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Catholic teen uses musical talent to help motivate kids to save planet

by Chelsea Weikart by Catholic News Service

Washington — Fourteen-year-old Catholic high school student Ashley Cortes says the one thing she wants to inspire in kids is "if you set your mind to something, you can definitely achieve it."

Ashley is one of the 10 artists who recorded volume one of "Pacha's Pajamas," a cartoon about protecting the environment.

"Pacha's Pajamas" is a project of Aaron Ableman, an educator and its author. What started as a story he told his younger brother turned into a book, a pop musical and a soundtrack of the musical released in September. Pacha, the cartoon character star of the show, is a city girl who is trying to change the world by focusing on environmental stability and childhood health.

Besides Ashley, he selected other young artists such as Ariana Hernandez and Milo McFly to be featured along with major stars such as hip-hop artist Mos Def.

Ashley, whose stage name is "Ashlie Cortez," plays piano, guitar and bass and writes her own compositions that she recorded as an album, "Make It Through," released online this year.

For "Pacha's Pajamas," she is the voice of the character Hummingbird. Her song tells of the importance of music and is the first song from the soundtrack to be made into a music video.

Ashley said Pacha's message to follow your dreams is what makes her passionate about her role in the production.

"It's a good message for young kids saying you can do what you can set your mind to," she said. "Helping

the environment is one of the ways that can help change the world."

This concern Ashley has for the environment sprouted even before she was part of the "Pacha" project when she went to a science camp in seventh grade. Her mother said she wouldn't even kill a spider when she came home because "it wasn't doing anything to hurt her."

"Nature is important because it's one of God's creations, we don't want the earth to be getting worse, if we work together we can make it more beautiful," Ashley said.

Ashley is a freshman St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School in Vallejo, Calif., where she is part of the women's choir. Her mother, Menchie Cortes, said she always believed in raising Ashley in the church.

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"I want to raise her to have faith," Menchie Cortes said. "Every night I pray with her before she goes to bed. She knows if you have faith in God everything will come smoothly."

The Cortes family belongs to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in the Diocese of Sacramento, Calif., and Ashley periodically sings in the church choir.

Ashley said she is honest about her faith to her fans. "I am proud of my faith. I have nothing to hide about that," Ashley told Catholic News Service.

Her love for music was obvious when she started singing before she could talk at age 2.

"I knew she had a talent so I might as well support her singing," her mother said. "I enrolled her at 7 years old for voice lessons, I asked her if she wanted to play piano, and now we can't stop her."

Ashley is a regular performer at open mic nights around where she lives in Fairfield, Calif., and in her family's native Philippines. At the end of December, she plans to go back to the Philippines to promote "Pacha's Pajamas."

Ableman has traveled the world as an educator. In India and Haiti, he produced entertaining educational programs for at-risk youths. His hope for "Pacha's Pajamas" is to turn this pop/hip-hop musical and book into a multi-platform educational tool to teach children about empowering themselves and protecting the environment.

His next step is to produce a curriculum for the classroom and a TV cartoon using the story line of Pacha.

"We are storytelling across media platforms to build a children's franchise, we want this to be the next 'Sesame Street' or 'Dora,'" he said in an interview with CNS.

The topics covered in "Pacha's Pajamas," Ableman said, "transcend creed and race."

"These are very universal messages that we have honed in on because of how divided we see a lot of our world is today," he said.

Ashley isn't sure what her dreams are yet, but she knows she will continue doing music and promoting "Pacha's Pajamas." She and her family emphasize prayer as the key to handling whatever comes next.

Before getting an offer to be part of the "Pacha's" project, "I was feeling really down," Ashley said. "I started praying. A few minutes later 'Pacha's' called me and I became a part of this thing. This tells me how the power of prayer really helps."

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