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Living Victoriously
— Finally

My experience in faith begins 22 years ago in January 1975. After attending my first meeting, I became very active in the organization. I thoroughly enjoyed all phases of activities, and I have many beautiful memories and lasting friendships with SGI members throughout the world. I feel extremely fortunate to have encountered the Gohonzon and received so many opportunities to improve my life by contributing to world peace. My debt of gratitude is immense.

While attending a headquarters men's division meeting in 1982, I attempted to open up a discussion about my growing use of drugs and my negative lifestyle. I had read SGI President Ikeda's guidance that detailed three symptoms of men who weaken in faith:

1. Overindulgence in alcohol or use of illegal drugs.
2. Mismanagement of personal finances.
3. Irresponsible relationships with women.

I was creating a powerful dossier on all three. My practice had become inconsistent. I was turning into an arrogant, ego-driven, cocaine-smoking maniac.

By 1988, I had successfully turned my life into a living hell. My wife could no longer depend on me for anything. I became such an abusive monster that we could no longer live together. I became homeless; living in abandoned buildings, sleeping in cardboard boxes and living among the shelter people — going to one center for breakfast, another for lunch and dinner and, finally, another shelter for overnight rest.

On one occasion, I was rushed to the hospital, so full of cocaine that I had suffered a mild heart attack. On another occasion, I was arrested for writing bad checks and spent two nights in jail. On numerous occasions, SGI members extended themselves to help me, but I abused their trust and friendship and that of friends and relatives.

Finally, in 1988, I sought professional help to fight my addiction. In January 1989, I entered my third treatment program. This time, I decided that I must first rebuild my practice. While in rehab, I received many SGI publications and a copy of volume 2 of *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*. I searched the pages of the Gosho, desperately looking for passages to affirm that I could again receive benefit by practicing correctly. The following passages from the Gosho "Curing Karmic Disease" (2nd ed., pp. 215–17) answered that question:

[The Nirvana Sutra states:] "Even the offense of slandering this correct teaching [will be eradicated] if one repents and professes faith in the correct teaching.... No teaching other than this correct teaching can save or protect one. For this reason one should take faith in the correct teaching."...

[The Great Teacher Ching-hsi says,] "It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground, but who then pushes himself up from the ground to rise to his feet again. Therefore, even though one may slander the correct teaching, one will eventually be saved from the evil paths."...

[Bodhisattva Ashvaghosha says,] "I have been my own worst enemy, leading myself to hell." But Punyayashas admonished him, saying, "Do not behead yourself! Instead, use your brains and your mouth to praise Mahayana teachings."

I rededicated myself to faith, practice and study. During my free time, I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for many hours. I also became active in supporting and attending SGI activities in Waukegan District. I made sincere efforts to help other addicts, especially SGI members who were suffering the same miserable hell that I had. I also sought out my

seniors for guidance and encouragement at every step of the process.

I have reestablished many of the relationships that suffered during my years of addiction. Most significant to me was having my son accept me back in his life. While I was in rehab, he sent one letter, which reads in part:

Dad, what is the matter with you? How do you expect me to feel about you all these years that you have ignored me? I sure hope you don't expect me to accept you with open arms.... I love it when I hear kids talk about their dads: "My dad bought me a new car." "My dad is great." "My dad visits with me on the weekend." "My dad treats me like crap." One of these doesn't sound right. Can you pick out the one I say, Sherlock?

I wonder if you get the message that I have a lot of bad feelings toward you.... Thanks for calling me on those special occasions like my birthday and Christmas. Don't give me some bull like, "I wasn't near the phone all day." I kind of excuse you from not wishing me a Merry Christmas because of your religion. And, yeah, I'm excusing you, my father.

This letter was not written to push us further away. It was to let you know how I feel about you. You're my dad. I hope you have a chance to act like one.

Love, Al

After several failed attempts to repair this relationship, I sought guidance. Finally, in January 1996, I made a breakthrough. My son and I had our first series of conversations openly sharing our thoughts about each other. Finally, he invited me to attend his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania. On May 21, I escorted my son to the commencement ceremonies. Proud and full of appreciation that poison had turned to medicine, I was finally rebounding from a miserable chapter in my family life.

For the last nine years, I have remained completely drug free. I have advanced steadily at my work. All of my past SGI experiences have contributed to my current employment. As the assistant manager of scholarship and grants for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, a state agency that administers financial aid programs for Illinois residents seeking education beyond high school, I have been on television and radio numerous times, explaining the financial process and available programs. I produced two agency videos, several satellite and cable broadcasts and one infomercial.

My responsibilities offer me excellent opportunities to assist many families in making their financial decisions for attending college. In addition to my job, I also have kept a part-time job for seven years as a waiter at a local restaurant. For the first time in my adult life, I have maintained not one but two jobs for a seven-year period. To practice this Buddhism correctly is amazing and wonderful.

I recently made three pledges to myself: to remain drug free and attack all unresolved personal issues; to be a model manager; and to raise capable men in Waukegan District. To these ends, I pray that I will somehow repay my debt of gratitude for this wonderful life I now lead.

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