

Empowering women
to change the world

Rochelle, an
Angel Returns
to Heaven

THE CHILDREN
OF THE
PHILIPPINES

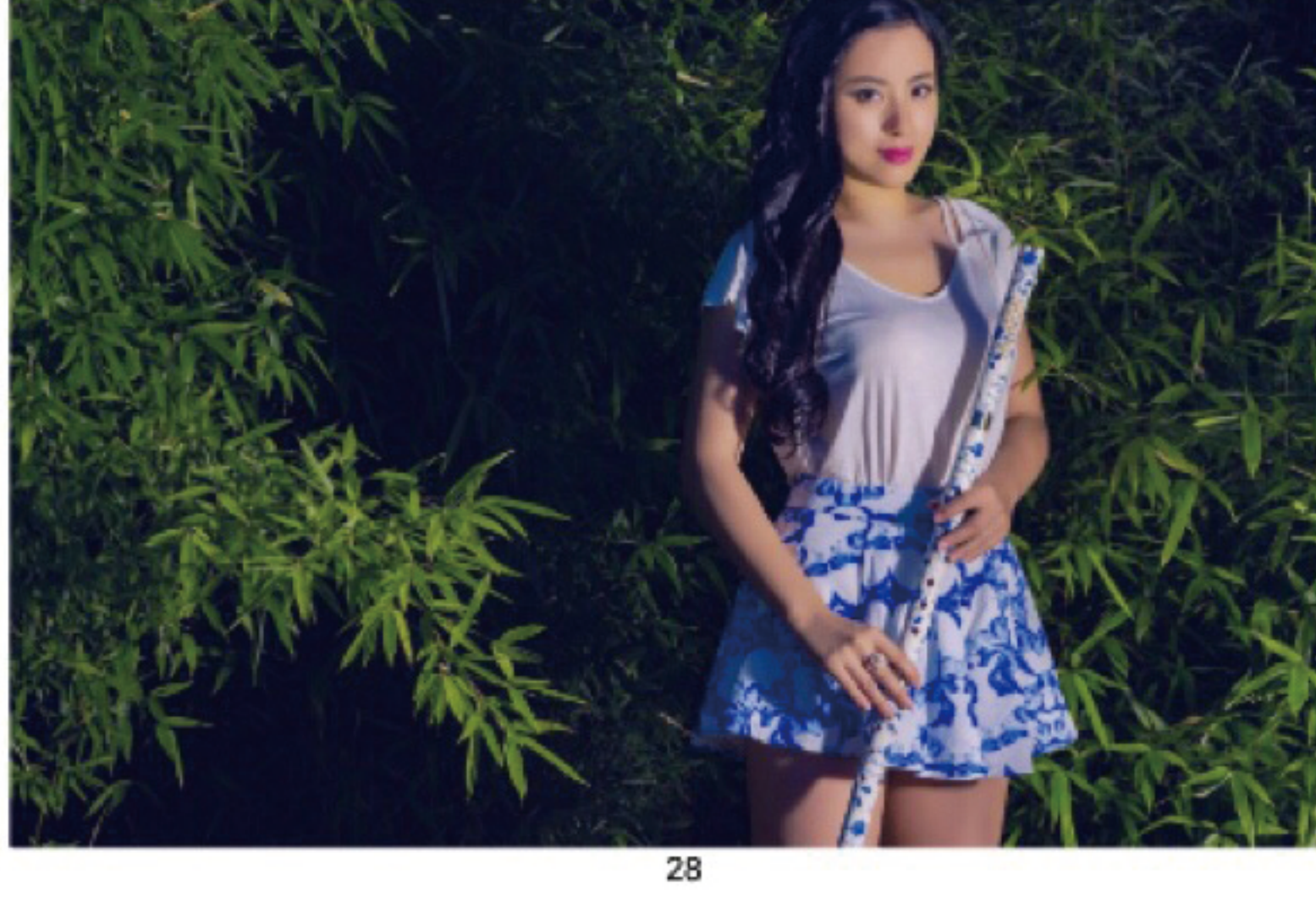
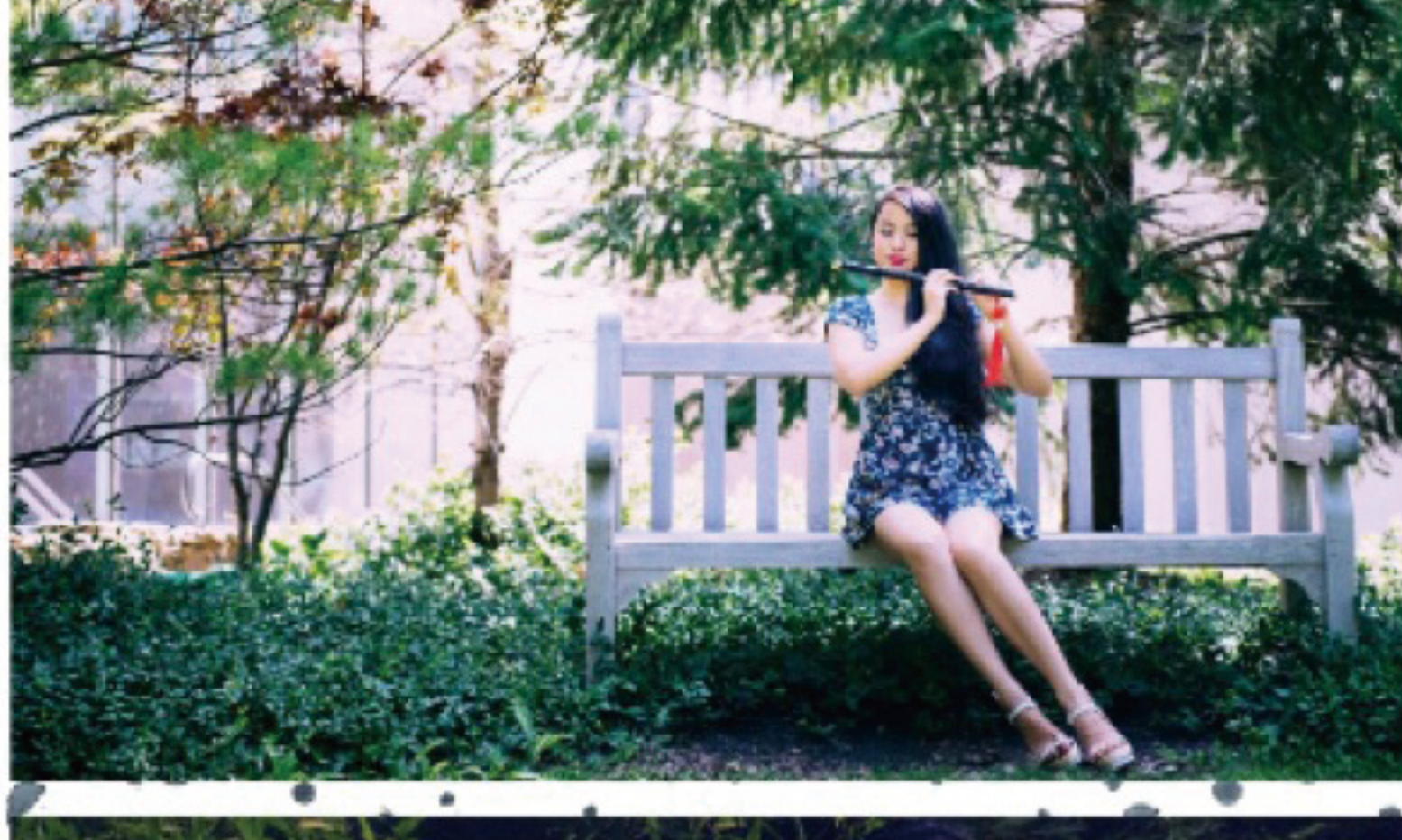
JENNIFER
ZHANG

2015 Miss
Friendship
Ambassador of
Chicago

PROJECT MICHELANGELO FOUNDATION



ONE ON ONE WITH JENNIFER ZHANG,
THE BEAUTIFUL HARMONY BETWEEN EAST AND WEST



28

Q: Jennifer, how did you find your spotlight? What has inspired you to become the person you are today?

I have always loved the arts, the stage, music, and performing. It has always felt natural for me to be on stage. As a young child, I begged my parents for a piano. Although they were very poor, they did very much to support their only child's passion for music. The only way to do that was to sacrifice more than half of their salaries so that I could attend piano lessons. At the time, my mother was a teacher herself, and many of her colleagues offered to teach me poetry, drawing, dance, and English. I knew I was very lucky; my parents reminded me of that often. So I practiced and practiced. I spent all my free time with my piano. I eventually won my very first national piano contest at the opening of the Asian Games in Beijing. It was such a proud moment for my parents, to see that their sacrifices were paying off. I began receiving letters from all of China, far and wide, from other young Chinese peers, excited to hear of my success in the fine arts. Many of the letters came from very poor areas of China. Their letters were beautiful, though scribbled on very thin paper writing with very dull pencils. I remember replying to as many as I could and often sending them school supplies as well. Their letters brought me lots of joy. I knew that this gift I was given to pursue my young dreams was the path I must take to "gift in return."

"I knew I was very lucky; my parents reminded me of that often."

Q: Was it a challenge to pursue the arts, especially living in a conservative place like China?

Despite my passion for music and the performing arts, my parents, like most parents in China, did not want me to pursue this career path. There is a stereotype in China that you only do music when you cannot succeed academically. They believe that most people doing music "end up very poor." As an only child, I felt much responsibility to please my parents, so it was still very important to focus on my academics. They sent me to a boarding school, a very reputable traditional Chinese middle school. It was not an easy transition. I was mocked by other students since I came from a suburb of Shanghai—they called me the "beauty from the village." It was difficult, but I did not let that deter my confidence. I earned my way to be chair of the Art Committee and even got involved in a few extracurricular activities. However, most of my time was spent studying math, physics, and chemistry. I remember there were only two pianos in the academic building, and I had very little time to practice. I felt sad and lonely without the piano. And then I was introduced to the bamboo flute by a fellow schoolmate. It gave me joy to study the bamboo flute over the summers and filled the void of not having a piano nearby."

29

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My hard work eventually paid off. I was admitted to one of the best high schools in Shanghai. Although I was one of the best students in my middle school, it was not the case when I started high school. I placed last out of all my classmates in the new high school. The pressure to get into the best colleges in China, and even the world, was so intense that I was forced to give up most of my musical passions to focus on "the art of test taking." There were many late nights finishing all the homework that would pile up to the ceiling. Despite it all, I did find ways to have fun. Late night studying made time for daily rehearsals, and I played the lead role in the graduation play.

Eventually, I graduated at the top of my class and was accepted to some of the best colleges in China and Hong Kong. It was one of the happiest days of my life when I received that heavy envelope in the mail notifying me of acceptance to my dream school—Northwestern University.

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Q: How did your pursuit of academia bring you back to the performing arts?

It was a challenge to be a young Chinese woman in the United States. I was learning the language, the culture, and feeling a lot of pressure about finding success in the future. During my time in school, my mother fell ill. Because of China's one-child policy, she was required to have a contraceptive device implanted in her body. Unfortunately, the device failed, and she became pregnant again while I was in school. She was forced to have an abortion, which resulted in various



30

complications and left her in intolerable pain. It was a very difficult time. I knew that I was blessed with my mother's strength and courage. Despite having personal freedoms and choices taken away, like the choice of having more than one child, my mother did all that she could to foster my talents and dreams. I believe a woman can do it all. But sometimes the path to your dreams brings you to a road that's hard to travel. This path is where struggle, sacrifice, and hard work are required before you can catch that path again. While at Northwestern, I realized this. I found the university challenging but exciting. I knew that I had more to offer than just the "beauty from the village"—I was an intelligent woman to be taken seriously. After college, I worked at Morgan Stanley for a year and then felt brave enough to be true to my authentic self and pursue my passion in the arts. An opportunity to represent Chicago in the Miss Asia competition was the beginning of my path to the dream. After winning the pageant, I have been exposed to many more Chicago-area media opportunities, which has been the cusp of my artistic career.



31

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Q: What are the most important things you have learned through this journey?

I was always an obedient child. I worked hard to make my parents happy and proud. And I am lucky that despite the expectations of very conservative culture in China, they continued to acknowledge my passion in the arts. I am thankful that I was allowed the opportunities to develop those artistic talents. At the same time, I am grateful for my parents' commitment to my education and am proud of my own perseverance to achieve academic excellence. It planted the seed for making good decisions in life and allowed me to come to a country that gives people more freedom of choice and inspiration to pursue one's own dreams. I believe in my heart that everything has deeper meaning. Where I began, and where I am now, I am still on that path, learning that true happiness, inspiration, and ultimate joy is experienced through the lessons learned through the journey. I'm not in any hurry.

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The story of this amazing woman is truly inspiring, and for the young woman who dreams big in life, Jennifer lives a life worth emulating. She was able to surmount and balance between the dictates of Chinese tradition to the calling of her fate to become the best person she was meant to be by the purest passion and march to the beat of her own drum. Confucius once said, "Our greatest glory is not in falling, but in rising every time we fall." Jennifer overcame all her difficulties because she rises on each obstacle with great determination. And so if there's someone we need to watch for who will shine brightly, do great things in the future, and inspire those who dare to dream, I know it would be Jennifer Zhang from China.

By Janie Posadas Reyes



32