

Friendships Bloom in Preparations for Women's Meetings

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Ananda, one of Shakyamuni's disciples: "It seems to me that by having good friends and advancing together with them one has already halfway attained the Buddha way. Is this way of thinking correct?"

Shakyamuni: "Ananda, this way of thinking is not correct. Having good friends and advancing together with them constitutes not half the Buddha way but all of the Buddha way."

This year women's division members were encouraged to approach their meetings commemorating Feb. 27, the annual SGI-USA Women's Day, just a bit differently. In a January *World Tribune* interview, SGI-USA Women's Division Chief Wendy Clark asked women not to obsess over elaborate details of extravaganza-style meetings, but to give attention to the warm encounters between members and friends that took place before the big events.

And so, in city after city throughout the country, women found themselves focusing on their friendships.

"At the beginning of our chapter-level planning meeting, we passed out Mrs. Clark's 'Enjoying the Process' interview," recalls Harriett Harris, the women's division leader of East Point District in Atlanta. "We must have underlined the phrases *home visit* and *human connection* five times apiece. The women all agreed that what will last long after the meeting are the connections we built with each other."

For Janice Jacob, the women's division leader of U.N. Chapter in Manhattan, the spirit of friendship was crystallized in a unique experience that took place as she and other members produced booklets with pressed flower jackets to give the meeting attendees as gifts. "At one point we just started singing rounds together," she recalls. "We sang over and over, 'Make new friends but keep the old / one is silver and the other gold.' After this experience, the meeting itself almost seemed like an anti-climax, although it was very important, too, in its way."

For Kayoko Gille, women's division leader of Salem Chapter in Salem, Ore., thoughts of friends meant especially her old friends. In early January, Kayoko found herself chanting about Mrs. Clark's "closing the gap" guidance and beginning to think about members no longer active in the organization. Some had been missing for more than 20 years; others had dropped out of sight in the early 1990s after the SGI-USA underwent dramatic organizational changes. But she was determined to see these friends at the commemorative meeting.

"I really wanted to close the gap those members were having with the organization," she recalls. "I chanted lots of daimoku that this meeting would be a fresh start for them. I decided to just call them directly and ask them to the planning meeting. I was so happy when 12 women turned up, including some we hadn't seen in years. The planning meeting had a special, light feeling. We spent a long time just giggling. And at the commemorative meeting, three women appeared each after having been absent for at least 20 years."

"I really expressed myself to these women," she says. "I said: 'Let's forget the past and do our human revolution together.'"

Mary Hollowell, the women's division leader of Manhattan's Diamond District, found that this year's emphasis on home visits renewed her understanding of the fundamental goal of the Daishonin's Buddhism: human happiness. "I remembered that this practice has

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such a simple purpose,” she says. “We’re only doing this to help other people become happy — and to become happy together with them.”

For Joan Weisberger and other women’s division members who practice in New Horizons District and live in Manhattan’s East Harlem neighborhood, thoughts of friendship centered on one particular friend: Rita Peoples. It simply wasn’t acceptable to these women that Rita’s cancer had returned.

By the summer of 1996, Rita, who had not yet received the Gohonzon, had become a crucial part of these women’s lives. She often would come to New Horizons meetings to chant; when the group participated in a midsummer barbecue in Central Park, it was Rita who fried chicken for them. They all rejoiced when Rita’s cancer went into remission and wrote to SGI President Ikeda to report her victory.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, though, Rita, who had already endured two mastectomies, was told she had brain cancer. Joan and the other women rallied around her, visiting her often in East Harlem’s North General Hospital and explaining that it was crucial she devote herself to chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to extend her life.

During an early January visit to Rita, Joan mentioned the upcoming women’s division meetings. Rita, who by this point had begun to chant in earnest and had been transferred to a nursing home where she was showing signs of recovery, asked: “Can we have one here? I’ll ask an administrator and we’ll get a conference room.”

And so on Feb. 23, 12 New Horizons members gathered in the conference room of the East Harlem nursing home to hold a special commemorative meeting with their friend. The highlight of the meeting, of course, was Rita Peoples, who delighted the group with her report that her doctors could no longer find any cancer in her body.

“Rita’s life-condition was so strong,” Joan recalls. “She encouraged everyone else with her victory. Some other women who had struggles and victories that they had kept to themselves for a long time opened up and shared their lives, too”

All their victories served as powerful illustrations for the women as they read Mrs. Clark’s message: “We have embarked on a remarkable journey: our practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. It is a practice of self-reflection, personal transformation and heroic victory over our pessimism and negativity.”

For Ivelisse Torres and other women in Carolina Chapter, near San Juan, Puerto Rico, friendship included the warm feelings that many women in a nearby district have for them.

“Several days after our planning meeting, we got a call from the women in Caguas District, many of whom have close ties to us,” Ivelisse recalls. “They said they wanted to all get together and asked if they could join with us at our meeting. They just wanted us all to be together at this time. I think they just really like us.”

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