

The Joys & Struggles of Byakuren

From self-confidence to humility, young women find what they need in this behind-the-scenes support group

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Sara Jones credits her time in Byakuren with giving her increased humility and compassion. Denise Lapier has gained new friends and lots of joy. And Traci Takahashi has found self-confidence.

At a recent Byakuren retreat in the Santa Cruz mountains, these three women were among many who reflected on the joys, struggles and impact that participating in this group has had on their lives.

Ms. Jones, the San Francisco Byakuren chief, joined the group in St. Louis 10 years ago. She is now an immigration attorney and says she is fortunate to participate in Byakuren because of the humanism it teaches her; she can now cultivate humanistic relations with her clients. It's easy, she says, to harbor arrogance as a lawyer, yet she can deal with her clients' situations on the basis of their inherent human dignity.

"I changed my life tremendously through participating in Byakuren, in ways that I never could have if I hadn't challenged myself through this activity," she says. "I accepted the responsibilities of Byakuren chief to repay my debt of gratitude to this group. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm very lucky to be a Byakuren member."

But Ms. Jones warns that a person must have determination to participate in Byakuren: "It enables you to break through deadlocks in life. I encourage San Francisco Byakuren members to really focus on what they want to change in their lives."

Byakuren is a young women's division activity group that supports SGI-USA activities in a variety of ways. Byakuren responsibilities include: arriving early to clean and help set up the meeting places; greeting people politely and leading them to their seats with warm smiles; staying after the meetings to clean up; answering front desk phones, etc. SGI President Ikeda gave the group its name, which means "white lily," in 1966, saying that its mission is to protect the members and community centers.

The goal of Byakuren is to support the members from behind the scenes so they can be comfortable and gain encouragement at whatever activity they are attending. The young women interviewed agree that Byakuren members must rise above their worries and greet everyone with a smile, a process that begins with deepening one's faith.

Byakuren are encouraged to chant as much as possible before and after each activity as they reflect upon the movement and their actions with the prayer to always improve.

Ms. Takahashi, who just graduated from Byakuren after eight years, says this type of training helped her improve her character in ways that will last for the rest of her life. In her first year, she struggled with her duties because she could get easily befuddled and distracted when greeting and seating people. Over time, however, she was able to master her mind and emotions in all situations, which led to more responsibilities at work and a large pay increase. Ms. Takahashi says her biggest benefit was gaining the confidence that she could handle any responsibility.

"Directing people in a positive way rather than being swept away by the current," she says, "was an opportunity I had repeatedly. I put into action the concept that one person determines everything. And I had many opportunities to see that my life is connected to other people's lives. How I behave influences my environment."

Ms. Lapier says this training is like no other. "It enables you to open your life and

realize people are struggling the same as you are,” she says. After working for 10 years as an artist, one year after joining Byakuren Ms. Lapier finally secured her own studio. She says that she has received more joy and happiness in her life from Byakuren than from any other activity.

“I look forward to it,” she says. “I don’t miss any meetings.”

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