

Switched-on Seniors
By WENDY DeORE
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“I’ll be ready to jam when y’all come back!” This was Catherine Wilson’s parting shot as she sat in her wheelchair smiling broadly and waving good-bye. She and the other residents of Park Manor Senior Citizens Residence in Dallas had just been treated to the Spring Fling — a morning of music, song and sharing sponsored by Victory District.

The brainstorm of Victory District Chief David McClure, whose mother is a longtime resident of the home, the Spring Fling was the most recent of Victory District’s outreach activities in the economically depressed area of South Dallas. “Victory was the first district in South Dallas, which is a predominately African American neighborhood and a deprived area,” Mr. McClure said. “But there are many SGI members here, and quite a few of our district members grew up in this neighborhood.”

The enthusiasm of Victory District members to reach out to this community inspired the local SGI-USA Jazz Band, Sunset Chorus and many youth division members to join forces for the Spring Fling. Park Manor residents were treated to a morning full of let’s-take-a-walk-down-memory-lane music from the band, vocals by the chorus, refreshments provided by members, and a colorful poster decorated by the youth division.

“This was so nice, so good!” Earnestine Thomas, president of the Park Manor Residents Council, said. “It was something different for the residents, who usually just sit around with nothing to do. The community around here isn’t supporting us — but this was good clean fun. The children who drew the pictures were just beautiful — we especially enjoyed the children.”

After swaying through renditions of such old favorites as “Stormy Weather” and “Boogie Woogie,” many of the residents responded to the invitation of an open mike to share experiences. Catherine Wilson came forward in her wheelchair particularly to speak to the children. She told them about the streetcar accident in which she lost her leg at age 6. She wanted the children to “remember to mind your parents — if I had obeyed my mother, I would not have had that accident.”

Several residents expressed their amazement that the SGI came only to give, to entertain and to share, and was not asking for anything in return. It seems this was the first time many residents could remember a group coming and not asking for donations or trying to trick residents out of money.

Mr. McClure said that over the many years of visiting his mother at Park Manor, he was always struck by “how hopeless and sad everyone was. I wanted to bring life into this building.”

Youth division members who participated also reacted with enthusiasm to the event. Tiffany McDowel, who sang with the choir, admitted that she had made plans to hang out with her friends, and really hadn’t wanted to spend her Saturday morning at the retirement home. Afterwards, however, she said: “I had fun working with the old folks! I want go back again. You can really learn a lot from them — like that even if you’re old, you can still do a lot of things.”

Victory District is planning a second event at Park Manor for June — just as residents requested: “Don’t forget the band when you come again.” “Remember to bring the children.”

The Spring Fling is the latest in a series of community outreach efforts organized by Victory District and supported by SGI members throughout Dallas. The district is continuing monthly meetings with community members held at the Martin Luther King Jr.

Community Center in the heart of South Dallas. Using themes such as “Unity in the Community” and “Let’s Take This First Step Together,” Victory District and other SGI-USA members have gathered to share the spirit of Buddhism with community members.

Young people have been active participants in these events, too, volunteering to do crafts with children at the center. For one meeting, Japanese members translated the video of SGI President Ikeda’s meeting with Rosa Parks, which was a powerful means of introducing Buddhism and the spirit of the SGI to South Dallas citizens.

These community outreach activities are Victory District’s response to President Ikeda’s emphasis on friendship and the SGI-USA’s desire to become a community-based organization.

Within the organization as well, these activities are creating unity and opportunities for growth and friendship among the diverse group of members who participate. For SGI members and everyone in Dallas “these activities,” says Audrey McClure, “are our way of actively closing the gap.”

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Title: Switched-on Seniors

Subject: World Tribune 05/16/97 n.3139 p.4 WT970516p04 Dallas, Texas

Author: Wendy DeOre

Keywords: Dallas Events Festivals Home National News Retirement Seniors Switched-on Texas