I just had to open my mouth to everyone, because God would generously provide the teaching opportunities. I looked back and waved at Mr. Morris who was grinning way too knowingly. Maybe this afternoon when he took me home, I'd invite him to the picnic, too. After all, Ayyam-i-Ha was a celebration of hospitality and fellowship, and a perfect time to introduce people to the Faith.

"To what do I owe the honor of being escorted into school?" I asked. "You're not going to ask to borrow my wheels for a race down the hallway, are you?"

Anthony laughed. "Well, now that you mention it, your chair does look very speedy. When are you going to go out for wheelchair basketball?"

"When my arms are stronger. Now that I'm past the first recovery period, the doctor says I can start training," I said as I pushed hard on the wheels to get me going up the not quite ADA approved, sloped hill to the school entry. I left my backpack on my lap to keep more weight in the front so I wouldn't tip over.

"Want some help?" he asked.

"And miss this opportunity for an upper body workout? No chance!"

"Was that sarcasm?"

"Yes. I'll take a push. How did you like the Youth Wave meeting?" I asked as he shoved me up the hill. I really did have to improve my arm strength not just for basketball, if I decided to attempt it again, or dancing. I needed it for hills like this which seemed like no big deal for someone who was walking, but which could easily tip me over backward if I weren't careful. It was bad enough that everyone surreptitiously watched me in my wheelchair. I didn't need to provide them with

the spectacle of me on my back with my feet in the air, wheels spinning. Unless it was on purpose doing wheelchair dancing which I really needed to start investigating.

“Cool,” Anthony said simply. “You guys are down to earth and you’re doing good stuff for the community. It’s comfortable to be around you and none of you are pushy about your religion. It makes me want to find out more.”

I looked over my shoulder at him and he was still smiling. “Good. You’ll be glad you did.”

“I’m looking forward to performing the prayer with Emilio and Cory. I went online and downloaded a whole prayer book and read some other Holy Writings on websites. I really liked the one that says, ‘The individuality of each created thing is based upon divine wisdom, for in the creation of God there is no defect.’”

We’d reached the door of the homeroom classroom and I hadn’t even thought to stop him from rolling me right up the wheelchair ramp and into the hallway. “Where is that quote from?” I wondered if he had been thinking about me and my defects when he read that.

“Someone named ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and a book called Divine Philosophy. I’m kind of a philosophy nut along with a history nut,” he admitted, “so when I was surfing around and saw the title of the book, I started reading it. I’ve got it on my tablet. Want to discuss it over lunch?”

“Sure,” I said. *Who was teaching whom here?*

I could barely pay attention to the announcements over the loudspeaker in class. I kept stealing glances at Anthony and every time I looked, he was looking back and smiling. I felt a little flip in my solar plexus—clearly a part of my body that still had full feeling. I was really looking forward to our discussion at lunch.

“And one final announcement for all juniors planning to further their education at a university,” the teacher said, and I jerked myself back to reality. “Remember that there is a University Information Faire this Friday in the gym. Representatives from 30

universities in California, both public and private, will be here to explain their programs, pass out brochures and talk about financial aid and scholarship opportunities. All junior should attend to get a jump on the scholarship application season.”

Now, that’s interesting, I thought, and definitely planned to go. Maybe I could find out about teaching degrees before I had another conversation with my parents.

After a quick wave in parting, I headed off to my morning classes and Anthony headed off to his, promising to meet me at the gazebo at lunch. It was almost like a date. Wow! I was going to have to talk to Duncan. He was our resident dating expert—or expert on how normal dating didn’t work for him at all and that he hadn’t figured out what Bahá’í dating was. I was probably getting ahead of myself. Anthony was interested in the Faith, that was all. *Teach, Janae*, I told myself. *You said you wanted to be a teacher.*

Lunch rolled around quickly, no pun intended, and I found myself unwrapping another stellar sandwich from my mother who was an inspiring teacher and a gourmet cook, but wanted me to be a lawyer/investment banker.

Anthony swiped his tablet and brought up the quote. He read:

The individuality of each created thing is based upon divine wisdom, for in the creation of God there is no defect. However, personality has no element of permanence. It is a slightly changeable quality in man which can be turned in either direction. For if he acquire praiseworthy virtues, these strengthen the individuality of man and call forth his hidden forces; but if he acquire defects, the beauty and simplicity of the individuality will be lost to him and its God-given qualities will be stifled in the foul atmosphere of self.”

Anthony stopped reading and looked at me. “What do you think about improving our personalities? How do we acquire virtues and how do we avoid acquiring defects?”

“Is this a test?” Because I haven’t been a Bahá’í long enough to have good answers. Usually I’m still the one with the questions. I can tell you who ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is, though. He’s the son of Bahá’u’lláh and the Center of the Covenant. He led the Faith after his father died and everyone really looks up to him as a perfect example of the kind of person to be. He even came to California about 100 years ago.”

“I definitely want to find out more about that visit! Wouldn’t it be amazing to meet Him? But, actually, I was really thinking about this subject because I was doing a paper on the insistent self for my philosophy class and this quote seemed to be saying that we have to purposefully turn ourselves towards God and try to acquire the virtues or else our insistent self will try to take over and run the show.”

Where had this boy come from and what had he done with all of the other regular boys? I tilted my head and considered his question, not used to being so philosophical at lunch. “We studied about this at our Youth Gathering when we took the course to be Junior Youth animators. Let me see if I can remember. Oh, right. We were talking about how we live in this age when the materialistic culture is pretty aggressive.”

“No kidding,” Anthony said. “It’s invading every segment of society. That’s what my paper is on—how the media has hyped us into having this exaggerated occupation with self by telling us we won’t be good enough unless we buy this fashion or wear this cologne or look, sound and act a certain way.”

“Or that our identities hinge on whether we have a sports car or a handsome boyfriend . . .”

“Or a lot of money, power and fame . . .” Anthony finished for me.

We smiled.

“I don’t think that’s what life is all about, but the media keeps shoving these images down our throats. It tells us to look out for number one and that being self-centered is a good thing. The self-help gurus tell us to go after our selfish desires and indulge our self-interest. Self, self, self. Even my parents are immersed in building an empire.”

Anthony stopped talking and ate his now cold slice of pizza that he’d gotten from the cafeteria. I just waited, because I knew he wasn’t finished.

“The thing is, when I saw that you were all very unselfishly finding ways to be of service to the community, it was really attractive to me. I want to be part of that. I’m tired of empire-building.”

“Parents,” I said, looking off in the direction of my house. “They have our best interests at heart, I suppose, but sometimes their visions for us don’t match our visions for ourselves.”

“What’s the solution? For my paper and for my life.” Anthony asked. “My parents want me to join my dad’s stock brokerage firm. I can’t imagine anything less fun and less helpful for the world than staring at ticker tapes all day and waiting to pounce when the stock prices go up and down.”

“Unless it’s being a lawyer or an investment banker,” I muttered.

“Ah,” he said.

“Hmm,” I answered.

We understood each other perfectly, but it was great to have someone to talk to about it.

“It’s important to have an occupation. Bahá’u’lláh says so,” I told him, turning my chair slightly to catch the full warmth of the sun on my face. “That occupation is your way to serve the world and no matter what you do, it’s the attitude you bring to it that’s most important. I suppose a stock broker or an investment banker with a serving attitude would be helping the world and a nurse or a doctor with a surly

attitude wouldn't be helping at all. Bahá'u'lláh says that work, in the spirit of service, is a form of worship."

Anthony shifted to sit in front of me on the grass. "That's cool. So, what form of work do you want?"

"I've really been thinking about being a teacher," I told him. "I really like working with the Junior Youth and I think I'm pretty good at guiding without being pushy. They accept me for who I am, chair and all."

"Other people don't?"

I shook my head ruefully. "Not really. Not even my parents. I think they see this chair as my ticket to an unfulfilling life alone and that I'd better make a lot of money to make up for the loss of status and desirability that a disability provides. I haven't tried dating, but I guess they could be right on that count since I haven't seen the suitors lining up."

Anthony threw back his head and laughed. The sound filled the whole gazebo and other kids started looking at him. I would have kicked him, but my legs didn't work.

"What's so funny?" I asked when he'd stopped howling with mirth.

"You're hilarious, do you know that?"

"Hilarious like a comedian or like an idiot?"

"You're totally desirable, but you have no clue."

"Should I say thanks or slap you?"

Anthony laughed again, softer this time. "Dating isn't all it's cracked up to be, you know? It's pretty hard to get past the shallowness of money, status and looks as well as all of the material stuff to find ways to meet people you might actually get along with. I know, because I've tried."

I leaned back and folded my arms. "Do tell."

Anthony leaned forward and whispered. "Girls always want to date me because they know my family has money and I'm reasonably good looking, but when they find out that I bike to school after my paper route in the mornings, they lose interest."

I leaned forward, too, and smelled his cologne, which wasn't half bad for a paperboy. "You mean, no fancy wheels, no girls?"

"You've got it!"

This time it was my turn to laugh. "Well, I've got my own fancy wheels and I'll bet I could keep up with your bike if you ride slowly. Want to take a spin around the park this weekend before the picnic?"

"Is that a race you're suggesting? What's the prize if I win?"

"You get to sit down with me and deepen on the quotes about how treat the insistent self. I've got them in my animator workbook." I reached out to shake his hand and he gripped mine firmly.

"Nice grip, Booth. How about a hand up?"

"No problem. You pushed me up the ramp; I can pull you off of the ground."

Chapter 7

I had some time to think on Tuesday afternoon while my parents were busy correcting papers, which they were quick to point out were a teacher's eternal companions. Other than their cryptic comments on work overload, they had let the teacher discussion drop. The pile of scholarship applications had not left the table, however. I wondered what I'd find out at the University Faire to add to the pile.

I really wished that I could talk to my parents about how I might want to live my life rather than have to fight with them about future glory. I wandered out into the backyard, thankful for all of the quick changes that my parents had made to our home to accommodate my wheelchair. Before the accident, I'd always spent quiet time under the old oak tree, but it was located in the far back corner of the lot and completely inaccessible once I was relegated to the chair—until a month ago when my dad laid a cement path to the tree and a deck around the tree. Now, I could sit and enjoy the budding trees and the squirrels that liked to jump around on the back fence. It wasn't quite the same as climbing the tree like I used to do, but it was better than sitting in the house and longing to be in the yard.

Though it was only February and late in the afternoon, it was unseasonably warm. The cherry tree had already started blooming and the crocuses were already greeting the spring around the edges of the little fish pond my dad had also built. Next to them, the spiky leaves of the daffodils had emerged, but hadn't yet decided it was warm enough to open. Their smooth sharp edges contrasted with the feathery ferns.

I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the morning sun and spent a few minutes absorbing its

rays. I quieted my breathing and went into meditation mode. I started by saying the Greatest Name, “Alláh’u’abhá”, 95 times, taking a deep, cleansing breath after each set of 19. I had found this was the best way to create the kind of stillness I needed to pray and listen for answers.

My conversation with Anthony floated back into my mind. I’d told him that we all needed a sacred purpose and I wondered what mine really was. Before, it had been being the best basketball player. Top basketball players earn scholarships to top universities where they can get degrees that matter. Without basketball as the carrot, it was a purely academic race. Better grades meant a higher chance of getting into a good school and having a good major, which translated to a higher paying job, more status, more independence—at least according to my parents.

I kept my eyes closed and remembered the quote from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá where he explains that everyone should have some trade, art or profession to serve humanity. He said that this service is acceptable as the highest form of worship. Could I have served humanity by playing basketball? I suppose if I had been very entertaining and people had enjoyed watching me. Was being good at academics a service to humanity? Was studying hard a sacred purpose or just a means to an end? Or worse, was it just knowledge that begins and ends in knowledge—not useful, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. My parents said that I must distinguish myself—set myself apart from the rest—because I had my disability to overcome.

Thank goodness that the Writings were only a click away and that our Wi-Fi reached into the yard. I swiped my tablet and brought up the Bahá’í Resource library. I typed in the word “distinguished” and a quote came up from Promulgation of Universal Peace. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

For you I desire spiritual distinction - that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity, for unity and accord, for love and justice. In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world - for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace. Finally, you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and for acquiring the bestowals of God. I desire this distinction for you. (PUP p. 190)

So, to be distinguished, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, didn’t mean having a high paying job, necessarily. But it did mean loving God and humanity and acquiring virtues while doing philanthropic deeds promoting international peace.

“Oh God,” I prayed. “Could you help me figure out how I can serve humanity? What can I offer the world? Is it teaching? Playing piano? Signing? Speaking Spanish?”

The sun faded as I sat quietly waiting for answers, but all I got was colder. I had been hoping for a big thunderclap and a voice from heaven saying, “Janae—you’re a natural teacher—go forth and teach.” Unfortunately, the only clap was me swatting a mosquito.

The Fast was coming up. It started on Monday, the day after the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic. Before that we had the four days of Ayyam-i-Ha starting on Thursday—two days from today. We were having our regular Bahá’í Club meeting that day to practice for the weekend, and deepen on fasting. And, then there was a community Ayyam-i-Ha party on Friday night. We were having a homemade gift exchange.

No more time for dawdling. I had a lot of homework to do so that I would have time to go to all of the Bahá'í events. Plus, I needed to make my gifts for the exchange.

Youth Wave had already decided to slow down a little during The Fast and not have any performances during the 19 days since we wouldn't be eating or drinking and it would be hard to rehearse. I realized that I was really looking forward to The Fast as a time to get my thoughts together. *Maybe if I'm not eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset, I'll have more time to think about my sacred purpose.*

Feeling centered and organized, I rolled into the kitchen.

Dinner was on the table. Lentil stew and homemade bread with a green salad. Just what I needed to fuel up for an evening of homework.

Everything seemed peaceful for about five minutes. Suddenly dinner turned into a battle.

"How has your week gone so far?" Mom asked. "We haven't seen much of you."

I started a conversation about how fun it was to work with the Junior Youth the day before and how I had helped them come up with ideas for the picnic, but I was stopped mid-sentence.

My dad put his hand up. "I know you're trying to show examples of how much fun teaching is, but it's not working. You really need to get on with applying to law schools. You need a solid profession with a future."

"Dad, there wouldn't even be lawyers without teachers. Teachers *are* the future. I'm going to a university faire on Friday to find out about career options in the education field. I want to be of service to humanity, not just amass wealth."

"If you really want to be a teacher, then you could teach law. You have the grades and study habits that will see you into and through law school. You're number 3 in your class. Don't waste your high standing on a low-paying service profession."

“Service is a noble goal,” my mom said and I thought for a moment she was taking my side. “But you can serve rich people as well as poor people.”

“You know, Janae,” my dad added, “you’ve been so recalcitrant lately that I’m sure you’d choose the opposite of what we want just to be ornery.”

My eyes opened wide. That was a low blow! I’d always thought of my parents as caring, giving, loving teachers—maybe a little pushy—but with their hearts in the right places, but now I had no idea who these people were. It was like the only thing they cared about was my material success and it didn’t matter what I wanted at all.

Deep breath, Remover of Difficulties, another deep breath.

I pushed back from the table, my bowl of stew untouched. “Mom, Dad,” I said, “I’m going to pretend that you didn’t just say the things you did and that you realize that I’ve gone through a tough time these last few months. At first I was very angry and if I took it out on you, I’m sorry, but I’ve been pretty calm the last couple of months since I made friends with the Bahá’ís and I’ve worked very hard at being cooperative.”

“Janae, we know . . .” Dad started, but this time it was my turn to hold up my hand to stop him.

“I understand that you want what’s best for me and so do I. I want to make you proud of me, but you have to let me decide about my own life. I have to live it—not you.”

I rocked my chair back and forth a couple of inches. “Look, let’s not argue. The Bahá’í 19-day Fast starts after Ayyam-i-Ha and I’m going to take the period of The Fast to look at my life goals. I ask you to be patient during the next month while I sort things out and do some investigating on my own. I have to go do my homework now.”

I rolled out of the kitchen, leaving the heavy silence and my bowl of stew at the table. Good practice for The Fast, I thought.

Either I was just incredibly logical or they were so shocked by the idea that I would fast for 19 days that they were speechless, I thought as I closed the door to my room. I clicked play on my MP3 player and See Me Beautiful flowed into my ears, drowning out whatever tumult might be occurring in the kitchen.

My cell phone rang. It was Anthony.

“Can I do the Bahá’í Fast even if I’m not a Bahá’í?” he asked as soon as I’d said hello.

I smiled. My parents were building walls. Anthony was building bridges.

“As far as I know there isn’t a rule that says you have to declare your belief to do The Fast. In fact, Brandon’s mom told me that she used her first fast to determine if she wanted to become a Bahá’í. She spent the time praying and investigating and she declared her belief on Naw Ruz—the New Year.”

Anthony laughed a little. He sounded relieved. “Guess what? So, I was reading online about The Fast and I found this quote. I thought it might help with what we were talking about today.”

“Really? You’re looking up quotes for me?” Astounding.

“At your service,” Anthony quipped. “Listen to this, Booth. *‘Obligatory prayer and fasting produce awareness and awakening in man, and are conducive to his protection and preservation from tests.’*”

“I could use some preservation from tests right now. I just had a ‘discussion’ with my parents about the importance of service, and not the kind of service that I had in mind.”

“It also says that fasting is the cause of the elevation of one’s spiritual station,” Anthony added for good measure. “I think I need a boost in that department. My material station is already fine.”

As we talked, I took out the beaded pen wraps that I was making with the names of the Youth Wave members and searched around in the alphabet beads to make sure I had enough to make one for Anthony.

We chatted about how fasting was supposed to awaken people and increase spirituality. More about how not eating helped a person confine his or her thoughts to the commemoration of God and that this produced 'ideal advancements'. I didn't even realize that an hour had passed while we talked and that I still needed to do my homework before I started my lengthy bedtime routine. At least, I'd finished all of the pen wraps and was ready for the gift exchange.

I'll bet that the Junior Youth would really like to make these pen wraps, I thought as I twirled them around the pens and laid them in the box. If I did these with the Junior Youth, we could talk about how they wrap around the pen the same way that Bahá'u'lláh's prayers wrap around us for protection. They could be reminders, and lessons . . .

"Are you listening?" Anthony asked, breaking into my teacher reverie.

This time it was my turn to laugh. "You're the first person who has ever called me up to debate the merits of spiritual versus material stations. I think we're going to deepen on this topic at our meeting on Thursday after we've rehearsed for the weekend."

"I'll be there and I'll see you at school tomorrow," he said. "Discussion at lunch as usual?"

"Sure thing. And, thanks for calling. That quote was the spiritual sustenance I needed right about now. And, some stew to take care of the physical. I haven't eaten yet. See you tomorrow."

Deciding on my life's work, my sacred purpose, was definitely a spiritual challenge and if fasting would also help protect and preserve me from tests, then it was a win-win, a term my parents were also fond of using. I was glad, however, that they weren't in the kitchen when I went back out to reheat my stew.

Chapter 8

Time seemed to pass more quickly than usual. Maybe it was because I knew it was only a couple of days before the fast and I wasn't going to be eating lunch. Would Anthony and I keep talking every day when we didn't have sandwiches between us? I was finding it increasingly easy to talk to him about deep subjects. He had such interesting opinions and for a rich kid, he was really humble. During our Wednesday and Thursday lunches where we had discussed everything from ancient religions to future careers, I had watched his parade of admirers stroll "coincidentally" by the gazebo.

Some waved, others giggled, the occasional brave one rushed up and gave him a note "from a friend" about "another friend" who liked him.

"I see what you mean about your fan club. They're pretty persistent," I told him after the fourth girl "accidentally" stopped by with a vital message. "It's like you're a movie star. I never knew that about you."

Anthony grinned and rolled his eyes. "You're so lucky I've deigned to spend time with you," he quipped.

"I'm just more subtle than the others," I joked back. "I'm really leading you into religion because I want your millions. I'm the decoy. The closer is coming any second. We target guys like you."

"Do you have my dossier on file in your tablet?" he asked, leaning over to peer at my screen which had some quotes about choosing an occupation to serve the world on it.

"We're more sophisticated than that," I told him conspiratorially. "I had to memorize it and then destroy it." I tapped the side of my head. "It's all up here."

“Waste of head space, I think.”

The bell to end lunch rang and I just shrugged. He'd never know just how much head space he was actually taking up. I *was* lucky that Anthony Torres was spending time with me. Our elevated conversations had me thinking night and day about the Faith and about my future and how the two of them went together. If this were teaching, then I was learning more than my student.

Several of us walked to Lian's house after school. Emilio was walking backward in front of me trying out some signs. He was practicing the motions for See Me Beautiful.

“Veme bella,” he said, signing and saying the words in English and Spanish. We only signed the word ‘beautiful’ in the song, because it was too confusing to the audience to try to show too many words. The concepts of the song got across with just a few strategic signs.

“Veme bella,” I repeated, wheeling, lifting my hands off the wheels and briefly signing. “Okay, here's the next one. We sing, “look for the best in me,” but we only sign “discover, best and me”.

“Busque la major de mi,” he sang, copying the signs.

Anthony took over pushing so that I could sign and Cory walked forward to prevent Emilio from falling over backward since he was so intent on signing, singing and translating.

By the time we reached Lian's house we all knew the words, the tune, the signs and the Spanish version of the song. We could probably sing it at the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic after all. Maybe not the dance, but definitely the song and signs.

“We've discovered something amazing,” I signed to Lian when she opened the basement door to welcome us. “Signing is a great way to memorize a new language. When I sign, I remember the words. I've got a physical

motion stuck in my memory. I think that we should all learn Spanish and sign language together.”

“Two languages for the price of one,” Anthony added. “The signs really are a powerful visual clue for the words.”

“And, I could understand you when you’re speaking Spanish,” Lian said, “even if I didn’t learn the language. What a concept!”

“What if sign language could be the universal language Bahá’u’lláh talks about?” Cory said. “Then everyone in the world could talk to each other, no matter what their language.”

“Two problems,” Lian said. “Blind people wouldn’t be able to see the signs and there are about 200 different versions of sign language that would have to be consolidated first—including about 20 versions of Spanish.”

“I still think it could help me to learn both at the same time,” I said, turning to thank Anthony for the push up the ramp.

“My pleasure,” he said, doing a princely bow.

Ham! I thought. We need to get this guy up on the stage.

“Lots to do today, friends,” Tracy said, quickly passing out an agenda. Yep, an agenda.

“I’m going to have to get some tips on organization and time management from you,” I said, sincerely meaning it. Tracy was one of the most organized people I knew and probably had her future perfectly mapped out and color coded.

“I’m free on Tuesday afternoons from 4:00-6:00 pm,” she said.

“Pencil me in for next Tuesday. That will be the second day of The Fast and a perfect time to start my plan.”

“What plan is that, Janae?” Brandon asked.

“I really want to take time during fast to reevaluate my life, to pray and think about what I want to do and who I want to be.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Saba said. “This is my first fast, too, since I just turned 15.”

“We’re all pretty new at this. Except for Duncan, we’ve all only had a year or two of practice,” Brandon said. “I’ve watched my parents fast all of these years, but last year was my first year and I’m not sure I did a very good job.”

Tracy cleared her throat and waved the agenda. “We’re going to have plenty of time to talk about fasting after we rehearse. First things first. And, I have a surprise for all of you that will help us deepen on fasting, so let’s get busy.”

Will took out his prayer book, his constant shirt pocket companion. Once he’d told me that he used to keep it in his back pocket until he realized that he was sitting on God’s words and that was probably not very respectful.

I closed my eyes and let a deep breath signal the clearing of my mind. How quickly I’d fallen into these spiritual habits and how dear they were to me.

O Thou kind Lord! From the horizon of detachment Thou hast manifested souls that, even as the shining moon, shed radiance upon the realm of heart and soul, rid themselves from the attributes of the world of existence and hastened forth unto the kingdom of immortality. With a drop from the ocean of Thy loving-kindness Thou didst oft-times moisten the gardens of their hearts until they gained incomparable freshness and beauty. The holy fragrance of Thy divine unity was diffused far and wide, shedding its sweet savors over the entire world, causing the regions of the earth to be redolent with perfume.

Raise up then, O spirit of Purity, souls who, like those sanctified beings, will become free and pure, will adorn the world of being with a new raiment and a wondrous robe, will seek no one else but Thee, tread no path except the path of Thy good pleasure and will speak of naught but the mysteries of Thy Cause.

O Thou kind Lord! Grant that this youth may attain unto that which is the highest aspiration of the holy ones. Endow him with the wings of Thy strengthening grace—wings of detachment and divine aid—that he may soar thereby into the atmosphere of Thy tender mercy, be able to partake of Thy celestial bestowals, may become a sign of divine guidance and a standard of the Concourse on high. Thou art the Potent, the Powerful, the Seeing, the Hearing.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Tread no path except the path of God’s good pleasure. Attain that which is the highest aspiration of the holy ones. To be given wings of detachment and divine aid. Become a sign of divine guidance.

When we read prayers, snippets always continued to replay in my mind. Maybe those were the things I needed to hear. Maybe those were the confirmations and messages that were given to me in answer to my prayers for guidance.

I could talk to Tracy about it. She seemed to have her spiritual act together. I mentally put it on a sticky note for our Tuesday conversation. By then I would have gone to the University Faire, too and would have all the tools I needed to dedicate my thoughts during the fast to my future goals.

We broke into small groups and practiced our numbers and then gathered together for the ones like “Listen” that took the whole group. While Duncan and Lian practiced the unity dance and I accompanied them on the piano, Brandon, Cory, Emilio and Anthony were lifting their Spanish voices in prayer. Tracy, Will and Saba were doing a tap and slap dance in another corner, designed to get the whole audience involved in cooperative movements. It was funny how we could all do very different things in the same room and not disturb each other. Maybe the prayers helped us concentrate.

I focused on the keyboard and the light display while Lian and Duncan danced out opposing moods on a much smaller stage than we'd have in the park, but I kept an ear on the Spanish prayer and allowed the rhythmic clapping to punctuate my heartbeat. It was like being bombarded with spirit energy. Wow!

In no time, we'd practiced and were back together for our sign language signature song, "Listen", which had turned the Riverview Bahá'í Club into Youth Wave' a few months ago. Everyone did the song with Anthony doing his best to learn the signs as we went along.

Again, I wondered if Anthony had somehow been with us all along—he fit in so naturally.

Mei ran down with a tray of snacks and drinks which we gladly gobbled up. Everyone flopped onto sofas and pillows to rest. Tracy dug into her bag and brought out some small turquoise books with a small flame on the covers. She passed them around.

"Happy Fasting," Will read. "Now, *that's* positive thinking! I'm not quite sure how fasting can be happy if you're not eating. I'm not usually in a good mood when I'm starving to death."

"Actually, I'm a bit worried about how not eating for 12 hours per day might weaken us enough that we'll get sick," Cory said.

"No kidding," Emilio brought up. "I get shaky when I don't eat or drink for a while."

"Or dizzy," put in Will. "When I was competing and I forgot to stay hydrated, I almost passed out."

Funny. I wasn't worried about going hungry. Being paraplegic had dampened my hunger signals considerably. I had to stay on schedule or I would sometimes forget to eat. I had to stay on schedule for other things as well—stuff I would never tell my friends, no matter how close we were. Let them think that things like going to the bathroom were still normal.

"Let's read some of the book," Tracy suggested. "In the table of contents it mentions things like the desire to eat and keeping hydrated."

I opened my book to the contents' page. The meaning of fasting, the purpose of fasting, meditation, prayer and fasting. Just what I needed.

"This book was written recently by a Bahá'í pioneer in China," Tracy said. "He's a doctor and gets a lot of questions about how to stay healthy during The Fast."

"Let's take turns reading," Cory said. "I can start."

Everyone nodded. Cory read:

"The 19-Day Fast is one of the great bounties Bahá'u'lláh has bestowed upon mankind. As a physician, I have had the opportunity to observe the reactions of friends and co-workers during the Fast. I often get concerned looks and comments suggesting that fasting from sunrise to sunset is equivalent to "starvation" or somehow depriving my body of the nutrition it needs to function throughout the day. Others mention that they have tried fasting, but were unsuccessful because they were "too hungry" or became very "weak" or "shaky"."

Will and Emilio leaned forward. Cory kept reading about how the book was going to talk about a basic understanding of digestion and dispel the concerns that fasting was harmful. The author even suggested that feelings of hunger and weakness were natural and actually conducive to the fasting experience, because they help us tune into our spirit.

It talked about how the Bahá'í Writings teach us that physical abstinence from food or drink isn't the primary purpose of the 19-Day Fast, but was a symbolic reminder of our spiritual purpose in life. It was a time of rejuvenation and spiritual liberation.

Wow again. Zing, zing, zing. It was like little spiritual confirmations were playing music in my head. This was exactly what I needed to be doing at this very moment: fasting and reflecting.

"We won't get through the whole book reading it together," Tracy said after we'd been reading and talking about just the introduction for an hour.

“We still have a lot to do during Ayyam-i-Ha, or as Bahá’u’lláh describes ‘the days of giving that precede the season of restraint’, Duncan said. “We have the community party tomorrow night and the performance on the weekend.”

Tracy smiled. “I’ve always loved Ayyam-i-Ha. Ever since I was a little kid, my parents make a treasure hunt for me to find my presents.”

“My parents always invite all of the neighbors over for a Chinese food fest,” Lian told us. “It’s a great way to introduce the Faith.”

“What does your family do, Brandon?” Anthony asked.

“Usually we go hike a mountain at Bosch Bahá’í School. It’s symbolic, too. When we reach the top, we know we can do anything together—fasting included. That also made us kids feel a part of The Fast, even if we were too young to participate in the no eating part.”

“That’s a cool tradition,” Anthony commented.

“My parents have been doing it since high school. That’s when they met and fasting is pretty special to my mom, because she became a Bahá’í after her first fast on Naw Ruz.”

“Well, I’m going to join you on The Fast, if you don’t mind,” Anthony said. “I’ve got a few symbolic mountains I need to climb, too.”

I wondered what those were and hoped he’d share during our lunchtime discussions.

Exclamations followed his announcement and toasts with water and juice. After all, it was the second to last Youth Wave meeting with refreshments for the next Bahá’í month.

“You should come to the Ayyam-i-Ha party and talk to my mom,” Brandon said.

“Thanks.”

“Let’s take the books home to read and we can talk amongst ourselves over the weekend, and for sure talk more on Monday at our next meeting,” Tracy said.

I couldn’t wait to start reading.

Chapter 9

That night I was in the middle of a break from homework where I was perusing the section in *Happy Fasting* about meditation and prayer during fasting when the phone rang.

“Hi, Janae, it’s Niki Farzaneh.”

“Hi Niki, how’s it going?” I asked.

“The Junior Youth have a problem and hope you can help.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Remember how we came up with the idea for having craft tables at the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic to attract people?”

I put a book mark in the fasting book and closed it to give Niki my full attention. “That was a great idea,” I told her. “So what’s the problem?”

“The grownups don’t have time to prepare all of the crafts for the tables. They said that they could buy the stuff, but they’re busy preparing for the community Ayyam-i-Ha party tomorrow night. We need to get everything ready. We’re going to be at Lian’s house on Saturday. Do you think that you and some of the other Youth Wave members could help us?”

I smiled, feeling needed. It was a good feeling to think she called me first—like they were already thinking of me as their animator. “Let me call around and find out,” I told her. “I’ll call you back later.”

Before I had the chance to dial anyone’s number, my phone rang again. This time it was Emilio. “Hey Janae, what do you say if we have a quick Spanish class on how to share Anna’s Presentation on Saturday before the picnic. Brandon says some of the

community members want to start lessons and I figure that's as good a time as any to start."

"Right after we help the Junior Youth prepare the crafts for the picnic," I said and told them their dilemma.

"I'll tell the guys," he said. "By the way, Happy Ayyam-i-Ha a day early."

"Thanks, and I'll call the girls. How's that for equality?"

"Igualdad," he said.

"Igualdad," I repeated. "Hey, can I have the words to the prayer you guys are singing in Spanish? I'd like to memorize it, too."

"I'll send you an email after we hang up."

By the time I finished calling the girls and telling them about the needs of the Junior Youth and the Spanish class on Saturday, I barely had time to finish my homework and take a shower since I have to lift myself out of my chair and transfer onto the seat in the shower and then try to get back out without slithering to the floor while my hands are all wet. It's quite the procedure, but I'm getting better at it.

I took the Happy Fasting book to bed with me and read a quote on meditation.

"Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit – the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation...This faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God."

Then I read the prayer in Spanish that Emilio emailed me.

He despertado bajo tu amparo, oh mi Dios, y corresponde a quien busca tal amparo permanecer dentro del santuario de tu protección y la fortaleza de tu defensa. Ilumina mi ser interior, o mi Señor, con los

*resplandores de la aurora de tu Revelación, así como
iluminaste mi ser exterior con la luz matinal de tu favor.*

Por Bahá'u'lláh

I knew that one by heart in English.

*I have wakened in Thy shelter, O my God, and it
becometh him that seeketh that shelter to abide within
the Sanctuary of Thy protection and the Stronghold of
Thy defense. Illumine my inner being, O my Lord, with
the splendors of the Dayspring of Thy Revelation, even
as thou didst illumine my outer being with the morning
light of Thy favor.*

Bahá'u'lláh

At first I couldn't get comfortable or stop thinking about what Anthony and I might talk about at lunch the next day and thinking that I should say more prayers for family unity and that I should start meditating on what I was going to do with the rest of my life and I should figure out how to fit animating the youth group into my schedule, and learn Spanish, and the university fair . . .

My shoulds turned into snores (well, actually I hope not) and I drifted off.

I woke up before dawn the next day and started my morning routine. At least it was good practice for fasting. By the time I ate breakfast, though, it was well past sunrise, so I realized that I'd have to put my breakfast out the night before if I had any hope of eating before the sun came up.

The day sped by what with the university fair where I got a ton of material about teacher colleges and lunch with Anthony where we discussed the finer points of finding safe places to say the obligatory prayer. It seemed like only a moment before I was rolling into the Community Center for the Ayyam-i-Ha party. The festive atmosphere struck me immediately. Streamers hung from every corner. A large table was piled with

anonymous gifts. Niki sat at the registration table and had us sign in. Everyone got a name tag.

“Is that a disco ball hanging from the ceiling?” I asked Lian.

“Brandon’s dad, Matt, is going to be the DJ after dinner.”

“No wonder they didn’t need Youth Wave to perform,” I said.

“The adults like to perform, too. Matt was quite the actor in high school, I’m told. He and Katie met while doing a Shakespearean play.”

“No kidding!” I looked over at Katie and Matt Olson standing by the DJ system as if seeing them for the first time. Before, they were just Brandon’s parents—nice, but just some of the adult Bahá’ís in the community. Lately, I’d been hearing about Katie’s first fasting experience and now the acting thing. I’d have to talk to them more. Sometimes teens can be so insulated in our own little worlds. It started making me wonder how my parents got along with their parents and who chose their careers for them.

Around us, the slight breeze from the air conditioners rustled the lightweight, blue plastic tablecloths. Centerpieces of flowers and driftwood made me want to go over to each table and look at its unique creation. I immediately thought about how fun it would be for the Junior Youth to learn to make centerpieces like these—more like natural sculptures than bouquets.

“So much goes on in this community that we’re not even aware of,” I commented to Brandon when I rolled up to him. “So, your dad’s a DJ in his spare time, huh?”

“He does the sound for our band when Cory and I and the other guys have time to practice.”

“I never knew.”

It was like I was seeing the community for the first time—people of every shape and color bustling to and fro, decorating, setting out food, marking out an area

for the dance floor, talking, laughing, everyone so unified.

“Quite the celebration,” Anthony said, coming up behind me.

“I know! Happy Ayyam-i-Ha!” I said, pulling his present out of my bag. “I made this for you.”

“Really? I didn’t expect a present. I didn’t bring you one.”

“Not necessary,” I said. “Your greatest gift to me is all of the talks we’ve been having at lunch. I’m really clarifying a lot of things in my mind, so thank you.” I nodded at him to open the package.

“You’re welcome and thank you,” he said, twirling the black pen with the letters spelling his name wrapped around the top. “No one will accidentally steal this from me. How did you know I lose a lot of pens?”

I shrugged and smiled. Prayers wrap around us and protect us, I thought as he admired my handiwork.

I managed to pass all of the rest of my gifts out and put my generic gift on the table before Brandon’s dad tapped the microphone and asked everyone to take a seat.

“We’d like to begin this festive occasion with a prayer,” Mr. Olson said.

Brandon, Cory, Emilio and Anthony went up to the front. Brandon strummed the first chord and the audience was instantly, reverently silent.

In perfect harmony and flawless Spanish, the three boys filled the room with Bahá’u’lláh’s words. In my mind, I tried to remember and say the words that Emilio had emailed to me.

He despertado bajo tu amparo, oh mi Dios, y corresponde a quien busca tal amparo permanecer dentro del santuario de tu protección y la fortaleza de tu defensa. Ilumina mi ser interior, o mi Señor, con los resplandores de la aurora de tu Revelación, así como iluminaste mi ser exterior con la luz matinal de tu favor. Por Bahá’u’lláh

Each word struck a resounding chord in my heart. Where before the prayer had sounded like something that could only be read in the morning, now I realized that wakening in God's shelter happened when I found the Faith. That's when I really woke up to my spirit. And if I wanted to stay protected and safe, I had to abide within it. The Faith was my stronghold. I could fend off any enemies or problems if I just prayed and asked God for help. Inner being and outer being. Both are important. Fasting is an outer symbol of the inner spiritual regeneration.

Chapter 10

“Tracy! Help! I can’t wait for next Tuesday,” I told her when I arrived at Lian’s on Saturday. “I’m having trouble keeping track of all of the stuff to do in the community.”

“Hi, to you, too!” Tracy said, laughing.

The preparations were well underway by the time I got there, being delayed by my homework and my parents who said I was getting too involved and needed to cut back if I wanted to take applying to Law School seriously. I told them that I wasn’t serious about law school at all and that set off another storm of commentary. Thank goodness for my new, fast wheels. I made the great escape and zipped over to Lian’s only a half an hour late.

Tracy probably would have launched into an explanation of how she keeps her social life together. I saw her take out her day planner, but at that moment Julia and Lukas ran up to me and started pulling on my hands.

“Unless you want to pull me the whole way, you have to let go,” I told them, laughing. “How’s the Junior Youth show going?”

“Badly,” Lukas said. “How many pipe cleaners do we really need to cut for the flowers?”

“Yeah! How do we know how many people will show up? One, a hundred, a thousand?” Julia added.

“Well, maybe not 1000.”

On one table Mei had stacks of colored tissue paper unfolded, but not cut. She was using a yardstick to see what size they should be so she could get the most out of one rectangular sheet. Tracy went over to help.

“Look,” I heard Tracy say. “If you just measure the paper and divide by three or four, you can figure it out.” She took the yardstick out of Mei’s hands and started showing her how to calculate it.

I saw Brandon already at another table. He was up to his elbows in glue, construction paper and toilet paper rolls since he had arrived first. “C’mon, we just need to make a few more examples,” he said, admiring his toilet roll penguin. “How about a monkey?”

“Are you guys playing or preparing?” Tracy called over from her table. “If you make all of the stuff now, there won’t be anything to do tomorrow.”

“See what I mean?” Julia said.

I nodded. “What do you think needs to be done? What’s the most important priority?” I asked her.

Julia, Lukas stood next to me surveying the chaos.

“Pray and plan,” Julia said.

I knew they’d figure it out. I trusted them.

“Great idea.”

“Hey everyone,” Lukas called. “Can we all stop for a minute and pray. Then we can make a plan.”

The shuffling and the flying tissue stopped magically. Tracy started to raise her hand to offer, but I just smiled at her and motioned to her with my hand to stop.

Suddenly, one, two and then five voices raised in prayerful song.

Chule Shang Di
Hai you shei neng
Jie chu qun nan ne
Dan ru ci shuo, zan mei gui yu Shang Di
Ta shi Shang Di
Wan ren duo shi Tada puyi
Wan ren ye zun xin Tade fen fu
Zun xin Tade fen fu
Babo

After a few minutes of silence, Julia leaned over and whispered. “That’s the Remover of Difficulties prayer in Chinese. We learned it in our World Ambassador class the other day.”

“It’s beautiful. Now, you speak English, Spanish and Chinese—the three top languages in the world. You’re way ahead of me,” I said.

“We’ll teach you.”

Jakob looked up from the table where he and Brandon were immersed. “Maybe we should make a plan.”

“Great idea,” Tracy said, pulling out the whiteboard that we used for Youth Wave meetings. “Here’s what we should do.”

“What are your ideas?” I asked the Junior Youth. “What are your goals for today and how do you hope to accomplish them?”

Tracy took the hint and handed the marker to Niki who came up to the whiteboard.

“Let’s make a list,” Niki said. “What crafts are we offering.” She wrote on the board as the others rattled them off.

- Tissue paper flowers to represent Mexico.
- Toilet paper roll penguins to represent South America, Africa, New Zealand and Antarctica.
- Stained glass ornaments for Europe.
- Coloring pages from several other countries.
- Friendship bracelets
- Making clay beads

“Those all sound really fun to make,” Brandon said. “I can’t wait!”

“What thoughts do you have when you look at the list?” I asked them.

They looked at the list thoughtfully and I kept glancing at Tracy and shaking my head slightly. *Just let them think and come up with a plan on their own.*

Mei looked at the others. “They do all sound like fun, but I think there are too many different projects. It will be hard to do them all at the picnic.”

Julia nodded. “The clay beads are too hard. They won’t have time to dry.”

Brandon looked heartbroken and it made me realize that we should do more art at our Youth Wave meetings. We did performance art, but some people liked to express themselves with crafts as well.

Lian came out of the kitchen and looked at the planning in progress. She glanced at the list. “The coloring sheets seem good. You can have lots of different ones in case the kids need more to do, but the same crayons will work for all.”

Lukas went up and tapped the board. “I think the stained glass is too hard to do, just like the beads. Plus, it’s expensive and we don’t know how many kids will be there so we don’t know how many little plastic frames or how much paint to buy.”

Niki tilted her head and they all agreed to eliminate the stained glass ornaments. I made a mental note to add that to the list of neat things to do at a Junior Youth meeting one day—maybe when they studied the continent of Europe in WAP. I really just couldn’t stop being a teacher. More and more ideas kept coming to me as the Junior Youth worked through the list and set their priorities for what to do at the meeting that day.

“Great job on your planning. You didn’t need us at all,” I told them afterward.

“You let us do it rather than tell us what to do. We like that,” Jakob said.

Tracy made a little face. “I’ve got a lot to learn if I ever want to be an animator,” she whispered to me as she handed the yardstick back to Mei.

“We all do,” I whispered back.

Emilio showed up right then and the kids put him right to work. Lukas, Julia and Jakob were telling Brandon all about a playground in the neighborhood that was badly in need of repair and painting.

“It’s dangerous and ugly,” Jakob said. “Maybe we could fix it up and paint it as a service project.”

Brandon and Jakob launched into a serious discussion about what made a good playground while Emilio was talking in Spanish to Julia and Lukas.

“¿De veras? ¿Hay mucha gente quien quieren aprender inglés?”

“¡Mucha!” Julia agreed. “They all know that learning English could really help them get better jobs.”

“But we want to learn to speak Spanish so that we can talk to them,” I said.

“Maybe we could all learn together,” Emilio suggested. “We can help each other.”

“Cory and Anthony could teach English because they already speak Spanish and Emilio could teach Spanish to the rest of us.” Brandon had it all figured out, but it was hard to take him seriously surrounded by a flock of penguins.

“I’ll bet we could find lots of kids and adults who want to study both languages and get involved with the Junior Youth group’s service projects,” Mei said. “We should get names and phone numbers tomorrow.”

By the time the people who were coming for Emilio’s crash course in how to teach Anna’s Presentation on Spanish showed up, there were organized boxes on the floor with all of the craft projects for the picnic neatly labeled. Niki had the white board filled with at least a dozen ideas for service projects.

I grinned as I left the kids eating snacks of their own making to join the group learning enough Spanish to read through Anna’s Presentation with people who came to the picnic. Animating was a lot like reigning in an imaginative monster—exciting and a little scary at the same time. Too bad that the community thought Youth Wave was too busy and that my parents thought teaching was beneath me, because it could be a lot of fun. If only they could meet the kids and see the process in action.

That's when I got the idea to invite them to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic. Why hadn't I thought of that before? We're out teaching and serving in the community, but I was ignoring the people I loved most in the world.

Chapter 11

Duncan walked me home after the meeting.

“Great job on the impromptu choreography for the Junior Youth today,” I told him.

Duncan grinned as he kind of walked and kind of floated along beside me. He couldn’t really stop dancing, even when he was just walking. Graceful movement was just such a part of him.

“Thanks,” he said, “but it was easy. “They’ve been watching us practice for months. I see them on the stairs when they’re taking a break from their children’s classes.”

“I know. They’re a ready-made group of potential performers. I’m glad that they can sign one of the songs at the picnic tomorrow. They were so excited about the ribbons.” My mind was still reeling with all of the possibilities. “I’m sure that their parents would like to see them perform at Feasts and Holy Days. In fact, Naw Ruz is coming up in less than three weeks. What if Youth Wave and the Junior Youth teamed up? They really want to serve. Did you see how they came together to create the arts and crafts stuff for the picnic tomorrow? Without any direction, they just decided to pray, plan and prioritize. It was amazing watching their process. In many ways, they’re ahead of me.” I closed my mouth, realizing I must be rambling about my favorite subject—the Junior Youth.

Duncan stopped and turned to look seriously at me. “It’s funny, isn’t it? They seem so young, but they’re only a couple of years younger than Saba, for instance. It won’t be long before they’re taking over Youth Wave and all of us are off to university or jobs or marriage.”

I stopped, too, and turned my chair abruptly to face him. “I’m really having trouble with the university

thing,” I said. “My parents are *determined* to run my life. They’re *convinced* I should be a lawyer.” I chopped my hands downward, emphasizing my frustration with the ASL sign for convince.

I must have said that a little too emphatically.

“I’m sorry,” he said, putting his hands up in mock surrender. “I didn’t know I was hitting such a nerve.”

I dropped my shoulders, which I hadn’t realized I’d raised in preparation for the same kind of verbal battle that I’d had with my parents. I knew that I could trust Duncan to listen.

“I’m really leaning towards teaching. I really love working with the kids. When I was watching everything go on today, I just felt so alive. Emilio and Cory were over talking in Spanish to Julia and Lukas and they were all helping the adults learn enough Spanish to greet people warmly tomorrow. You and Lian were teaching the Junior Youth how to do the signs and add some steps to the See Me Beautiful song. Brandon and Tracy were cleaning up the art mess and I suddenly had . . .

I stopped myself, not knowing if what I was about to say was just too weird.

“Had what?” Duncan said, kneeling down so that he was closer to eye level.

“I don’t want you to think I’m strange, but it was like a sudden vision of my life as a teacher. The whole room seemed brighter, glowing kind of. I saw myself rolling into a classroom of unruly middle schoolers and sharing my story about how I ended up in this chair. I was telling them about the hardship and struggle and inspiring them to make the most of their lives, no matter what the obstacles.

“You can do that better than anybody,” Duncan said softly, covering my hand with his own—chocolate on caramel. “It’s not just talk for you. You’re living it every day. I, for one, am really impressed with how far you’ve come from the girl I met just a couple of months

ago who was so angry that she swam across a lake just to make a point.”

I grinned. “You’re a ruthless coach!”

“You are a headstrong athlete,” he said, grinning back. Duncan stood up and did a little half step with a twirl. “When you find your sacred path, you have to follow it. You said it yourself. No matter what the obstacles.”

I wasn’t sure if it were all of the deepening we’d been doing around the spiritual nature of the fast we were about to embark on, or all of the prayers I’d been saying about trying to figure out a plan for my life, but my mind went somewhere else for a moment.

Around us the trees continued blossoming and the cars drove down the residential street. A man across the way was mowing his lawn with a push mower and seemed to be enjoying the concentric pattern he was creating on the grass. A million bees buzzed in the honeysuckle hedge bordering the front of my neighbor’s yard and the sounds of kids playing a pick-up game of basketball in the driveway next door reached our ears. The smell of my mother’s homemade bread drifted in our direction, completing the sensory focus of the scene.

It was like one of those science fiction movies where you’re the only one frozen in place and the world is in fast motion around you. This was the most important discussion in my life at that moment and I felt on the verge of a breakthrough.

“How do I figure out if teaching really is my sacred path?” I asked. “How and when did you know that dance was yours?”

Duncan sat down on the little brick wall that surrounded our front yard. Despite the fact that I couldn’t stand up, I hated to make people stand while I was sitting.

“It was in my second year of high school,” he said. “The drama club did a musical called *Bergeracky* and played *Royce*. It’s a twist on *Cyrano de Bergerack*

where the girl is the big nosed poet and I was the guy who fell for her cheerleader friend.”

“Sounds fun.”

“That’s my point. It was the most fun I’d ever had at that point. I loved the singing, the dancing, but especially the choreography. I got to work with the dance teacher to create some of the dances and I was hooked right then and there.”

“What did your parents say?”

“My parents are into the arts and they are very supportive.”

“You’re lucky. My parents are convinced that I’m going to be single, alone and lowly forever if I don’t get a degree in law and show the world that my chair doesn’t matter. Somehow I just want them to understand how much I love being with the kids because they’re so accepting of who I am. The chair is secondary. They’re so charged up about life and working with them, being valued by them, makes me feel excited, too. I can’t stop dreaming up ideas and activities. But, my parents don’t understand. Money and power mean success, not meaning. My plan is to reflect on all of that during The Fast and find some better ways to communicate with them about the subject without it turning into a fight.”

I glanced toward my house as the world sped up around me again. I wasn’t sure I wanted to go in, but I did want to invite them to the picnic. Somehow, I knew that was the right thing to do.

“You’ll find a way to convince them,” Duncan said. “Let’s say a prayer for unity before you go into the house.”

O my God! O my God! Unite the hearts of Thy servants, and reveal to them Thy great purpose. May they follow Thy commandments and abide in Thy law. Help them, O God, in their endeavor, and grant them strength to serve Thee. O God! Leave them not to themselves, but guide their steps by the light of Thy knowledge, and cheer their hearts by Thy love. Verily,

Thou art their Helper and their Lord.
Bahá'u'lláh

Guide my steps, I continued praying as I rolled up the ramp and into the foyer. Was there a prayer that said *guide my wheels*?

“Hi!” I called out. “Anybody home?”

“In the kitchen,” Mom called back. “Come taste my newest creation.”

Cheer their hearts, I told myself.

Remember, it’s God’s great purpose. *Grant me strength to serve Thee*.

Dad was already at the table, two empty silicone muffin cups in front of him and opening a third.

“Something smells really good,” I said. “I forgot that I was hungry.” I hoped that would also be an easy thing to do during The Fast.

“Cranberry, pecan, pumpkin muffins,” Mom said, putting one in front of me as I slid my chair under the table.

“Don’t forget the butter,” Dad said, slathering his with a generous chunk. He handed me the butter knife.

I really do have very nice parents with good hearts. *Unite the hearts of Thy servants*.

I inhaled the sweet, tangy smell of the steam when I broke my muffin open and reached for the knife. “This is a good hobby for you, Mom. How about coming to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic tomorrow and bring a batch of these muffins along? I know everyone would love them.”

“We’re not doing anything else, are we?” she asked my dad.

“All papers are corrected for once,” Dad said. “Speaking of papers . . .” He reached across to pull the ubiquitous stack of university brochures over in front of us. “Have you had a chance to look at any of these?”

Grant me strength. “I haven’t much, but I will,” I said, flipping to the Stanford Law School brochure with the picture of an arched walkway and the blue Bicycle Friendly University logo. I hoped they were wheelchair

friendly, also. “Stanford looks good and I’d want to be close to home.”

“Great, Stanford has one of the best law degrees in the world. Look what it says here. Stanford Law School is a place for the ambitious, those intrigued by big questions and the opportunity to explore answers with thought leaders and innovators whose ideas have real impact. Venture beyond the traditional boundaries of legal education here at the institution that pioneered interdisciplinary learning: because Stanford is where the future begins,” he read enthusiastically.

I reached into my backpack which was still on the kitchen table where I’d left it last night. I pulled out a brochure with Stanford’s signature power red border and read the blurb on the front. “Stanford’s Master’s in International Comparative Education addresses educational practice in a rapidly changing global context in both less developed and industrialized countries. It focuses on effective leadership, administration of cutting edge educational programs and learning design and technology. You can even get a joint MA and a JD in Law and Education.”

“Really? Law and education?” Mom said, taking the brochure and unfolding it. “Where did you get this?”

“At the University Fair yesterday at school,” I said. “I talked to a lot of representatives about different programs. Stanford also has one of the best education programs in the country. Also, Abdu’l-Bahá gave a talk there 100 years ago. It would be nice to be somewhere which such a strong spiritual connection to the Faith.” There. I’d said it. I waited. And prayed.

On the light yellow wall, the clock ticked. In the kitchen, the timer went off for the next batch of muffins. I took a bite of my muffin and let the flavors blend with the textures, sweet and tart, chewy and crunchy, the butter a salty reminder which brought out the other tastes.

Sometimes waiting for other people to talk is the longest time of your life. But, I had done it with the Junior Youth and I could do it with my parents.

“It seems like you’ve been doing more research than we’d given you credit for,” Dad said, glancing through the rest of the brochures I pulled out of my bag. I had sticky notes stuck all over them with the names of the people I’d talked to, particularly at UCLA and Berkeley, my other two top choices for a teaching degree.

Unity, unity, love, love, unity—one of our songs bounced around in my brain.

“I’m really lucky,” I said. “I have parents who care about me and want me to have a happy, successful life.” I didn’t know where that came from, but it seemed the right thing to say. “You’re wise and I know that you have my best interests at heart. I’m sure that you must have your reasons for wanting me to go into law.”

I waited again, saying Alláh’u’abhás silently to fill the void and to stay calm.

Mom got up. Five Alláh’u’abhás to walk to the kitchen. Five more to open the oven and take the muffins out. Four Alláh’u’abhás to stick in the toothpick and make sure it came out clean. Sixteen more to put them on the rack. Sixty-five more and I’d have my 95 for the day. Forgot ablutions first. I’d have to start over.

Mom came back. There were tears in her eyes. I reached out to put my hand on hers and she sniffed. “Janae, we’re just so afraid that you won’t be able to be as independent as you want to be unless you have a good enough job to satisfy all of your needs. New wheelchairs are expensive and so are all of the modifications you have to make to wherever you live. And what if you never get married?”

“My accident has cost you a lot, hasn’t it?” I asked, suddenly realizing that it wasn’t all about me. “Not just financially, either. You lost your hopes and dreams for

me and my basketball career, too. You've had to do so much to help me and I haven't thanked you enough."

"We just want you to be happy," Dad said.

I took Dad's hand, too. "I *am* happy," I insisted. "I know that I was angry and frustrated when this first happened, but it feels like a lifetime ago now. Finding the Bahá'í Faith was a Godsend. I don't know how I would have coped without God's help and the help of the community. They accept me and love me just the way I am. Can you?"

Both of them jumped up to hug me. I thought there was going to be a collision in the air above my chair.

"Of course we can, Janae," Mom said. "Have another muffin."

"We'd better do more than just accept Janae's new mature and centered self. We'd better investigate more about her new Faith," Dad added. "Anything that can transform our hard-headed daughter into a woman of tact and logic must be worth checking out."

Thanks, I told God as I was rolling into my room three muffins later. Not only had my parents said that they would come to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic, but they had agreed to fast with me and take the 19 days of 'Alá to continue the discussion on my future schooling. I had left them looking over the section of the Happy Fasting book on the meaning of fasting.

God really works fast, I realized. All I have to do is put forth my heartfelt prayers and intentions and then trust that the means will become available. As I went through the motions that had now become commonplace for getting in and out of the shower using only my arms, I also realized how grateful that I was for all of my blessings—being alive, to start. The accident could have taken my life. And, I was blessed by having the chance to serve and having parents who loved me enough to try to force me to become something I didn't want to be. I really hadn't thought much about teaching the Faith to my parents before today, but they

really had to be my first priority. They are the most important people in my life and I really want them to know Bahá'u'lláh.

Chapter 12

I arrived at the Rosalia Paz Park early. After all, it was just a couple of blocks from my house and whenever I had the chance to get somewhere on my own, I took it. Once I had convinced my parents that I didn't want to be a lawyer, and I thought I was well on the way, I was planning to use some of my debate skills to try to convince them to let me get my driver's license. Of course, that would mean a car that was specifically designed for me to drive with just my arms and who knows how much that would cost, but it was worth a shot.

The park was an oasis in the middle of the city. I know that sounds cliché, but it's true. The tall trees surrounding it almost completely blocked any traffic noise and the lake in the middle served as the hub round which the spoke-like paths extended just like those on the wheels of my chair. A running trail served as the border and from anywhere on the trail, you could detour along one of the spokes to end up at the lake.

Cherry trees with their pink and white blooms dotted the park and singing birds dotted the trees. Could a spring morning be any more perfect? I thought as I took my favorite spoke path to the bulb garden which was currently exploding with daffodils and tulips. I loved the fire tulips with their vibrant, unapologetic colors.

I sat in the middle of the floral painter's palette and took my prayer book out of the specially designed pocket I'd recently made for it that hung from the back of my chair—since this new chair didn't have arms. I was still thinking about that aboriginal print cover. Maybe I'd make that during The Fast, too.

Settled, prayer book in hand, I searched for a prayer that God's will would be served through the

activity that day, that we find waiting souls and would be able to share the teachings with them. I prayed, also, that my parents would come and their eyes would be opened. I prayed, as always, for healing and that all would go right in my world and sat there waiting for some confirmation in the form of a gentle breeze or a floating petal on my lap, something to show that God had heard and was on my side.

When the air continued to be still and the blossoms continued to stick firmly to the trees, I decided that I was trying to get God to prove to me that He heard my prayers and that just wasn't the point. My fingers flipped to the section on detachment.

O God, my God! Thou art my Hope and my Beloved, my highest Aim and Desire! With great humbleness and entire devotion I pray to Thee to make me a minaret of Thy love in Thy land, a lamp of Thy knowledge among Thy creatures, and a banner of divine bounty in Thy dominion.

Number me with such of Thy servants as have detached themselves from everything but Thee, have sanctified themselves from the transitory things of this world, and have freed themselves from the promptings of the voicers of idle fancies.

Let my heart be dilated with joy through the spirit of confirmation from Thy kingdom, and brighten my eyes by beholding the hosts of divine assistance descending successively upon me from the kingdom of Thine omnipotent glory.

Thou art, in truth, the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the All-Powerful. 'Abdu'l-Bahá

I really have to be detached from the outcome of any teaching we do today, I told myself. I'm not in charge of anyone else's feelings, beliefs, thoughts or actions. It was all about trust. Trust had led Anthony to investigate. Trust had put the right words in my mouth the night before to convince my parents that we

needed to consult on my future rather than have them decide it unilaterally. Trust had kept me helping the Junior Youth and learning sign language—and now Spanish.

Trust.

The confirmations came in the form of doors slamming and shouts from the Junior Youth as they arrived on the scene. My practically solitary park suddenly erupted in joyful laughter and activity.

“Janae! You’re already here! That’s great!” Niki said. “We’re setting up under the trees by the lake. Want to help us?”

“Absolutely!”

More slamming of doors and Bahá’ís trooping down to the water’s edge, Brandon carrying the electronic keyboard, battery operated, for me to play. The folding tables were opened; tablecloths came out, boxes of craft supplies made their way to their appointed spots.

“Where shall we hang the signs?” Mei asked.

“What about on the trees facing out?” I suggested.

“Maybe on the signposts at the ends of all the little paths,” Julia said.

“Do we have enough signs?” Jakob wanted to know.

“We can make more,” I said.

A flurry of activity met that suggestion with the markers and paper being whipped out and Lukas doing a quick lettering job as the Junior Youth had determined that he was the best at drawing big, block letters.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Spread out. Everyone take a couple of spokes and meet back here.” I accompanied Julia and Mei with four of the signs in my lap, the girls carrying the tools.

No sooner had we hung the first sign than a lady jogging by with her baby in a stroller and her dog on a leash stopped to ask us what was happening.

“We’re having a picnic with games, crafts and food to celebrate Ayyam-i-Ha,” I said. “We hope you’ll join us.”

“What’s Ayyam-i-Ha?”

“It’s a Bahá’í holiday.”

“Well, I don’t know what that is, but I’ll try to stop by later with my older son. He loves to do crafts.”

The jogging path was starting to fill up with walkers and runners as we went to the next sign post to hang the sign.

“Hola,” said a woman in Spanish. “¿Qué es esta?”

“Una fiesta para la Fe Bahá’í,” I said, using the phrase that Emilio had taught us the day before. It meant, a party for the Bahá’í Faith. Julia gave me the thumbs up sign to show I’d said it correctly.

“La Fe Bahá’í. Mi sobrina en Venezuela es Bahá’í, pero nunca me dijo nada de una fiesta.”

I was lost. Something about her cousin and a party.

“Lo siento. No hablo español muy bien.”

“Oh,” the lady said, disappointed. “Tengo preguntas.”

Questions. I knew that word and looked to Julia for help.

Julia jumped in with her perfect Spanish and told the lady that there would be people at the party who could answer her questions. As far as I could gather, she also mentioned the Junior Youth classes that we would be starting up about virtues and the service projects we were considering in the neighborhood. I heard clases, virtudes and servicio and wished I knew a lot more words so that I could talk to the woman, too.

However, she smiled and said she’d be back with her husband and her eleven year old son.

Julia and I grinned at each other.

Mei was grinning, too. “We’d better get the rest of these signs up and get back to the picnic before the whole neighborhood arrives.”

Mei was such a great example of taking action and I couldn’t believe how connected to the Faith Julia was when her parents weren’t even Bahá’ís, and she and her brother had only been coming to children’s classes. I had another realization at that moment about how

important this age was for the Junior Youth's future. They were forming the beliefs and habits now, which would carry forward for their entire lives. Their future lives of service depended on their foundation. What if there were no more classes after the children's classes finished? What if there were no one to animate all of this enthusiasm?

By the time we got back to the picnic area, it seemed that dozens of people had already shown up. All of Youth Wave had arrived and were laying out the stage area. Stewart had arrived and I introduced him to the other Junior Youth. Mei and Niki put him to work right away at one of the tables. He was in his element making penguins with kindergarteners. Some neighbors were wandering up and asking questions. Lukas was sitting at the table with the nine-pointed star mandala activity and helping some preschoolers color their points.

Brandon's dad cranked up the music.

"Where should I put the food?" asked Mrs. Farzaneh.

"On the blue table," I directed her.

"How about the drinks?" asked Mrs. Olson.

"Square red table."

"I volunteered to sit at a craft table," Mrs. Yuan said.

"Who needs help?" I asked the Junior Youth.

"I do," Niki said.

Mrs. Yuan headed to the flower folding table.

People from the neighborhood started to arrive and we weren't even set up yet. As quickly as Bahá'ís arrived, I helped the Junior Youth decide where to put them to work. Anthony to the penguin table with Stewart. Emilio to talk to the lady with the baby and the eleven-year old, who had brought two of his friends and had already engaged in a conversation with Lukas about how they could make the toilet paper roll penguins into maracas.

While I was directing traffic in the midst of the happy chaos, my parents arrived, but I didn't even have

time to say hello. I just looked up, beamed at them and waved.

More food, more people, more crafts, more questions. The speed with which the picnic took off was amazing, but it quickly got out of hand. As the adults sat down to talk with other adults—including my parents—how I wished I could eavesdrop on that conversation—the kids started running amuck. Amuck wasn't acceptable.

I quickly gathered the Junior Youth. "Any ideas?" I asked, looking around at the out of control kids.

"Let's do some songs and sign language with them," Mei suggested.

"Good plan. Leave the bigger kids doing crafts and gather the little ones into a circle."

It didn't take long for Julia, Jakob and Stewart to make a snake with all of the kids holding hands. They sang Snake from the Sea in Spanish and all of the kids just automatically joined in. Around the tree, over the log, between the tables, the snake curled and twisted with one Junior Youth in the beginning, middle and end. They finished in the circle around my chair and I didn't give them a moment to get out of control again. I started signing and singing "See me Beautiful". Suddenly, behind me I heard Brandon's guitar and Lian stepped up to help the kids with the signs.

The older kids actually left the craft tables to join in the singing. It was like one of those movies where everything goes exactly the way it should.

I loved seeing all of the beaming faces—especially Stewart's. I was so glad I had invited him.

"Okay," I said after we sang the song, "what's next?"

"Let's do a clapping song," Niki said. "Just follow me."

Niki started patting her legs and clapping her hands, then getting the kids to all go to the right and left and touch the back of the person next to them.

"Hold on, I'm coming." Stewart hopped out of his chair and sat on the ground between a couple of little

kids to keep them organized, and participate in the song. No one cared about his missing legs.

As the Junior Youth sang and played, I could see them drawing on all of the things that Mrs. Yuan had taught them to pass on to the little children. Youth animating Junior Youth and they, in turn leading the children. What a plan!

Mei took charge several songs later. “Who wants to do crafts?”

A whole circle of little hands went up. Quicker than I could even think to do it, she divided them into groups of three or four and assigned them to one of the Junior Youth.

“Let’s go to the tables and make some pretty things. Stay with your leader.”

Stewart hopped back up in his chair, ready to go back and take charge of the penguin table.

“This is fun,” he said as he rolled by me.

Who was animating whom? I wondered. I was learning a lot about being a teacher from these young students.

The adults wavered between watching what we were doing and talking. I wheeled from table to table, helping where I was needed. I thought about whether I should go over and see how my parents were doing. I looked over and saw them engaged in conversation with Tracy’s mom and dad. The adults could take care of teaching the adults. I wasn’t needed there. It was so important to teach the kids, maybe even more important than teaching the parents, I thought. The kids were the ones who would usher in the ever-advancing civilization and bring their parents along with them.

Chapter 13

Just about the time that the majority of the kids had made the rounds of the craft tables, but before the food was uncovered, Tracy rang the little gong we always used to signal the beginning of a performance. It was a peaceful sound that made everyone look up, but didn't jar them the way the squawk of a microphone would.

"Welcome, everyone, to the Ayyam-i-Ha picnic sponsored by the Bahá'ís of Riverview. The term "Ayyam-i-Ha" is Farsi and means "The days of hospitality." She looked around and smiled. "What a beautiful day for such a happy occasion. Some of the youth in our community would like to share prayers for unity and peace in the world, some dances and songs. Would the children at the craft tables please join their parents for the performance?"

Nice touch, I thought. That freed me to wheel up to the stage and lay the piano across my lap. I loved my new quickie wheelchair with the tilted wheels and without the arms. So much more practical. I folded my hands on top of the keyboard and waited my turn.

Brandon took his place center stage with his guitar flanked by Emilio, Anthony and Cory, reverently ready to sing the first prayer in Spanish.

As their voices rang out in the clear, springtime air, the blending of melody and harmony sounded even more beautiful than it had in Lian's basement. All rustling in the audience ceased and I saw many heads bowed, eyes closed, before I smiled and closed my own.

Saba chanted the same prayer in Farsi. Mei read it in Mandarin. Will followed that with English with Lian signing the words. Unity in five languages.

Several dances and songs later, the audience was still excited and wanting more.

“I’ve got an idea,” I signed to Lian. “Let’s have the Junior Youth lead See Me Beautiful and we taught signs to the kids in the circle earlier. What if we invite them up on the stage and show their parents what they’ve already learned in Bahá’í class?”

“Great idea,” she signed back. She quickly told the others what we were doing and I motioned to the kids I’d been working with in the song circle earlier.

“Come up on stage,” I invited. “Let’s sing the song we learned and teach your parents.”

A little reluctantly at first, but then like drops coming together to form a small stream, the kids joined us in the front facing the audience. I wheeled up in front of them. “I’m going to play the piano and Lian is going to lead you in the signs, okay?”

“What if I don’t know all of them?” one little girl said.

“We’ll go really slowly and Lian will be right here. We’re all learning together and we’re all beautiful, remember?”

She smiled and nodded, content to stand in the line.

I turned to the audience of expectant faces. “This song is about how each of us wants to be seen for who we are. On the outside, we look different. We speak different languages, wear different clothes and live in different houses. We even eat different food,” I added, waving my hand at the eclectic mix of multicultural foods that Mrs. Yuan was unveiling on the picnic tables. “But inside, we’re the same. Our hearts beat with the same red blood. We laugh and cry and love our families. We want to make the world a better place. We try to be the best people we can be—to show the virtue and beauty we have inside.”

Parents were nodding their heads and I saw a couple of tears in people’s eyes.

“Listo? Ready?” I asked.

Twelve little drops nodded back. Lian took her place, cross-legged on the ground in front of them and I knew she'd do the signs with her left hand so that the kids could follow with their right.

I played the slow, haunting intro and I saw their smiles grow. "See me beautiful," I sang, my voice joined by their small, tentative ones. Each circled his or her face with the sign for beautiful.

"Look for the best in me," I sang and this time Cory, Emilio and Anthony added the harmony. Twelve hands touched their cheeks to say "look" and their hearts to say "me".

The swell of voices grew as adults in the audience who knew the song joined in. The kids got louder in response as we sang, "It's who I really am, and who I want to be."

All of the Junior Youth had flowed up onto the stage to back up the kids, all signing with Lian, causing a mirroring effect in the audience.

"It may take some time." Dozens of hands pointed to their wrists in the sign for "time". "It may be hard to find, but see me beautiful!"

By the time we got to the second verse, everyone was signing along with the kids.

"See me beautiful, each and every day.

Could you take a chance?

Could you find a way?

To see me shining through,

In everything I do,

And see me beautiful."

All hands lifted in unison and opened to heaven, spreading fingers in the sign for "shine" and circled their faces together. Now, I was crying as I looked at my parents' smiling, shining, glowing faces full of love looking right at me.

I had a catch in my voice as I finished the song, hoping no one would hear it as the chorus of drops, streams, rivers and waves had become a mighty ocean,

immersing us all in the message that no matter who you are, you are valuable and beautiful.

We had to sing the song three more times until everyone knew it well and I heard people still humming it as they moved to the food tables. It was like we had already formed a community with these people who had been strangers this morning.

“Cool!” Stewart said as he wheeled past me, right at home.

Mrs. Lian was gathering names and phone numbers to start new children’s classes. Cory and Emilio were signing people up for English Corner. I heard one of the women offering the community room in their apartment building.

Anthony and Brandon were discussing the service project about painting and repairing the playground with some of the fathers.

I rolled over to start cleaning up the craft tables and was joined by Mei and the junior youth. They had three other kids with them.

“Quiero presentarte a Esteban, Clara e Isabela,” Julia said. “And you know Stewart already. We all go to the same school.”

“Mucho gusto,” I said, shaking their hands. “¿Cómo les gustan las canciones?” I hoped I’d said that right. “How did you like the songs?”

“Me encantan,” Isabela said.

“Are there any crafts left for us?” Lukas asked, looking around at the tables filled with the remains of penguins and paper stars.

“Un segundo,” I said, reaching around and digging in my backpack. I pulled out the bag of beads, wire and pens that I’d been carrying with me to make wrappers for all of the Junior Youth in my spare moments. “Let’s clear off this table and I’ll show you what I’ve been making. It’s too hard for the little kids, but you’re all capable.”

In a flash, the nine of them had the table cleared and a new cloth spread out on top. I rolled up to the

end of the table and they gathered around, Stewart hopping onto the bench. He is way more mobile than I am.

“Everyone needs a wire and alphabet beads with your name on them. Choose some other beads to decorate the whole wire.”

Carefully and respectfully, they took turns choosing the beads they wanted. “Now, you string the beads on the wire, and then use this pair of pliers to twist the wire around the pen.”

I realized that there was always a need to carry supplies with me, because you never knew when an opportunity would present itself to teach. I added that to my mental list of “teacher notes”.

“When you wrap the pen, it’s like the way prayer wraps us with God’s love. It protects us from troubles and helps us become better people.”

“No entiendo,” Esteban said, shaking his head while twisting his wire around the pen.

I tried to summon the little Spanish I had, and encouraged by Julia’s nod, I tried to explain.

“Dios te ayuda, pero tu . . . needs . . .” I looked at Julia.

“Necesitas,” she supplied.

“Pero tu necesitas . . . pray . . .”

“Rezar,” Lukas said.

“Esta . . . reminds you . . .”

“Te ayuda recordar,” Jakob said.

I smiled. “Esta te ayuda recordar que Dios . . . wraps you . . .”

“Te envuelve . . .”

I looked up to realize that half a dozen parents were standing around us, listening to my broken Spanish explanation. For a second, I felt embarrassed, and then I remembered the message of the song.”

“Si, gracias,” I said. “Esta te ayuda recordar que Dios te envuelve con protección y amor.”

“La voy a usar cada día,” Esteban declared.

“Me, too,” Lukas said. “I’ll use it every day. I want God’s protection and love with me always.”

“Praying is one way to let God know that you need Him,” I said.

Murmurs started in the group of parents surrounding us and I offered wires and beads to them as well. Several sat down to make their own protection pen wraps.

“I wish that our children could have this experience more often,” said a woman that I knew must be Esteban’s mom, because she had her hand on his shoulder. “Mrs. Lian said that there is a new children’s class forming, but what about this age group?”

“Are you their teacher?” Clara’s father asked. He was sitting next to her, shoulder to shoulder, choosing his beads.

“Well, at this age, they don’t really need a teacher. They need an animator—someone to guide them in their efforts to grow and offer service to the community.”

“So, are you their animator?” Isabela’s sister asked. She had to be her sister, because she looked just like her, but closer to my age. “I could help you. I love teaching children and want to be a teacher one day.”

I looked at all of the expectant faces, knowing this was exactly what I wanted to do—to animate this Junior Youth group—but there was one hurdle left. I scanned the group, looking for my parents. “I’d love to, but I have to ask my parents first. Family unity is the most important thing and sometimes they’re smarter than I am.”

I finally saw them, my dad’s arm around my mom, both grinning at me, tears in their eyes.

Is it okay if I animate the Junior Youth Group? I asked them with my eyes and a tilt of my head.

Mom said. “We think you should do it. You’re a natural teacher.”

“I come from good stock,” I told them. “Maybe it was just meant to be.”

The explosion of cheers surprised me. It was almost as if everyone had been holding one, big collective breath.

Isabela's sister came over and introduced herself as Teresa. "What can I do to help, starting now?"

"You can teach me how to sing that song in Spanish," I said. "And, we can clean up the mess. Do you go to Riverview High?"

"No, I'm going to the community college, taking my general ed classes so I can transfer to the state college for my teaching degree."

There was a lot I needed to talk to Teresa about. She already had a plan. Duncan interrupted us. "The community college? I think I've seen you there."

My dad came over and scooped the scraps of paper into the garbage bag I was holding. "Thanks for letting me animate the Junior Youth Group," I said.

"Once we saw you in action today, there was little doubt about your calling."

"Does this mean that I'll be getting up on my own for The Fast now that you've agreed I should be a teacher?"

"Absolutely not. Your mother and I agreed that The Fast would be a perfect opportunity to help you plan your career as a teacher. There are still schools to choose, the decision between primary, secondary and college level teaching, the subject areas you'll want to consider, etc. Mr. Olson says that there are many of the Bahá'í Writings about the importance of education and its elevated station in the Faith."

I chuckled under my breath as he walked off, notebook in hand to write down the books we should study during The Fast. It would be hard for them to completely relinquish control.

Anthony strolled up to me. "Better now?" he asked.

I grinned and shrugged. "Some things change, but others stay the same," I said.



Cindy Savage is a mom of six and a grandma of eleven. She loves to travel, do handcrafts, garden and learn new languages. She has more than 35 years of experience as a teacher, principal and administrator of schools in the U.S., South America and China. In addition, she's a writing expert with 40+ published novels for young people and 100+ textbooks to her credit. Her specialty is training students to write and speak with clarity, enthusiasm and style. She teaches workshops worldwide and is currently splitting her time between Shanghai, China, Panchgani, India and the United States of America with her husband, Trip Barthel.

In China she has created the World Ambassador Program which teaches global awareness through a unique blend of stories, biographies of people making the world a better place, songs, games and art. More than 7000 students in grades 1-11 are using her program.

Lately, she's been editing publications for the Bahá'í Academy in India, teaching writing online and giving presentations at schools and organizations. If you'd like Cindy to come to your school or organization go to www.cindysworkshop.com.cw .

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Stir-n-Serve

By Cindy Savage

Youth Wave's schedule is keeping them pretty busy these days and Janae Booth loves every minute. She particularly enjoys hanging out with the Junior Youth. They accept her the way she is and don't care about her wheelchair. When she's animating them, she's at her best—a natural teacher. Finally, she feels she's found her purpose in life.

Unfortunately, her parents have other ideas about her future career. An ongoing battle rages about law school versus teaching. They're convinced that she needs a high paying job to offset her disability. Happiness, according to them, hinges on material wealth and status.

What do you do when your sacred purpose and your parents don't see eye-to-eye?

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