

A Single Father's Commitment **By Cheryl Utley, Kansas City, Mo.**

Becoming a single parent almost a decade ago catapulted John Mills of Kansas City, Mo., into a demanding daily schedule that he finds constantly challenging. In the following article, he shares some reflections on the commitment and sense of responsibility it takes to be a full-time single father of two children.

BUSY! Busy! Busier! That aptly describes John Mills of Kansas City, Mo., who has been a single parent of two daughters, Krystal, 12, and Andrea, 10, for almost a decade. John starts his workday at 4:00 a.m. with thirty to forty minutes of chanting followed by the recitation of his morning prayers.

On school days, he wakes up his children at 5:45 a.m. by singing and laughing as they prepare for school. He has learned through his Buddhist practice that possessing a strong, high life-condition is essential for his daughters to be happy. Due to his own personal struggles over the years raising his daughters, he has gained tremendous respect for all mothers. "I've come to realize that parenting is a lifelong commitment," said John. His Buddhist practice has taught him to take total responsibility for his life and that of his children. "If I want a better life for my children and me," he said, "changes and improvements must come from within myself."

A few years after he began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1983, John secured work as a truck driver for a major corporation that put him on the road to financial stability. Shortly thereafter, he and his wife parted; their divorce became final in March 1988. Four months later, he had received custody of his two daughters, ages 10 months and 2 years, as his ex-wife had agreed that he was in a better position to raise the children.

"My children and I lived in a one-bedroom apartment," John said. "I asked myself, 'What am I going to do?' I was just learning how to become a responsible parent. I felt I had two choices: I could run away or take responsibility for my life."

John decided to dedicate his life to his daughters, and thus gave up his single's lifestyle. Fearful because he didn't have the slightest idea how to care for his children, he sincerely chanted to do his best and become a good father. He found he had to cope with higher stress levels when it dawned on him that he had to do everything himself, like chores around the house, buying groceries and clothes, planning meals, and most recently, a move to a new home. "I realized soon that it's very demanding to work all day, come home and do homework with both my daughters," he said.

"My daughters are my first priority," he continued. "Their needs come first. So I just can't go out and party and hang out with the guys, like I used to."

When his daughters were younger, John recalled that finding quality child care while he was working was his biggest struggle. "I chanted to the Gohonzon to find strength and wisdom because I was working over sixty hours a week so I

could provide for my daughters and pay for good child care," he said. Although at times he took his children to day-care centers, he concentrated more on finding people he knew and trusted to babysit.

NOW that his daughters are older, John trusts them to be on their own, whether it be at home or visiting with friends, especially during the summer months. Although initially he had mixed emotions about leaving them alone at home at times, he now believes that it helps them to take responsibility. He feels that children should be treated with respect and not be limited in any way just because they're children—he takes the time to explain to his daughters how to handle a variety of situations and what is expected of them. He also has given them a pager in case of an emergency.

Sometimes John draws on his own childhood experiences to deal with situations like leaving his children alone at home. Recalling how he felt one summer long ago when he and his sister had stayed home alone by themselves, he feels he can empathize with his daughters and know what their needs might be when they are left by themselves. "I also realize that growing up in today's world is totally different than when I was growing up," he said. "And that my daughters' experiences as they grow up may be different from other young girls who live in two-parent families." Therefore, he encourages his daughters to explain things to him in detail so that he might better understand everything going on in their lives.

During difficult moments, support and encouragement come from other SGI-USA members, from whom his daughters have learned the basics of the practice. John gradually realized that his daughters respected him when he took them to discussion meetings and home visits. They also like the family-like atmosphere at the community center. His daughters have taught him that children retain little of what you say—they learn by example. It's difficult to be a hypocrite as a parent, John indicated, and not do your human revolution. "Whatever the activity—discussion meetings, home visits and organizational meetings—my daughters saw that I never stopped in my Buddhist practice," he said. As they continue to watch their father, they see his selflessness and his attitude never to give up.

ANDREA, the youngest daughter, feels her father is "a cool dad" because he listens to her music and plays with them. Krystal said that "she would never give up her dad for a million bucks." She feels he has patience and a big heart. She shared that when they went shopping at a mall once, he had originally intended to buy them only two dresses each; instead, he bought each of them four dresses. "He'll sit down and explain things to us," she said. "He wrestles with us, tickles us after work. We go to the mall, to meetings, movies, swimming, ice-skating, and vacation together. He even helps us clean our room. He's funny and has a sense of humor! He's like a child. After he yells at you for doing something wrong, he says, 'I'm sorry.' He doesn't spank or hit us. He explains everything to us so that we understand when we are wrong."

John sees that his daughters have developed a unique friendship with one another. "Even though Andrea and Krystal are competitive as sisters, they are very good friends and close to each other," he explained. "I treat them both equally and try not to compare one with the other. They share my personal struggles with me and they see that I am doing my best to challenge my life. I respect them as individual human beings who have their own separate identities, and we make decisions together as a family." □

Title: A Single Father's Commitment
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/97 v.1 n.10 p.18 LB9710p18 Kansas City, Missouri
Author: Cheryl Utley
Keywords: City Commitment Experiences Family Father Features Kansas Life Missouri Parenting Relationships Single