

The Power of Faith, The Power of Dreams
By Emiko Rohde, Davis, California,
as told to Geoff Rohde

Sequoia Park Preschoolers Get a Head Start on Learning

AS a child growing up in rural Japan, I knew that life must have more to offer than the poverty and small-mindedness all about me. From my earliest years, I was absolutely determined to create a better life for myself. Shortly after leaving the countryside for the big city, I joined the Soka Gakkai. Even at my first meeting, I sensed that here was the environment and the philosophy that would allow me to build a solid, happy life. Now, after thirty-seven years of passionate practice, my very first dream—a rock solid, happy life—has been thoroughly realized. No person, no obstacle, no situation can defeat me!

My second dream, that of leaving Japan and learning the real meaning of freedom and democracy took seventeen years to come true. When I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I was poor, under-educated and without direction. Yet I boldly asked a leader how to realize my dream of going to America. He responded by saying: "Yes, without a doubt you can do it. Stick with the Gakkai. Practice hard. And you will definitely realize your dream." I had no idea exactly how this might ever become possible, but with total confidence in this wonderful practice, I poured my heart into every activity.

Eventually, I realized that I needed to establish a career, a mission in society. What could I do? In what field could I contribute? In the mid-'70s, while reading of SGI President Ikeda's travels to France, I saw a picture of him encouraging a young child. This wonderful, heart-to-heart exchange between Mr. Ikeda and a little French boy touched me deeply and changed the course of my life. From that moment on, I was determined to become an educator. How, where and when this might occur were "minor details" to be worked out over time through prayer and effort. Even though my new mission seemed truly unobtainable, my Buddhist practice and respect for President Ikeda's accomplishments with the Soka Schools gave me all the confidence I needed.

Meanwhile, I was so busy with activities as a young woman in Osaka that I had very little time to worry about marriage. President Ikeda had always told us to put faith first and create the good fortune to attract the right person. I was confident in his advice and did not worry about remaining single well into my 30s. Other than my daily Buddhist activities, my three big goals of establishing a rock-solid life, of becoming an educator and leaving Japan were my top priorities.

In 1978, my years of prayer and effort paid off as I was invited to visit a friend in California. How shocked I was on the drive from the Sacramento airport to the small town of Davis—the sights, sounds and unique smell of farms brought back memories of my childhood. What had I gotten myself into? My fears quickly vanished as I made contact with the local SGI organization and began attending exciting discussion meetings. But in a totally unexpected development, the young Davis District chief found me as attractive as I found him. This year we

celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary.

Despite realizing two major goals and marriage, too, I had not yet established myself as an educator. To this end, and to improve my English, I enrolled at Sacramento City College and graduated less than three years later with an A.A. degree in early childhood education. Those years of long days, long nights and very little sleep were difficult, but now they are a treasured memory. I'm truly grateful that America offers such rich educational opportunities for immigrants or late-bloomers like me.

For the next eight years, I worked as a teacher at local preschools and day-care centers. It was not easy. At times it was the school management itself that created unnecessary problems. Often I told myself: "That's not right! I could do a better job as director." Over time, a powerful urge to establish my own preschool developed. I wanted to demonstrate how the power of Buddhism and "applied humanism" could transform early learning. I was also determined to prove to President Ikeda just how much I had learned during my years of practice. Once again, exactly how this might happen were "minor details" to be worked out through prayer so strong "as if to draw water from dry sand or set fire to wet tinder."

Starting in 1988, my husband and I visited many preschools for sale. Most were too far away in Sacramento and none seemed "just right." To complicate matters, we had very little money for a down payment and initial operating expenses. We also had none of the business experience a responsible bank would require for a loan. What else could I do but chant many hours for weeks, months and even years to realize my impossible dream? It's hard to describe the intensity of my prayers or the painful ordeal of human revolution I went through. Over and over I chanted passionately to subdue my cowardly tendencies, my anger and my lack of confidence. My continuous campaign to chant as much as I could each day solidified my resolve to the point that I began to identify with Nichiren Daishonin's closest disciples.

After so much chanting, guidance from my seniors and study of the Daishonin's writings, I understood why the Daishonin demanded support from Bodhisattva Hachiman on the way to Tatsunokuchi or the god of the moon while at Ichi. I, too, began demanding answers in my prayers: "Gohonzon, show me what I must change within myself to achieve victory! Show me what strategy to follow in society to realize my dreams."

One day my oldest sister told me that she might be able to help me start the preschool. This unexpected news only deepened my resolve to succeed. We tried, but failed, to buy a plot of vacant land in downtown Sacramento, near its many State Office buildings. We next called upon our city's Director of Children's Services. She mentioned that a nearby facility might soon be on the market. Five months later, we bought that property. Not only did my sister provide much of the down payment, but the seller was eager to carry the financing and help us avoid a bank loan.

On April 15, 1991, we became proud owners of an empty preschool. In what must be a record, we were issued a Child Care Center License by the State of California after only six weeks of vigorous work and inspired prayer. Sequoia Park Preschool was now open and could enroll children! My career as a professional educator

began.

Caring for children proved easy compared to the many unexpected complications of running a business. Finding employees, navigating the complexities of labor law and government regulations, convincing parents to entrust their child to a new, unproven preschool—it's been much more difficult than I ever imagined when I was "just a teacher." But despite all the difficulties, we've overcome each one, worked very hard and operated in the black every month for the past seven years.

Even while working so hard to make my preschool a success, I've not cut back on my practice of Buddhism in the slightest. Every week I make the time to encourage members in Sacramento, in Stockton, and even as far away as San Francisco. When I begin to complain that my life is too hard, I reinvigorate myself by reflecting on the amazing efforts and accomplishments of President Ikeda. In fact, the very name we selected, Sequoia Park Preschool, was inspired by his 1990 speech about California's giant sequoia trees:

Incidentally, the [giant] sequoia trees here in California are very famous. Some of them grow as high as 130 meters and their stumps can reportedly hold over forty people; some of these trees also live more than 3,000 years. Even such giant redwoods sprout from a single tiny seed. One seed contains unlimited potential. (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 64)

Here is how we captured President Ikeda's vision in our preschool's philosophy: "The early childhood years are the foundation of life. While that foundation is seldom visible after we grow up, what (and how) we learn before the age of 6 will influence our lives forever. Sequoia Park Preschool will strive to help each child build a strong foundation of self-esteem, character and competence. The Giant Sequoia, after which our school is named, is the largest living thing. It is massive, strongly rooted, drought-, disease-, and fire-resistant. It lives for thousands of years and inspires all who see it. Yet it grows from a very tiny seed. Sequoia Park Preschool is dedicated to the principle that every child has the potential to grow into a magnificent human being who inspires others, triumphs over adversity, contributes greatly to society, and lives a long, happy, fulfilling life."

The one phrase that best describes our day-to-day program is "well-balanced" since we strive to nurture all aspects of a young child. Building emotional intelligence is very important at this age. But so is learning to enjoy learning, making and being friends, and developing both fine and gross motor skills.

In 1997, readers of our local newspaper voted us "Best Preschool" in Yolo County. This honor is deeply satisfying, as it is recognition of my success in creating the best possible learning environment for the young children of Davis. As grateful winners say on Oscar night, "This award would not have been possible without the tremendous support and encouragement from many others." In that spirit, I'd like to express my heartfelt appreciation to:

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- President Ikeda and the many SGI leaders here and in Japan who have taught me so well how to manifest the power of faith and practice.
- My extended family in Japan. About ten years ago, shortly after my brother-in-law died, his 35-year-old daughter was diagnosed with stomach cancer. As this vivacious young woman lay dying, what was she most eager to talk about? Not the great memories of our past three decades, but how she and her mother could help finance my preschool! She insisted on devoting her remaining days to the achievement of my dreams. When others have literally given their life to help you, how can you ever let them down?
- My family in America. My husband and his mother have provided indispensable help. Geoff built most of our preschool furniture and still repairs the plumbing, processes the payroll and writes correspondence for my signature. My dear mother-in-law filled in as an occasional substitute during our early years. More recently, she has taken it upon herself to prepare hot meals for us. What a delight to enjoy her excellent, international cuisine after a fourteen hour day!
- The teachers, children and parents of Sequoia Park Preschool. How lucky I am to have such dedicated support. In a field famous for rapid turnover, my teachers have stayed with me for years and contributed their unique skills, talent and enthusiasm for teaching young children.

I have proven especially to myself what the power of faith and practice can accomplish when it is animated by a great wish and inspired dream. I believe in the depths of my life that every individual has equal or greater ability to win whatever race he or she may choose to run and enjoy the deep satisfaction of victory. □

Developing Social Skills—From Sequoia Park Preschool Parent’s Handbook

LEARNING to live happily within the constraints of society’s formal and informal rules (laws, customs, and manners) is a big part of social development and successfully “growing up.” For this reason, no matter what activity your child is engaged in, be it playing with others, painting a masterpiece, or building a house of blocks, we will always be helping him/her learn how to:

- Be friends; to develop trust, patience, kindness, and a desire to help.
- Take pride in his/her accomplishments and appreciate those of others.
- Behave with common courtesy and respect the property of others.
- Be responsible, follow directions, and clean up after him/herself.

Socialization starts soon after birth and continues through the teen-age years. The preschool years, however, are especially important since this is the period in which inter- and intra-personal skills are most effectively learned. Children who arrive in kindergarten with little self-control or underdeveloped social skills will

be much more “behind” than children who haven’t learned to read. We believe strongly that after assuring your child’s safety and happiness, helping him/her learn how to get along with others and how to behave in groups (especially in a school-like setting) are the most important responsibilities we have to you, the parent(s), to your child, and to society. By providing this assistance to your precious child, we will contribute greatly to his/her success not only in school, but in life itself! For all these reasons our program is not an unstructured free-for-all, where “kids can be kids.” Such an approach does NOT help children learn interpersonal skills, but rather postpones these vital lessons until later in life when behavior becomes [much] more difficult to change. On the other hand, excessive control is also ineffective. Constantly correcting or chastising a child for every misstep, no matter how minor, makes it difficult for a child to develop self-control. Too much strictness creates a fearful environment that robs a child of self-confidence and discourages the adventure and happy joy of discovery that is the best part of growing up. Therefore, we seek a healthy middle ground between these two extremes at Sequoia Park Preschool. With patience, love, and consistency, we convey not only the standards of good behavior, but also the important principles which underlie the rules, e.g., consideration of others. We do our utmost to help every child develop impulse control, empathy, and self-esteem. □

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