

DARLENE RIFFERT, MUNCY PRISON, PA.
Each of Us Has a Choice

When I arrived here at Muncy Prison back in November 1986, I was without spirituality, ethics, goals or initiative. I had a five–10 year sentence for a robbery committed in Philadelphia. The parole board gave me an additional nine month hit for violating parole.

All my life, I failed to plan, thereby planning to fail. I was hopelessly dwelling in a comfort zone, where blaming everyone else for my circumstances or situations was much easier.

Then someone entered my life, Crystal Sanders, an inmate who took the time to teach me about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Each day she instilled in me the teachings of this profound religion.

While adopting this new way of life, I was arrested here for selling drugs. I was brought to trial and received another 15–30 years, bringing my total minimum sentence to 25 years.

Crystal helped me to realize the terrible causes I had made. I had accumulated so much bad karma. I realized that I had to develop my spirituality, to make the commitment to practice and incorporate this new way of living into my life. I knew that by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I would make the necessary changes within to develop into a caring, responsible human being.

The first major change was that I finally took responsibility for my behavior. Buddhism taught me that ultimately I'm in charge of my destiny. I create, I make, my own karma. Once I understood this, I was ready to reach out and seek the help to address the other aspects of my life.

Immediately, I became involved in every drug abuse program available. I've participated in every therapeutic program offered here at Muncy. I have challenged myself with educational and vocational programs as well.

For 10 years, I was fortunate to work at the institution's greenhouse. Germinating seedlings, nurturing them into full bloom, was such a benefit for me.

I attended Penn State University classes at the prison and have earned 24 credits to date. Now I am enrolled in a caning and wood refinishing apprenticeship program. Upon completion, I will earn a license.

At the beginning of my practice in 1986, there was only Crystal and me who chanted daimoku here. On the weekend, we would sit in a corner of the TV room and do gongyo together, since the administration here at Muncy Prison did not offer any place for us to meet and pray. However, through our combined efforts and some serious chanting, we have now grown into a real Buddhist community.

Crystal was released from prison years, but she would be so proud to see what has blossomed from the seed that she planted within me. I look back at my almost 12 years of practice and recognize the numerous benefits in my life. I am eternally grateful to the Gohonzon that exists within my life.

In 1997, the prison's chaplain located an outside SGI-USA member who willingly comes and chants with us once a month. Imagine my tears of joy when my eyes finally gazed upon the Gohonzon for the first time!

How very fortunate I am! I want to be a drug counselor and help change poison into medicine with those in need. I have 11 years remaining on my minimum sentence. I am chanting and doing all that I can so that some of this sentence can be alleviated.

Looking back, I realize how the prison environment could have been the world of Hell for me — or the Buddha land. I chose to make this time, this environment, my sanctuary. I

encourage other women to challenge themselves. Each one of us has a choice, a purpose and, yes, a mission to complete while here on earth.

I now face my obstacles with courage, believing in myself and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The Mystic Law of cause and effect is absolute. With this in mind, I now care about my actions toward other people, how I speak and even how I think. I make a conscious effort to treat everyone with dignity and respect.

My proudest moments are every week on Monday afternoons when our Buddhist community of around 10 gathers to perform gongyo and encourage one another. I love each member and appreciate her determination to learn and develop into a great Soka Gakkai member. I look upon each member as a wonderful benefit in my life, to help me work toward the attainment of kosen-rufu. Thank you.

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Title: Each of Us Has a Choice
Subject: World Tribune 11/06/98 n.3216 p.1 WT981106p01 Muncy Prison, Pennsylvania
Author: Darlene Riffert
Keywords: Choice Each Experiences Muncy News Pennsylvania Prison