

EXPERIENCE — CLAIRE WROBLEWSKI, DOE RUN, MO. STILL CHANTING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

I was living in western Massachusetts when I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1973 by my elder sister, Marie, who had come in from Washington, D.C., for Thanksgiving. I was 16 at the time. From the beginning of my practice, I was encouraged by my seniors in the organization to have a long-range vision of life; so I made it my goal to shoot for my 20th year of practice. They told me that no matter what kind of turmoil my life goes through, hold on to my practice. It was a good thing I did, for I went in and out of schools, in and out of too many jobs to count, and in and out of two marriages.

As the sun rises and sets, and the days turn to months and years...I finally greeted my 20th year of practicing Buddhism. I found myself in what appeared to be my most difficult and unfortunate situation to date! I was separating from my second husband and had moved, with my three children ages 18 months, 3 and 15, to the Midwest where I barely knew a soul. I had sold my home in Massachusetts and paid someone to build a home for my children; unfortunately, to date, I have never seen my money nor had my home completed!

Luckily for me, the greatest thing I received from my 20 years of practice allowed me to face this situation bravely — I had confidence! I knew nothing was impossible, with my practice to the Gohonzon, I knew I would get through this and win.

The town where I live is called Doe Run, in Missouri. Aptly named with its small population, the doe and the deer pretty much still rule! Soon I discovered a great joy — doing a refreshed gongyo. I knew there were no other SGI members living here and I felt that due to my practice, all the life around me from the smallest blade of grass to the biggest oak tree was enjoying for the first time the warm and joyful vibrations of my gongyo and chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. It felt like something really big was happening to me and my environment, and if I was destined to move here for the sole purpose of refreshing my gongyo, then it was all worth it.

Practically speaking, I had to find a job. On the East Coast, I had done all sorts of jobs from being a waitress to a nurse's aid to insurance adjuster and more. I wasn't specialized but I was flexible. I quickly landed a job at a nursing home as a housekeeper on the graveyard shift. It was challenging, but I did my best. Although there was no one there to see me but a few frightened mice, I always tried to present myself neatly and sometimes would work through the day shift if they needed me.

Soon I developed a friendly relationship with the activities director of the nursing home and was able to get different volunteers for his activities. Michiko, my SGI district leader, volunteered to perform a dance for the residents in traditional Japanese costume. The performance was a great success and the following day I received big news. The activities director was moving to Florida and the administrator said that he had suggested that I replace him!

So from third shift housekeeping, I jumped to daytime activities director. All would seem ideal, but without the confidence I received from my Buddhist practice, I could not have made such a bold advancement under the scornful glances of some of my co-workers.

That was approximately four years ago. Today I still enjoy working in the activities field. Now more than ever I am able to use many things that I learned in our SGI organi-

zation, such as always put the members' happiness first — in my case, the residents' happiness — keep your life-condition high so that you can be like sunshine for others, and think big!

I initiated many new programs. For instance, the nursing home had a man-made pond that I convinced the owner to have stocked with catfish so the residents could enjoy fishing. Now we hold an annual Senior Catfish Derby where we invite all the local nursing homes to participate. Stories poured in how many residents who appeared to have given up on life now had their children and grandchildren hunting down and dusting off their fishing tackle and pole. To their amazement Grandpa was goin' fishin'! More stories surfaced; for example, a woman from the nursing home decided the catfish were her pets, so she fed them bread early in the morning so they wouldn't succumb to the bait! Whether pro- or anti-fishing, one thing was certain, these seniors all had caught something — a sparkle in their eyes that wasn't there before!

When things got quiet, I chanted for new ideas that would make life more engaging for the residents. One day I felt deadlocked, too tired to initiate new ideas, when I opened the *World Tribune*. To my great delight, there was a series on the topic of aging. It was exactly what I was looking for. I printed many excerpts from the articles and posted them daily for all the staff to read. Many staff later told me that their day didn't start until they read the inspirational words I would display. Even the administrator and the owner of our nursing home commented on how impressive the daily postings were and what an influence they had on the staff.

The particular words from SGI President Ikeda that stuck in my mind from the articles were: "It is not how long we live but the quality of our lives that count." I decided this would be my motto for the residents from now on. My vision and mission were clear. I determined that I would do my utmost to establish the best quality of life for each resident I was responsible for. I believe due to this correct thinking and my chanting, I was able to pioneer many new, exciting programs that enriched not only the lives of the residents but the lives of the people in my community.

The Junior Volunteer Reading Program was established to encourage young readers to volunteer at the nursing home and read to the residents. The residents, if able, would help them if they stumbled on their words. It was the beginning of a great rapport with the children and the local schools. A reporter from the local newspaper began showing up at our doorstep almost monthly to ask about any new programs that they could report on. To our surprise, the Junior Volunteer Reading Program even received a letter of congratulations from none other than Hillary Clinton!

My administrator told me that the staff's morale was at an all-time high, greatly due to the Activities Department's influence. Soon after, we were notified by the South East Missouri Area Agency on Aging that our nursing home had won an award for the outstanding contributions to the lives of its residents. To my amazement the award is called the "Quality of Life Award!"

Recently I was promoted to activities coordinator responsible for supervising several of the nursing homes under the same ownership. My focus is on staff morale, community relations, implementing creative new programs and most important, making the lives of the residents meaningful and rewarding.

I am confident that all the success I enjoy at my job is due to sticking to my practice at all costs. That encouragement about aiming for 20 years was right on target for me. And

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this is only the beginning. I feel I have so much more work to do.

In my personal life, many things have also changed for me. My estranged second husband traveled 1,100 miles to surprise me at my doorstep and asked for a reconciliation, which I accepted. He has proven over the last few years to be sincere and we are doing much better.

My children are healthy and happy. My eldest daughter received the Gohonzon and is presently attending the University of Massachusetts on a full scholarship.

I greatly appreciate the sincere SGI members of Far Reaches District with whom I have the great pleasure practicing. With their unpretentious, caring ways, they have served as a great oasis and influence for me.

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