

The Heart of a Happy Family

In 1998, one of the areas the SGI-USA is focusing on is families. In the following conversation, Bridgett and Mark Horton discuss their journey into a loving relationship. Mark is a police officer for the LAPD and Bridgett works at Warner Brothers Studios. Living Buddhism correspondent Kathleen Slattery visited the couple and their 16-month-old baby girl, Khyla, at their home in Canoga Park, California.

Bridgett: In the beginning of 1990, we had planned to get married and then two weeks later, my husband got cold feet.

Mark: The cold feet I had was about commitment. Commitment meant that I couldn't go to the gym if I wanted to. I fought marriage tooth and nail. I just wanted to keep my freedom. I thought I was losing something. I think overall, the word *commitment* in itself scared me.

Bridgett: I was freaking out. It was very difficult for me because I chanted to the Gohonzon to see if this was the person for my life. I've always met guys who wanted to play the field. I was always the "other woman," and found it difficult to find someone who would respect me—be honest with me. I'd never been in a relationship where the guy expressed so much respect for women and was sincere. This was an indication that I had changed something.

Mark: For me it was a process of realizing that I needed to be more responsible; that commitments were just things I invented in my imagination that prevented me from taking the next step toward my development and growth. After we got married, we went through several struggles. We had a lack of communication. When we got angry...

Bridgett: We wouldn't talk at all for days.

Mark: Or my anger would come out in the form of yelling. And the next step she thought would be that I'd hit her. I reassured her that my grandmother always told me never hit a woman. That never crossed my mind. I might have yelled at her out of anger, but we didn't know how to communicate how mad we were with each other.

Bridgett: I grew up in a family where I felt I didn't have a voice. You didn't speak up or have an opinion or show your emotions. So all these years, trying to undo that has been really difficult. It's my nature to be calm and I hold things in a lot. It's a struggle for me to say exactly what's on my mind. And with Khyla, our 16-month-old daughter, being a part of our lives, it forces me to change because I don't want her to suppress her feelings.

Mark: My struggles were with my ego, finding out who I was and how much I

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was lacking. The faults that I found in myself were my own anger, my own negativity, the very things that I was actually blaming on Bridgett. I really looked at her and realized this woman is really beautiful and sincere and she's always happy. I got to the point where I accepted the fact that yeah, I was getting angry on the inside and it was something that I needed to challenge—something that I was suffering about. Bridgett is basically a real mellow person, real even-keeled, really down to earth. And once again, that used to bug me.

Bridgett: My husband has to come to me and ask what's wrong, and I still might not say anything until I feel comfortable. If he does something that bothers me, I won't tell him at the moment he's doing it, even though inside I feel like ripping him apart.

Mark: Today it doesn't take as long, but it's like I'm going in there to do surgery to get her to communicate. I mean, I don't have a doctor's degree. After chanting about it, I can go to Bridgett and say, "Hey, what's bothering you now," and I can accept it. Before, it was confrontational. I would try to match wits with her about what she was saying.

Bridgett: We had to create the environment—that's our prayer—to create the kind of environment where we can speak freely and frankly without the other person's feelings getting hurt. A passage from President Ikeda's book, *The Creative Family*, has helped us out a lot:

[T]here need be nothing extraordinary about their dialogue. Discussing with another those everyday matters that concern one the most, including what is pleasurable as well as painful, and talking honestly, from the heart, generates an inexhaustible range of topics. This is why it should not be difficult to communicate, because when one speaks frankly and openly about things that matter most, one freely reveals oneself, making it possible to be better understood and loved by others. (p. 18)

Mark: I told her before, "You've got to say what's on your mind and don't worry about whether it's going to hurt my feelings." After chanting a lot and going back and forth with these battles of communication, we began to really understand each other. We began talking about having a baby.

Bridgett: At first, I was having a hard time about having a baby. I guess it was the freedom—that I was going to do all the work.

Mark: That's exactly what I felt. I thought I was losing my freedom.

Bridgett: After talking about it with an SGI leader and chant-ing daimoku about what she said, my life began to open up, and I felt like, "Okay, I can do this." It was okay.

Mark: And with this in mind, I've been telling Bridgett I want to have another baby... I never missed an appointment with the gynecologist. It was important for me to be there. That's what responsibility is about.

Bridgett: I took a week off before Khyla was due. I didn't know until later that you could have postpartum symptoms prior to the baby coming. I didn't know this was happening. I just knew that my memory was going; my emotions switched radically. Mark could be holding my hand one minute, and the next minute I'd pull away and he wouldn't know what was happening. It was like I was going through a change in personality and it was pulling us apart.

Mark: The day we went to the hospital her emotions were on edge. Bridgett began saying things that didn't make sense. She'd go from one topic to another without completing a sentence.

Bridgett: And I could see myself doing it but I couldn't control it. Everything—all the pain, hurt and anger that I'd suppressed—wanted to come out at one time. Everything blew up at once—things from childhood, things in our relationship. I thought we were on the verge, right before Khyla was born, of going our separate ways.

Mark: She was trying to figure out who she was.

Bridgett: Thank goodness for my mother and mother-in-law. They were very understanding, very patient and reassuring that I was okay.

Mark: It was like, I didn't know who this woman was; it's not the woman I married. But we finally got to the hospital with the tension going on, and our moms were there with us and Bridgett went into labor.

Bridgett: So they performed a Cesarean and Khyla was born looking just like her dad. The medication they had given me was supposed to numb me up to the waist. It numbed me to my chest and I couldn't breathe. The fear I was having of dying was profound. The pain of surgery and having a child, trying to care for this new baby and care for myself was just overwhelming...and the relationship...

Mark: She began reminiscing about an acquaintance who had a baby and found out she had ovarian cancer and died. Bridgett's thoughts were along those lines, that this was her mission to deliver this baby and then die like her friend. That compounded the fear of not being able to breathe. We stayed in the hospital for two days and finally got a chance to go home. Bridgett still wasn't getting any sleep because she was breast-feeding every two hours.

Bridgett: One day something changed in me. I guess it was the postpartum depression coming down. When I would chant, it would dissipate but then it would come back up. I felt like I was a patient, and then I had to take care of

Khyla and wondering how could I do it all.

Mark: I took two months off from work to help out. One day Bridgett came running to me, saying, “Who’s going to take care of me?”

Bridgett: I felt so alone, I couldn’t express myself.

Mark: I didn’t know what was going on. We went to the OB-Gyn and Bridgett said, “Mom, Mark, I’m going to be okay.” And I think she quoted something from Nichiren Daishonin. We left the office by this point. I accepted the fact that she was saying statements that might be a little bit different. Then she started chanting real loud—yelling daimoku, basically screaming.

Bridgett: That morning I wondered if people knew when they were about to die. I felt like I was falling into...

Mark: This sinkhole.

Bridgett: Yeah, like a sinkhole. I dipped into this psychotic type of person. I chanted and then I just snapped out of it, and went in front of the Gohonzon and said, “I will not die!” I made a determination to live and devote my life to this practice.

Mark: The night before we went to the doctor, I was chanting and I said in my prayers: “Okay, bring it on. Whatever it is, let’s get busy. Let’s see it in its entirety.” So when the yelling started, I was prepared. Everything that I thought would be lacking was there—the confidence, the courage, the patience. I pulled the car over in an alley, held her and started chanting. The ambulance showed up and police officers came.

Bridgett: No one could get me out of the car.

Mark: There were three police officers.

Bridgett: I felt like if I moved out of the car I was going to die. So when I started screaming, it was as if my life were closing. I was fighting for my life and that’s the kind of strength that came out of me.

Mark: We got her to the hospital. I had to continue to fight, though I didn’t know what the outcome would be. We had SGI members who came over and were there at the crucial moment.

Bridgett: This all started happening a week after Khyla’s birth.

Mark: It was difficult for me to decide on the best facility for Bridgett. So her father and I both agreed to keep her at UCLA. While she was there, I visited every day. I

knew I had to just listen to what she had to say, whatever she was experiencing. I listened to her because we just had a baby and I had to be there for her.

Bridgett: This brought us together as a family in this crucial moment and made us all the more stronger.

Mark: And Khyla! I'm so in love with her. I never knew it would be so good, and especially having a daughter because this is little Bridgett. Khyla is our little princess. Khyla's at the stage where we really have to help her. We have to really develop ourselves in order for her to be a great individual. I look at things like changing her diaper, or holding her or reading to her. When she walks up to me and just holds a book out to me, how can I not read to her?

Bridgett: Mark does everything I do. We share the responsibility of caring for Khyla. There's nothing he can't do and won't do. I thought a man would say, "I'm going to the gym now." They don't even ask, "Oh, honey could you watch the baby?" It's just automatically assumed it's the woman's responsibility. But I chanted a lot of daimoku about it and I'm sure Mark has chanted about it, and it's no longer an issue. I remember an SGI friend saying that when you first get married you are parallel to each other and then over time you become one. You know each other's thoughts... you're in sync.

Mark: I finally began to respect Bridgett's opinion and to appreciate the things she has to say. I realize she's an individual, and as much as I want to change her, she's not going to do that. So I started, as painful as it was...I began to think, "Okay, what do I need to do so this suffering can cease?"

Bridgett: What do I need to change?

Mark: And anger was most of it, basically. Because growing up, I didn't have a father that was around.

Bridgett: My parents were never married, and Mark's parents divorced when he was a kid. So it was just hard to pave the way in this relationship.

Mark: It was like we were looking for a recipe for a family.

Bridgett: We didn't have role models.

Mark: We got to the point where we decided we're going to have to create a happy relationship and family.

Bridgett: Reading President Ikeda's guidance on family and chanting about what it is that I need to change for this or that to happen has helped a lot in pulling our relationship together. I used to go to my husband and say, "Do you even like

me?" Because he would hate it when I wouldn't speak up or express myself. I couldn't do it. And I was mad at myself that I couldn't do it. But that began to change after Khyla was born.

Mark: I just wanted to make sure she had a pulse. I wanted to see the fight in this woman, and I did see it that day in the car. The kind of fight that I didn't have to worry about her sticking up for herself or speaking up for herself anymore.

Bridgett: It was very painful.

Mark: "Is there someone in there breathing? Hello! Hello! Hello! This is Mark Horton."

Bridgett: We would point a finger at each other and just drown in misery and that's where we would stay.

Mark: But even that was beneficial, because we realized that's where we were—that we were pointing a finger at each other. Now I can share my experiences and not worry about what other people think. I didn't have enough self-esteem in relationships—I didn't think I was worthy or capable of having anybody in my life for any length of time.

My mom is Shirley Jackson and has been practicing for twenty-four years. Her strong practice to fight through anything and everything has encouraged me. She's my hero. She's been through so much raising three kids and then moving out here from Chicago. Having a really good relationship with my mom was key to me because that also was a reflection of my relationship with Bridgett.

Bridgett: That's right. At our wedding, someone asked us what we wanted to convey to people about our marriage, and one of the things was to be an example for other people. I know that's why we've gone through so much, to be able to help others. And that doesn't mean that it's perfect. It's a work in progress. No matter what struggle we go through, no matter how dire, we always come back stronger. It's scary when you're going through it because we're thinking...

Mark: It's over.

Bridgett: And I think to myself, I can be miserable all by myself.

Mark: I don't need anybody else to be miserable!

Bridgett: But it's amazing how much more we're in love.

Mark: Three or four years ago, I told my mom I needed to talk to my dad. It was a difficult step. I was always intimidated by my dad. When he came over I told him I loved him, but also about what hurt me. We were both just sitting there

crying.

My dad is not used to expressing himself. I began to open up—to believe that it's okay if some things are bugging me—to express myself. I don't have to hold it in. If I have to cry, it's okay. Now it's gotten to the point where I can chant with my dad on the phone. I understand and accept my father the way he is.

With the practice and encouragement, I stepped out of my limitations. Once I started chanting, it opened up so many areas of things that I thought were impossible, because before they were not possible. Having a kid was not possible for me. I just didn't see it.

Bridgett: Marriage seemed like an impossible dream to me. Neither of my parents were married, so it just didn't seem like it was something that was going to be real or last very long.

Mark: November 23 is our seventh anniversary. It's really been about expanding my life condition, so I can have the capacity to open up my life to people and not be secretive, but feel I have a voice, I am important, I have something to contribute.

Bridgett: President Ikeda's guidance is the key to our success. I also think it's so important to continue reading about successful relationships. When the parents are happy, the children will also be happy. But if you let your relationship die, then things just fall apart.

By keeping our relationship happy, and fresh, Khyla is so happy watching us. There's some advice we received that says, "Having a big heart that forgives the minor faults and mistakes of each other is one of the keys to a successful relationship between husband and wife. Rather than harping on faults and mistakes, we should acknowledge and praise each other's strengths and offer warm encouragement. Marriage is made for two people aiming at a mutual goal."

Mark: I feel like I can finally appreciate a relationship that is functional where we are able to create value.

Bridgett: I'm starting to realize what President Ikeda means about building a life without regret. I realize it's taking action at the time. Then you won't have any regrets. And that's what he does with his life—takes action.

I think it's crucial for me to keep developing myself. There are a lot of things that I have to constantly work on—constant self-improvement.

Mark: Our families and future family will be able to show actual proof, not by having the easy way, but by being able to challenge struggles and overcome them—as a family united. □