Maurice Mimes, Denver
Life Is To Be Lived
By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor

Growing up blind, Maurice Mimes was always taught to do everything, to live fully. But when his confidence faltered in college, he sought out Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Today, his Buddhist practice fuels his activities to help deaf and blind people throughout the country as vice president of the Blind/Deaf Division of the National Federation of the Blind.

Soon after Maurice Mimes was born, doctors pumped oxygen into his body to counter the effects of a lung infection that hampered his breathing. In the late '50s and early '60s, this was a common emergency medical treatment, and doctors didn't realize that an excess of oxygen could cause irreparable brain damage. In Maurice's case, the effect was blindness.

It's an effect that Maurice has lived with for the last 31 years, and one that he has challenged by trying to be of service to others. Not even the progressive loss of his hearing, which has declined sharply since 1996, has stopped him. This past July, he was elected vice president of the Blind/Deaf Division of the National Federation of the Blind.

"What I'm primarily responsible for is communicating with those statewide officials who have blind persons in their state who could benefit from the work of the division," says Maurice. This work ranges from personal encouragement to advocacy work.

For example, Maurice said, the division is now helping a government worker in Washington, D.C. "She's slowly being forced out of her job after six years," he says. "We're trying to educate her employer on deaf and blindness issues. What she needs is some adaptive equipment and special training."

Despite the work of such pioneers as Louis Braille in the 1800s and Helen Keller at the beginning of the 20th century, many emotional and physical challenges still face deaf and blind people. For instance, just as Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, first had to convince Helen's parents that they should expect much more from their daughter, many parents of blind children try to shelter them from the world. The simple act of pardoning a blind child from the household chores expected of other siblings may send a message that leads to dependency.

In Maurice's case, he experienced both worlds. "My mother was a little overprotective off and on, as sometimes mothers can be," he says. "On the other side of it, my father said, 'I expect you to get out there and do everything.'" His grandmother also always encouraged him that he could do whatever he set out to accomplish, "as long as he didn't get too wrapped up in himself."

He made his way to college at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studied political science. And he took leadership in student government, through the regional association of residence halls, lobbying for rules that prevented isolating disabled students.

But by 1993, when he was introduced to Buddhism by a blind student from Japan, he was beginning to lose his confidence. A favorite aunt who worked in healthcare died suddenly of a massive heart attack at 39, and he was diagnosed with high blood pressure.

"I was searching for something," says Maurice. "I began to wonder about how finite life is. Then a friend's father passed away suddenly. I felt like my life was a comedy of disaster."

"When I first started to practice, the many problems I was experiencing as I entered my senior year at the University of Washington didn't seem so bad," says Maurice. "Indeed, despite my problems, my blood pressure began to drop."

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Still, his grades slipped, and he moved out of the residence hall because of financial problems. But his friends in the SGI-USA helped him through this difficult time, as he established an independent life and successfully graduated from college in 1994.

Looking back on that time in his life, “the key benefit was making a successful transition from academic life to job seeker,” he says. “I volunteered my time with both members and non-members, teaching computers. Then, finally, I got a job with a private university in Seattle, helping their information systems department, where I worked for two years.”

In late 1995, doctors told him that his auditory nerve was apparently dying. His computer job required no travel or interaction with people, so the reality of this loss of hearing didn’t impact him at first. “The first thing I noticed was that I began to have difficulty getting to SGI meetings on my own,” says Maurice. “I was too scared of traffic because I couldn’t hear well enough.”

A longtime friend, Doug Trimble, encouraged him to come to Denver for special training. Blind himself, Mr. Trimble is a travel instructor at the Colorado Center for the Blind, one of three special training centers founded by the National Federation of the Blind.

Uprooting his life in Washington was a serious and difficult choice. “I chanted to make the decision,” says Maurice. “I had to chant sincerely to understand what Doug was trying to get across to me and have confidence that the center could help. My final decision was to go. I had already seen plenty of negative aspects of my life — it was time to start fixing it.”

At the Colorado Center, most of the staff is blind, and the working philosophy is that blindness is a limitation to be overcome with wisdom. “For example, life is to be lived not seen,” says Eric Woods, another instructor at the center. One of the first challenges he helped Maurice face was the trip to the SGI-USA Denver Culture Center, which is located on one of the city’s busiest streets.

Even the Helen Keller teaching methods say that people who are both blind and deaf shouldn’t travel alone. Mr. Woods’ job is to move his students toward this independence. Imagine trying to get across a four-lane highway, with turning lanes governed by separate signals, when you can’t see or hear the cars. After examining the options, one of Woods’ solutions might take a little longer, but it works: Ride the bus down and back up the route, so that you can get off on the side of the road you want.

“Our belief is that a blind person, given the right training, can compete on equal terms,” says Woods. While the public perception is that blindness is a tragedy, he views it simply as a challenge or limitation — which, in various forms, all human beings have.

“You play the cards you’re dealt,” he continues. “You have to find out realistically what those limitations are.... One of the biggest stumbling blocks is admitting to a realistic degree what the problems are. Once you acknowledge ‘*I’m this way,*’ you can start doing things differently.”

That doesn’t mean, of course, that you can’t do them. “We go rock climbing, white-water rafting, skiing,” says Woods. “We have a woodshop with power tools off the showroom floor.... Blindness is a challenge, but it’s not necessarily disabling.”

Diane McGeorge, executive director of the center, echoes this: “Just like you, I raised two children, held a job and managed a household,” she says, after hearing my two children making noise in the background during a phone interview. “As a blind woman, I use different techniques...but I did what you’re doing.” She says this in a calm, gracious voice, which assures me that what I — a sighted woman — am doing is no more or less difficult than what she did.

The most difficult thing that blind people face, she adds, is countering the negative attitudes that surround them in society. “I don’t permit that thinking to affect me,” she says.

Maurice uses his Buddhist practice to keep challenging both his external and internal

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negativity.

"While going through the program at the Colorado Center for the Blind and now going through college for the second time, my practice and those who also practice around me, seem to allow me to push myself onward, to never settle for second best — never selling myself short," says Maurice, who graduated from the Denver center Aug. 14. His next step is to complete a degree in information systems, which will academically certify many of the computer skills he has already taught himself.

"My practice feeds what I do, both as an SGI-member and in my work in the National Federation of the Blind," he says. "I want every member of the deaf and blind division to have a good job. It starts with me. I want to give back to all those folks who helped me....

"And I want the American dream: I want to find Mrs. Right and have a family," Maurice adds. "I believe those things are important."

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