

**Making a Difference**  
**Buddhist practice and principles learned in the SGI help Michael**  
**Pehmoeller be a strong and effective community leader.**

**By MICHAEL PEHMOELLER**  
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**Now surely the peace of the world and the stability of the nation are sought by both ruler and subject and desired by all the inhabitants of the country. The nation achieves prosperity through the Buddhist Law, and the Law is proven worthy of reverence by the people who embrace it.... Therefore one must first of all pray for the safety of the nation and then work to establish the Buddhist Law. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 27)**

This is an account of some personal experiences and reflections on what it means to me to be a neighborhood leader.

Longmont, Colo., has a Neighborhood Group Leaders' Association, which was formed to facilitate communication among neighborhood groups and the city. My involvement began when a gentleman bought the property adjoining mine. He started proposing developments that would have altered the basic character of this area.

That was in 1992. There was no neighborhood group for my area, so I formed one and began circulating a petition to get support from nearby residents. It soon became clear that there were many concerns among the residents.

I had stopped practicing Buddhism sometime before this, and the whole situation seemed overwhelming. My esteem grew for those who find the time and courage to challenge the problems of a community. I spent the following year learning how the city operates and how other NGLA leaders handled concerns.

I resumed my Buddhist practice in early 1993. The four years since then have been a real education in appreciating and learning to apply the value-creating principles of the SGI. This is key. Many of the demands on a community leader can be solved by dialogue. Hearing what people consider important and allowing discussion to reach consensus is a start. Further dialogue can bring disparate parties together. These are things I've learned the hard way at times and am still learning.

The value of combining daimoku and dialogue cannot be overemphasized. The one thing community leaders need most is wisdom.

The challenge to understand neighborhood concerns and find answers is one aspect of community involvement. Another is to get recognition from city government regarding the importance of these concerns. Here again, dialogue is essential. Chanting to the Gohonzon is the only real means I ever had to persevere and learn a proper perspective — that, and the invaluable aid of SGI friends and leaders.

In 1995, at the urging of a leader from an adjacent neighborhood group, we created an annual community activity we call the Old Town Street Stroll. It's basically a giant block party. We set up tables to provide information on the historic houses in the area and on Habitat for Humanity, which was to begin a project in the neighborhood. We organized a variety of games and contests so that the young people had activities. Many friendships emerged and trust among people grew.

However, until the week before the event, there were only two or three people working to make it possible. There were many obstacles, including dissent among those who originally played a major role in the planning. At one point it seemed impossible for the event to happen.

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I redoubled my chanting and then saw our concerted efforts draw others in at the last moment. The success of the Street Stroll was beyond belief. The next year, we had the young people organize the games and contests.

In another case, one neighborhood had been experiencing increasing difficulty with vandalism and graffiti. Leaders from many neighborhood groups recognized that these same problems could happen in their areas. This led to the formation of a panel — including the police chief, city prosecutor, a parole officer, and a city community relations person — to hear the neighbors' concerns.

A fellow SGI-USA member, Bill Clinton, had recently moved to Denver from Las Vegas. He had a lot of experience with youth violence and related issues, and he gladly consented to be a part of the panel. Bill and I did gongyo together before the panel discussion and talked about how to understand the issues we were facing.

The discussion began with each panelist describing his or her experience as it related to the problem. The attitude among the group seemed to be largely one of us versus them. That is, until Bill shared his conviction that the problem had to be solved using a humanistic approach that was inclusive, not exclusive.

There was a reason for the rebellious actions of the youth, he said. Only by seeking to understand and work with these disaffected young people could a solution become reality. This opened the door for people to start focusing on solutions. The chief of police recognized Bill's statements as the long-term solution and a neighborhood plan as a necessary short-term beginning.

The focus of the neighborhood's efforts had been to "take their park back," but during the question-and-answer period, I mused that we might be better off "taking our kids back." This drew laughter and helped break the tension. The meeting was considered very successful by every person present. Everyone knew that it was still just the beginning, but it offered hope and some fresh ideas.

These recent words from SGI President Ikeda have been helpful: "Let us compose many dramas of human revolution for the sake of others. Let us adorn our lives with many 'various causes' and 'various similes.' And let us decorate our communities like flower gardens filled with the 'various similes' of many and varied dramas of human revolution, with one person after another realizing victory and becoming happy" (*Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 1, pp. 90–91).

**WT**

*Two years ago, Michael Pehmoeller was elected chairperson of Longmont's Neighborhood Group Leaders' Association.*