

Illiteracy Battle Is Put to Music

Tulsan's Song Used Widely

By Terrell Lester
Special Writer

Margie Alfonso wants to slam the door on illiteracy.

And she wants to open the door to reading.

The key to that door might be in E flat. It's a song that celebrates the joy of reading.



"Reading, it's an open door"

"To the things we never knew"

"And could never see before."

Terrell Lester

The words were written by an emotional Mrs. Alfonso following the well-publicized announcement by professional football player Dexter Manley that he could neither read nor write.

"It choked me up," the Tulsa housewife said. "I had a burden for his handicap because I really love to read."

"I thought, 'Gee, here's an adult man who seems to be successful and famous and has it all, and yet he lacks the basic thing that everybody needs to learn to grow: the ability to read.'"

Manley is a 6-foot-3, 257-pound all-star defensive end for the Washington Redskins, of the admitted last spring before a Senate panel on illiteracy that after four years of high school and four years at Oklahoma State University, he was virtually illiterate.

His story, and the tears that welled in his eyes as he told it, touched millions of Americans. Including Mrs. Alfonso.

"I had a real feeling in my heart for this man," she said.

Although she knew nothing of football, or Dexter Manley, she was moved to transfer her emo-

tions to paper. The words flowed. Within minutes, her thoughts had taken shape. Her composition was whole.

"Reading, it's the words to a prayer,

"Tells us all about love,

"Tells us all about life,

"Tells us somebody cares."

The words sat quietly and alone for several months.

Mrs. Alfonso watched the battle against illiteracy gain strength, and numbers. She watched as first lady Barbara Bush joined, and led, the fight.

Mrs. Alfonso took up words and music, if not arms.

"I thought if I could just put the words down and have it recorded, perhaps it would encourage someone to think that, 'Yes, this could open a door for me. It could allow me to read music and sing the words, or read a prayer, or read the Bible.'"

"You can't do anything without having this basic skill of reading," she said. "So, I just finally decided to record it."

With daughter Margaret Ann singing the words to basic instrumentation, they recorded a demonstration tape at a local studio.

That was a month ago. Mrs. Alfonso has been in tune with the fight against illiteracy ever since.

Her song is being used in Phoenix as part of that city's literacy program. It has been utilized by Capital Records and ABC Television. It has been accepted by program directors at two Tulsa radio stations.

On Thursday, the tape was played during a literacy program in Washington, D.C., put together by the Department of Education.

Mrs. Alfonso had the music for her songs in her head. She cannot, or will not, put music on paper.

"I don't have time to," she said.

See Reading on A-18



Margie Alfonso, songwriter, in her Tulsa home.

Word staff photo by Terrell Lester

...Reading

Continued from A-17

said with a smile. "If I find that I can get by without writing down the music, and I have found that I can do that, then I don't do it."

When she entered the recording studio with words in hand and music in head, she knew what she was doing. She hummed the melody. The musical director took it from there. He transformed the humming into music.

The recording was not Mrs. Alfonso's first.

She captured the essence of the 1987 bicentennial celebration of the writing of the Constitution in the song, "I Stand By My Country."

It was adopted by the Bicentennial Commission and was played and performed at numerous patriotic celebrations and conventions that year.

Like the song "Reading," the patriotic number was a family affair. Mrs. Alfonso and her son, George, now a 22-year-old law student at Pepperdine University, wrote the words. Margaret Ann, now 19 and a vocal performance major at the University of Oklahoma, sang on the recording.

She appeared at events from Philadelphia to Orlando, Fla.

The song was an overwhelming success. It earned all three the George Washington Honor Medal from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge.

Similar acceptance for "Reading" would be particularly gratifying for Mrs. Alfonso, given her penchant for the written word.

"If just one person hears this song and responds positively, and



Margaret Ann Alfonso
Singer

has the urge to want to read, then the song has really accomplished a lot," she said.

"It won't be Top 40, that's for sure. I don't see the nation grabbing on to something that you can hear the words to, or that won't break your eardrums."

The words won't break anything. Except, maybe, the grip that illiteracy has on millions of Americans.

"Reading helps us to understand

"And to learn and grow.

"It's exciting to read.

"There's so much we're needing to know."