

Photojournalist Secures His Artistic “Voice” **By Jonathan Wilson, Philadelphia**

I STILL marvel at the irony. How it all began with a picture hanging on a wall in a modest row home in the Oak Lane section of Philadelphia during the late spring of 1969. I was a sophomore at Tyler School of Art majoring in painting. My career as an artist was off to an inauspicious start. Even after two years at what was by all accounts a highly respected art school, I was unable to reconcile my values with those of the faculty. My professors seemed more in tune with the New York art scene and less into the human being and matters of the heart. I had grown up in a family that had stood up to McCarthy in the '50s and actively supported the civil rights movement of the '60s. What I was really looking for at the time was someone who could show me a way of connecting my social values with my artistic ones.

What impressed me about the picture hanging on the wall was the demeanor of the person in the photograph. He appeared regal but not authoritarian; serene but not spaced out; compassionate, but he didn't appear to be the bleeding heart type. After scrutinizing the picture for about thirty seconds, I can still remember saying to myself, "I think this is someone I can trust." In the midst of my contemplation, John Whitlock, a Soka Gakkai member who had recently moved to the Philadelphia area from Japan, came over and proudly explained to me, "This is President Ikeda. He is the president of our organization." While this encounter after a Buddhist discussion meeting seemed so unremarkable in the myriad moments of one's lifetime, it ultimately proved to be the seminal moment—the moment that would lead me to a lifetime of practicing Buddhism as an SGI member, to the woman I would eventually marry, to the decision to become a photojournalist, and to the answer to the question that had been gnawing at me: "How can I reconcile my social values and my artistic sensibilities?"

I PRACTICED Buddhism at a fever pitch my junior and senior years of college. I was the pride of my district chief and the darling of the local organization, whose mostly Japanese members were amazed to see an American show up at meetings wearing whites, able to sit on his knees without pause and could speak English laced with Japanese Buddhist terminology so seamlessly that it appeared he had been born at a discussion meeting. Despite a wholehearted effort in the Buddhist practice, artistically I was going nowhere. No matter what I did I could not get my heart onto the canvas. The fact that I graduated at all was indeed remarkable.

After graduating I came to realize photography was the medium that would best enable me to express my ideals. Yet in spite of pounding the pavement and being told I had a respectable portfolio, I was unable to find any work as a photographer for months. Instead I worked as a security guard, bank teller, silk screen printer, dishwasher and in a number of low-level technical photo jobs over the course of five years. By this time I had major youth division responsibility in the organization. In 1976, I was retouching pimples on teenagers at a studio that specialized in yearbook photography. The president of the company, apparently impressed at the fervor with which I could eradicate a zit from a teenage face, offered to train me as a photographer if I would continue my retouching duties during the slower times of the year. After seven years of practicing Buddhism, this was a major breakthrough. My career in

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yearbook photography consisted of traveling to high schools throughout the mid-Atlantic states, taking senior portraits during the day and then photographing sporting events until five or six in the evening. The five- year effort to become a photographer paid off. I was well liked by the schools where I worked and by the owners of the business as well.

AFTER about three years, I began to feel a sense of dissatisfaction again. I came to realize that I wanted to work for a newspaper. Unfortunately, newspaper photojournalism was and still is highly competitive. As I began talking to people in the profession, I found out that jobs at a paper large enough to pay a salary one could raise a family on were rare. It was at this time I began chanting 3 million daimoku. In 1981, after completing my daimoku campaign, I approached the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, one of the city's four newspapers, only to receive a form letter stating there were no positions at the paper, there were none anticipated in the future and have a nice life. Remarkably I was not discouraged but determined to increase my daimoku target to 10 million. Employment prospects soon worsened. The *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Philadelphia Journal* folded, filling an already competitive job market with about twenty additional photographers, all with better experience and credentials than I had. In addition, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where I wanted to work, was rapidly becoming one of the most respected newspapers in the country. Between 1975 and 1985, it had won a dozen Pulitzer Prizes (two for photography). Naturally this meant that the competition for photo positions was increasing dramatically. If I was to get a position at the *Inquirer*, I would not only be competing with the glut of local photojournalists but with the top people from all over the country, since it was now the "hot" paper to work for.

The situation seemed as bleak as ever. I had been working for the yearbook company for nearly ten years, had never had a photo published in a daily newspaper and with my SGI responsibilities really did not seriously have the time to pursue any work outside of my immediate job. After receiving guidance about my dilemma, I was determined to continue in my 10 million daimoku campaign, become the top person in the region in my position as a yearbook photographer and continue to participate as much as I could in youth division activities.

In April of 1987, I completed chanting 10 million daimoku. I had recently graduated from the youth division. Also, competing yearbook photographers were offering to double my salary if I would come to work for them. Discussing my situation with a senior in faith, we concluded I should quit my position working for the yearbook photographer and pursue my career in photojournalism on a full-time basis. A friend of mine had been hired by the *Inquirer* as an assignment editor so this time I was easily able to get an interview with the director of photography. As I prepared for the interview, the question remained how would I be able to convince the head of what was now the top newspaper photo department in America that I could produce pictures at their level despite never having had a picture published in a daily newspaper.

Larry Price, the *Inquirer's* director of photography, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner himself, went through my portfolio, not saying much. He called in another editor to look at my work and then another. Explaining that the paper was in the midst of a major shift in news coverage and that they would be expanding their suburban coverage, especially in the area of suburban sports, he said they wanted me to begin doing high school sports assignments for them in the fall. During the twelve years I

had worked for the yearbook photographer, I had come to be on a first-name basis with scores of athletic directors and coaches in the Philadelphia suburbs. Consequently I was able to gain access to athletes in locker rooms, weight rooms and training rooms. Furthermore, I had developed a style that the *Inquirer* wanted for the type of sports coverage that was being planned.

ONCE I began working for the *Inquirer*, my status quickly changed from sports assignments to general assignments and to doing the centerpiece photography for various sections of the paper. After eighteen months, I went from a freelance status to a long-term contract. I have been working as a staff and contract photographer ever since. After about two years at the paper, the deep sense of dissatisfaction with my photography began creeping into my life again, just as it had when I was in art school. As I chanted and continued to study SGI President Ikeda's guidance, I felt a need to be able to create photographs that didn't simply illustrate the subject at hand but resonated on a deeper level.

In his 1987 speech to the Arts Division, President Ikeda discusses the importance of distinguishing truth from falsehood. This meant to me bucking the trends of contemporary photojournalism and pursuing a more transcendent image. I also noticed in his guidance how he often prefaced his speech by stating that his remarks were for the people of the twenty-first century. For me it was still 1989. I realized that my goals and determinations for my photography had been much too short-sighted and shallow. I began chanting to inspire not just current readers but to have the ability to move the hearts of people in the twenty-first, twenty-second and twenty-third centuries. As I struggled to do this, I began developing a definite style that my editors began to use, which led to my first photo essay for the *Inquirer's* Sunday magazine on the construction of the Blue Route, a suburban Philadelphia interstate.

Writers often talk about the need to find their "voice." I think artists also grapple with this process perhaps in different ways. Over the twenty years since I had been in art school, I had really been in search of my artistic voice. Many times I felt isolated because there was never an artist or photographer who could tell me how to find it, or that it even existed. Yet, from the journey that began with a picture on a wall in a Philadelphia row home, the answer eventually came.

President Ikeda concludes his guidance to the Arts Division by expressing his hope that we can live lives of victory, showing tremendous actual proof, whether we appear in the spotlight or not. It is certainly the secret wish of every photojournalist in his or her lifetime to take one image that defines an era, be it a solitary figure in front of a row of tanks near Tiannamen Square or a young woman crying out over the body of a fallen student on the Kent State campus. On a personal level, what matters most for me is not the recognition my work receives in my lifetime. At the core of my existence, however, there is an immovable determination that in the twenty-second or twenty-third century, when the turbulent era in which we live is understood and the efforts of the SGI pioneers are fully appreciated, historians will undoubtedly write the chapter on Daisaku Ikeda and the rise of his disciples. My sole wish is that in that chapter, be it a sentence or even a footnote, it will be noted in the closing years of the twentieth century that there was a photographer from Philadelphia named Wilson who understood President Ikeda's heart, captured his spirit and put it on pieces of 35mm film. □

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