

Stop the Violence
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San Francisco correspondents

We felt like we were in a swamp,” remembers Jackie Matthews, “but we had to act for kosen-rufu in Vallejo.”

For years the Northern California town of Vallejo has suffered from drugs and crime. The recent closure of a large naval base contributed to an economic slump. Over the holidays last December, a terrible murder was committed in a local fast-food restaurant. Then a series of bombings began.

This spurred Vallejo Central District members to continue in their effort to stand up and stop the violence.

It started a year ago, after their traditional Saturday morning gongyo together. The members of Vallejo Central District agreed — they just had to get out there and do something about the violence.

In July they planned a small program in Jackie Matthews’ back yard. But when other groups also showed interest, Jackie’s back yard became too small. They held their first summer festival on the nearby waterfront. During the festival they watched a crime scene one block away with police cars and helicopters. (See the Nov. 1, 1996, *World Tribune*.)

A second event was planned for this February. “Vallejo residents are starving for this type of program,” Roger House said. Chanting together and focusing on encouragement from SGI President Ikeda helped keep their spirits up. The SGI president has said: “Winning people’s hearts is the most important thing of all.” “The human being is the point to which we must return and from which we must depart anew.”

The February event would be held in the John F. Kennedy Library auditorium, with dancers, drummers and performers of all cultures, as well as a presentation of Buddhist books. Fliers invited other groups to join in, and 25 community service organizations responded.

The planning group, initiated by several SGI-USA members, also received support from the Vallejo Cultural Commission, the Arts Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce and the Visitor and Convention Bureau, in addition to newspapers and radio stations. The collective group took the name Friends for a Great Vallejo, based on SGI-USA Women’s Division Chief Wendy Clark’s comment in the *World Tribune*, “Let’s make a *great* America!”

When the holiday murder occurred, the district members strengthened their determination. Only two weeks before the festival, 30 sticks of dynamite were found outside the library. Two days later national television reported a bank bombing. Friends for a Great Vallejo realized their event might be canceled due to safety concerns. But the district members refused to succumb and chanted together to reach their goal.

Days later, national news focused on the latest disaster — the Vallejo Courthouse had been bombed. In the face of powerful negativity, the district focused on the writings of Nichiren Daishonin: “As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge, vying with one another to interfere.... You should be neither frightened nor influenced by them” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 145). Many district members experienced both a sense of awe and a feeling of joy from their practice.

Four days before the festival, the library received yet another bomb threat. The building was evacuated, but police found nothing. The members continued to chant with the conviction that “nothing will stop our efforts for peace.” They invited TV stations in hopes

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of positive coverage in the midst of destruction. By week's end the bombers had been caught, thanks to the police department.

On the morning of Feb. 9, a day of victory and magic began. The library bustled with energy and laughter. Rhythms by the young women's division taiko drummers resounded blocks away. The three-hour festival unfolded to a standing-room-only audience. Ten performing groups, many with children, included Mexican folk dancers, Native American drummers, jazz musicians, country singers, Afro-Cuban dancers, gospel performers, and hip-hop dancers. Friends for a Great Vallejo served tea and coffee and signed people up for the next community event. The librarians forgave the noise for the day, as they tapped their feet to the music.

That evening a Bay Area TV newscast began with the words: "There's a lot more in Vallejo than bombs and bullets — Vallejo citizens are fighting back!" Following this intro, several members of Friends for a Great Vallejo were interviewed about the event.

The next events are scheduled for May 10, Vallejo Children's Day, and July 19, which will be a bigger community festival with an entire day of multicultural performances, exhibits by 60 community organizations and food from around the world. President Ikeda's encouragement to reach out to the community and to never give up enables the Vallejo members to keep their dream alive.

"Our dream is that someday Vallejo will be a wonderful place, and we're chanting daimoku behind every move," Jackie says.

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