

RAY C. PETTY, NEW YORK CITY Standing Up For Justice

After returning from the Vietnam War and finishing school at the University of Delaware, I moved in 1976 to Los Angeles, where my sister took me to my first SGI discussion meeting.

I am a singer, so the sound of everyone chanting this wonderful, warm Nam-myohorenge-kyo fell on my ears like honey and touched something inside of me. No one had to convince me. All I wanted to know was how to get started, and how and when could I receive the Gohonzon.

At the beginning I did not have a clear idea what I was doing. I believed that the source and the solution to all my problems were on the outside; I was waiting for some outside force to rescue me.

In the early 1980s, I became a group leader. The whole group was youth division members, and we became propagation champions. Eventually I became Silverlake District chief for three wonderful years. There were 25 young men's division members and 20 young women's division members.

I was in the world of Rapture. I neglected my personal life. I did not think about anything but my district and its beautiful members. I totally ignored my finances and my health, and I abandoned my career, never chanting for my personal happiness or success. I would walk up into the Hollywood Hills in 90-degree heat to lead a meeting because I had no money to catch the bus. I lived in sleazy hotels in Hollywood filled with drug addicts and prostitutes.

In effect, I did not believe the Gohonzon could effect a change in my personal life. I had resigned myself to only taking care of my district, ignoring the pain and suffering in my personal life and getting satisfaction only from watching the members be happy. I was sacrificing myself on the proverbial "cross" for my district and using it to escape from my life and my responsibility to do human revolution.

In the middle of all this, our women's division territory leader, realizing that I had no plans to marry — in other words, that I'm gay — arranged to remove me from my position. (I know this would never happen today, and I am proud to once again hold leadership responsibilities.) I was devastated; my fellow members were in shock. They could not understand what was happening. I chanted not to be angry and not to hold a grudge, and in the end I did not. I consider that a victory.

Since I no longer had district responsibilities, I had plenty of time to focus on my horrible life. I could no longer ignore or hide from the pain. My situation started slowly worsening.

I landed a great job, but it soon became apparent that my boss was doing drugs on the job. She, out of fear that I would tell other people in the company, eventually forced me out of my job.

During my short employment, I had moved into a great apartment. But now I was forced to search for a new job, and for six or seven months I could not pay rent.

I was at the lowest point in my life. My district leader took me for guidance. The person helped to show me that my life is precious, that it actually is the Buddha. He taught me how and why to pray to the Gohonzon for happiness and success. My mission for kosen-rufu, he said, was to become happy and successful, always striving for the attainment of enlightenment so that I could encourage others to overcome their own suffering. He told me that it is not necessary to be a leader to have a positive impact on people or to

Title: Standing Up For Justice

Subject: World Tribune 09/26/97 n.3158 p.12 WT970926p12

Author: Ray C. Petty

Keywords: Career Experiences Justice Standing

contribute to kosen-rufu, and he helped me to understand that I must stop slandering myself for thinking I had failed, stop “crucifying” myself, face my negativity squarely and win.

He read the Gosho “On Attaining Buddhahood” to me. I had read it before, but I gained a new understanding of what Nichiren Daishonin was saying and started to see that my life was worthy of respect. I was not moving forward because I was constantly slandering my life. No one up until then had explained this to me with such confidence.

Soon I was in the process of being evicted. Though the management company received a court order to evict me, the apartment manager saw me job hunting day after day and would not call the sheriff to evict me. Finally her supervisor forced her to call the sheriff.

I went back to the apartment complex and asked her if I could get some things out of the locked apartment. The manager said yes. In the elevator to the sixth floor, she began to cry because she had watched me go out day after day walking to interviews. She was not about to let me be on the street in Hollywood. She let me back into the apartment and asked me not to chant too loud so that other tenants would not discover that I was back in the apartment and report her to her supervisor. It would be months, she said, before the company would repaint the apartment and rent it to someone else.

Later that evening, sitting in my apartment in front of my altar, doing gongyo with my cat on my lap, I asked myself, “Didn’t I just get evicted?”

I began to face my negativity squarely, without fear. I chanted daimoku as if there were no tomorrow. If a little daimoku is good, I figured, then a lot had to be fantastic. I had such a hunger to chant for my life and my success that I could not get enough. This was the turning point in my life and in my practice.

I received disability because of duress at my old job. This gave me food to eat and bus fare, while I continued to chant and interview for jobs.

I read “On Attaining Buddhahood” until I understood it with my life. I have memorized this Gosho until it has been engraved in my brain, and I still read it when I am going through difficult situations. Every time I was victorious after an obstacle, my faith doubled and quadrupled, and I learned that faith is the key.

Soon I got not one but three excellent job offers. I accepted a position with O’Brien-Kreitzberg (the largest and oldest construction management company in America), which was building the Metro Greenline for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the new Los Angeles Central Library.

I began to realize that if I continued to slander myself, I would never be happy. Once I began to really understand that my existence is the Mystic Law and that my life, the Gohonzon and the universe are one and the same, not only did I stop slandering myself, I became very sensitive about anyone else slandering or diminishing the value of my life. I was learning to fight for my life and understanding that it is my obligation to do so.

I was assigned to the Metro Greenline project in Los Angeles. At that time, Los Angeles was in the grips of great racial tension and hatred due to the Rodney King incident. I remember sitting in my office, looking out the window, watching the city go up in flames. Unbelievably, at this time the Metro Greenline was actively seeking to keep its African American employees in check, openly hindering their careers and subjugating them. Although the Greenline was built straight through about five predominately black areas, the company would not hire any blacks from those areas — even though their tax money was being used.

Although I was very qualified, they paid me as a regular secretary yet worked me like an executive assistant, making me the deputy project manager’s secretary. I was compelled to stand up for myself. If my life was truly the Buddha, then it was worthy of respect, and if I was not allowed to slander my life then no one else was going to, either.

Title: Standing Up For Justice

Subject: World Tribune 09/26/97 n.3158 p.12 WT970926p12

Author: Ray C. Petty

Keywords: Career Experiences Justice Standing

The guidance finally sunk in, and I began to defend my life and its dignity with a great amount of daimoku and conviction. This love for my life and the desire to protect it were totally new for me. It affected every part of my life. I stopped going out and squandering my money, ruining my health and wasting time partying. I had friends who opposed me when I started being more responsible; they accused me of thinking that I was too good to go out with them anymore. I began to love my life and to prepare it for success and happiness, because I finally believed I deserved success and happiness.

I began to chant eight or 10 hours a day. I am not saying that this is what everyone else should do, but this was what I, because of my great negativity and the fact that I planned to take on a whole corporation, had to do. Every morning I would chant three hours before getting on the bus. I would read the Lotus Sutra and the Gosho for two hours all the way to work.

My friend, co-worker and courageous SGI-USA women's division member, Linda McShan, and I would ride home together after work and chant for an hour every day to resolve the negativity at work. Linda was the only black female supervisor in the entire company, and in retaliation, they first took the computer equipment away from her staff and eventually took her staff away from her, constantly harassing her. She chanted daimoku and courageously stood up to them as we have been taught to stand up by Nichiren Daishonin, and our leaders, especially the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai.

She rallied her staff around her, showing them by example how to be strong women. Linda was magnificent. As the persecution continued, she wore her Christian Dior suits and her Ferragamo heels to work every day and held her head high with pride.

We would always read SGI President Ikeda's guidance together: "A strong-willed or courageous person is always the master of his or her own heart. Therefore, he fears nothing, is defeated by nothing, and shrinks from nothing. As the Gosho states, 'The wise will rejoice and the foolish will retreat.' No matter what may happen, a courageous person advances against any obstacle like a fierce, raging wave. He is, with head held high, confident like the sun, king of the heavens, shining above the clouds."

I have never fought for my life more intensely. I received guidance from a leader who told me that this was not only a personal issue but an issue of justice, and that I must stand up using Mr. Ikeda as an example. Another leader told me that the universal forces would protect me as long as I was fighting for the larger goal of justice.

Every time the project tried to fire me or attack me in any way, it would backfire and turn around on them instead. Finally the president of O'Brien-Kreitzberg, Inc., got wind of the situation and sent his second man to the project to investigate and calm the situation. The president of the company even gave me his direct phone number in San Francisco. I received calls from the head of corporate human resources in San Francisco every other day inquiring about my welfare.

The individuals who were persecuting me became furious and tried tactics such as trying to make me so angry that I would quit or do something that they could fire me for. They even had one manager come into my office and make a racial slur at me during working hours. I followed my guidance and remained calm.

In January 1995, out of the blue, I got a phone call from my present boss here in New York City, who had been looking at resumes on our computer network and noticed mine. He saw that I had a great job background and my qualifications were perfect for the position of project coordinator that he needed to fill. He hired me after talking to me an hour on the phone and asked me to report to my new position in New York City on Feb. 8, 1995.

Title: Standing Up For Justice

Subject: World Tribune 09/26/97 n.3158 p.12 WT970926p12

Author: Ray C. Petty

Keywords: Career Experiences Justice Standing

Instead of being stuck in a cubicle, harassed and subjugated, struggling for my dignity, I now work in Times Square on the 35th floor of the Viacom Building, with a view of the Hudson River and the coast of New Jersey. I am the project coordinator and administrative assistant for the No. 1 marketing person in the company.

Out of my struggle and Linda McShan's struggle, the company has developed a comprehensive Equal Opportunity Policy. This policy not only protects the employees but also the company. In our industry, all major public works projects have a strict minority business hiring requirement. This policy helps to demonstrate my company's active involvement in equal opportunities for minorities when bidding for multimillion-dollar contracts. Additionally, it has developed a very sophisticated human resources program.

The company now is also involved in mentoring young interns and young people from minority communities. I am very proud and honored that six female engineers and architects from O'Brien-Kreitzberg participated in the SGI-sponsored career expo on March 22 at the New York Culture Center, which was organized for the junior high school, high school and first-year college students of our community.

I am now working for a very humanistic company. My boss is a brilliant man who treats me with respect. When I first arrived I was so used to being abused that he had to sit me down in his office and tell me to relax, trust the people in this office, and above all have confidence in myself (sounds like guidance, doesn't it?). He told me that he was aware of what I had been through and reassured me that his office had a different policy, one in line with the company's policy. Instead of withholding computer software from me, like the managers on the Greenline did, he sent me to computer graphics classes so that I could help him prepare professional proposals for new multimillion-dollar projects.

Because of my Gakkai training I follow and support my boss, working alongside him many long hours no matter what. I've become indispensable.

I have learned that no matter how bleak and hopeless my situation may seem, I can turn it around and change poison into medicine through this wonderful practice, accepting my human revolution and having faith in the Mystic Law.

At the beginning of my practice, I had no idea how profound it was or that I would continue. After 21 years with the SGI I have seen growth and change in our great organization to the point that diversity is one of our major campaigns and is among the SGI-USA guidelines for 1997.

I am now a group leader in Schomburg District in Columbia Territory. I live in Harlem, where I am very active in my neighborhood group, and I make causes every day to improve life in this community for its residents and particularly for its young people.

I now have the opportunity to pursue my goal to sing opera, and I am around people who are doing the same. There are many world-class voice teachers here in New York and the No. 1 opera house in the world — the Metropolitan Opera. I am now studying with a master teacher, a voice coach and an exercise coach, and with my great job I can afford the fees.

My activities with the SGI and my practice to the Gohonzon are now the center of my life, and at the age of 52, I am starting to see my lifelong dream of becoming an operatic tenor coming true right before my eyes.

WT