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## Writer's Note: Zia Singers are the Stars, but Pay Attention to Solo Signer

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Brian Sandford

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I once read that it's much harder for magicians to fool children using sleight of hand compared with adults, because youths haven't been conditioned to follow cues and look where the magician wants them to look. This fascinates me, as society tends to view the first, say, three decades of a life as a time of personal growth — an era of exclusively gaining faculties, not simultaneously losing some. As a reporter, I benefit professionally and personally by looking in the places I've been trained not to look.

At the Zia Singers' first concert of the year, the audience's focus obviously was on the 50-plus singers as their voices rose to the heavens — or, at least, the roof of Christ Church Santa Fe. Artistic Director John Tiranno also cuts a distinctive figure as the only male involved and the only participant facing away from the audience.

A third dynamic element caught my eye: the blur of a woman's hands as she translated the songs using American Sign Language. She employed hand motions I'd never seen before, and I asked a friend involved in Zia Singers to put us in touch.



The woman's name, Kris Meurer, might sound familiar to longtime New Mexicans; she oversaw school health for the state Public Education Department and worked in Albuquerque Public Schools for more than 20 years each, retiring in 2024. Now she signs for singers, including Zia Singers again at this weekend's *She the People* performances, at 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May 30-31, at Christ Church Santa Fe.

If Meurer solely uses traditional sign language during a concert, those unable to hear the music are limited to reading lyrics.

"I have to look at the songs and analyze what their meaning is," she says. "Just signing the words doesn't necessarily [help] someone who doesn't hear the music, and doesn't hear the singing. It takes a lot of research."

Among the songs in *She the People* is "I Lift My Lamp," written by contemporary composer Katie O'Connor-Ballantyne.

"It's actually about the Statue of Liberty and her holding her lamp up, but it doesn't really say that in the song," Meurer says. "If I just signed, 'I lift my lamp,' am I taking the lamp from my nightstand? What does it mean? It really means is I'm lifting that fire and then welcoming immigrants and refugees into America.



Kris Meurer

"That's the lamp that we're talking about.

That song also talks about the golden door, so I had to research that. I didn't know that there actually is a golden door on the Statue of Liberty that people go through."

Meurer has visited New York City but not Liberty Island. The Emma Lazarus poem *The New Colossus*, written in 1883 to support fundraising for the statue's base and preserved on a bronze plaque there, ends with, "I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" It's preceded by two lines sure to

prompt strong feelings: “The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.”

Readers of this column might end up being hyper-aware of Meurer’s presence, and because of space constraints, I can’t tell you her entire story here. But she welcomes interaction with attendees.

“I have another interpreter who signs with me at the Mass that I typically do every week,” she says, referring to her role at the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church in Albuquerque, “but once in a while, somebody comes up and says, ‘I [learned about the interpreter presence] on your website, so that’s why I came.’”

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**Brian Sandford**

Pasatiempo reporter