

## The FNCC — Our Summer Home

Here all the staff have been supporting me and my practice. This weekend I realized what a huge debt of gratitude I owe to everybody here. Even if people feel like they haven't done anything to support me, they have, and I still owe them gratitude.

In the Gosho "Repaying Debts of Gratitude," Nichiren Daishonin says, "If one intends to repay these great debts of gratitude, he can hope to do so only if he studies and masters the Buddhist teachings, becoming a person of wisdom" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 172). To me, that means standing up in the SGI, supporting all the members and sharing this Buddhism. That is exactly what I'll do when I get home.

— ALEX BARDALES, San Francisco (junior high/high school conference)

The title of the YWD conference was "Strengthening Our True Identity." To me, this meant getting back to my roots by remembering what it's like to experience the world through the purity of a child's heart. I truly feel that SGI President Ikeda wanted to create this atmosphere to remind us of how free and open it feels to be a child. I live in San Francisco, where I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, but at the FNCC I felt so safe that I could leave my things anywhere, ride a bike with no hands, and fall asleep at night with no worries.

This was such a wonderful opportunity to rediscover and, more important, to have the confidence in my true self. My challenge now is to never forget the spirit of kosen-rufu I feel in my heart. And to bring that spirit to my family, friends, members and community. This is my mission as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

— MARGARET SMITH, San Francisco (YWD conference)

Our YMD gathering at the FNCC was an extremely significant experience for me. I was so touched by the incredible level of intimacy and the trust all the participants had for one another.

Never before have I been involved in an event, either within or outside the SGI organization, that provided such an open and honest environment where people could truly be themselves and open their hearts without hesitation.

And this conference really opened my eyes to how important our movement for peace is on the national level. I've always viewed things from a very local perspective, but from this conference I began to realize that all across the country there are so many of us, all struggling in our unique ways to create a peaceful and prosperous society. I am grateful to have so many beautiful friends across the United States with whom I share such a significant bond.

— DAVID EISENBERG, San Francisco (YMD conference)

I was so encouraged by the study sessions and all of the moving experiences that everyone shared — especially in the panel discussion on the role of young women. Once again, that study session reaffirmed for me that nothing is impossible when you trust the Gohonzon. I could relate to just about every experience that the five panelists shared.

My personal goal is to bring all the information that I received here back to the YWD members in Philadelphia to help them grow into strong, confident, capable leaders for kosen-rufu and make a big, positive change in society. This is a golden memory that I will always treasure and keep in my heart.

— RAYMONDE BEST, Philadelphia (YWD conference)

I'm not an emotional person, but I was so touched by the members, especially in the group

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discussion about “Discussion on Youth” [a dialogue among President Ikeda and youth division members currently being serialized in the *World Tribune*] and the impression I got from them that they had the courage to tell their problems and how they could break through with this practice. — SWEET CHENG, Chicago (junior high/high school conf.)

We are treasure towers! We are Buddhas! The FNCC was out of this world. It was like living on the planet Peace, Love and Happiness for four days and three nights.

Most incredible was feeling my heart melt. I did get on the plane in New York very afraid, with deep feelings that I am not a bright YWD member — who will like me? But I have faith sisters all over America. I have begun my practice anew. Lots of YWD members are struggling with their jobs, money, boyfriends, sexual abuse issues or being a lesbian. Many of us are also very confident and breaking through.

We are not alone. The YWD members of America are not alone. We are sisters in faith together forever. That’s what I discovered at the FNCC.

— KALEMI BAXTER, New York (YWD conference)

Since last year, I’ve been chanting to wake up with the thought “Great! Another day I can fight together with President Ikeda!” — *before* I think about my personal worries or struggles. At first it was very abstract. But since the YMD conference, it has been natural. For me, this conference was about reaffirming the nobility of dedicating myself to this movement, of helping other people break through and become happy.

And what reawakened that was seeing the lives of my fellow YMD members and their sincerity in the midst of the changes they are going through. This is a tough practice. A wondrous philosophy, but requiring a rigorous effort every day. And there’s no way to continue without rock-solid friends in this practice.

I want to stop being a fair-weather bodhisattva and really start getting sopping wet in the rain, sharing the members’ suffering alongside them, as President Ikeda says. At the FNCC, I thought these really are my brothers. Now I want to do my best so I can encourage them, so we can spur each other on. That’s the whole purpose behind YMD activities.

— DAVID BOGOSLAW, New York (YMD conference)

As everyone else did, I felt the strong bond of friendship. Throughout the conference, people greeted and talked to one another even though we were complete strangers. This does not happen often in our daily lives, like in high school. The conference also gave me a sense of mission and many new determinations.

— HIROMI IKEDA, San Francisco (junior high/high school conference)

I’ve been so encouraged by the struggles of others whose relentless practice has enabled them to overcome their weaknesses and achieve victory in their lives. I’ve learned that major changes don’t happen overnight, and the longer and harder the struggle, the deeper the foundation of my true self will be. I am now ready to take the plunge and truly trust the Gohonzon with the most fragile aspects of my life. So many of these women have won — so can I!

— CATHY BERNIER, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (YWD conference)

I was impressed that everyone came up on stage and said something emotional. Everybody felt sad to leave and said that they had met some friends. And it’s hard to say goodbye to your friends. Once you leave the FNCC, you always remember about the conference’s talent shows and that you had a great time.

— JASON DOWDY, Houston (junior high/high school conference)

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