

EXPERIENCE — VERELETT P. ALLEN, LOS ANGELES OFF THE DOLE AND TEACHING NEW ROLES

By focusing on the Buddhist basics of faith, practice and study, Verelett Allen got off of welfare. Now she's active in the community empowering other women to do the same by training them to break into nontraditional occupations in the workforce.

As a single mother of three, I've seen my share of hardships. Even though I had graduated from high school and attended a year of college, at 22 I had no marketable job skills. I continued to work in a low-paying job and received a supplement check and food stamps from welfare. I felt I had made a mess of my life, and it was over. It seemed as though I was going to live this way for the rest of my life. I was a nothing, and a nobody.

During this time I was also involved in a relationship in which I was being cheated on. This was the last straw, nothing was going right for me. I concluded that everything my mother and family said about me was true — I would never amount to anything. So I got a gun and I decided to end my relationship.

For some strange reason I decided to stop by my co-worker's house — who was a Buddhist — because we were good friends. He introduced me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1973, but my immediate response to him was "I don't believe in that stuff" — by *stuff*, I was referring to religion. He still insisted that I needed to chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo for the happiness and well-being of my three small children and myself. I did not take him up on his offer — not until that night.

I showed him the gun and told him what I was planning to do. I was in tears. My friend asked me to sit and chant with him. I refused. An hour later, he had convinced me to chant for my children, since I was about to make them motherless. After chanting for 30 minutes, he convinced me to attend a meeting with him the next day. I didn't recognize the feeling that I experienced while chanting then, but today I can say it was calm and peaceful. I started to attend meetings regularly, and I received my Gohonzon on Oct. 19, 1975. I have had the great fortune of having sincere, caring members to help me seek out SGI President Ikeda's guidance, and to work hard at the basics: faith, practice and study.

My seniors in faith always encouraged me to never give up. I worked hard and attended classes whenever I could in electronics.

In 1980, I finished my training in electronics and passed the test to receive my Federal Communications Commission License. What a victory this was for me! I never thought I was capable of this, but the SGI members kept telling me that everything is possible with the Gohonzon. I realized that I was also starting to learn how to love myself. Now I love life, and I love people. This is what this practice has allowed me to see in myself.

I started a good paying job in 1981 as a radio communications technician for the mass transit system in Washington, D.C. This was the most money I had ever made in my life. This also made my daughters happy. They saw the change in me because of my Buddhist practice, and began participating in SGI activities.

I thought my biggest challenge was over when I got that good job, but I realized it was just the beginning. My first day at work I found out that I was the only female among 16 men. They didn't exactly welcome me with open arms. In fact, they were guessing how long it would be before I left. I received no help in the beginning to "learn the ropes."

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Every day I went home angry and frustrated as I put up with the isolation that sometimes comes with being the only female in a man's occupation. I also performed work that was not my responsibility because I didn't know any better at the time. I wanted to quit, but knew this was the best job I ever had. Besides, I had a family to take care of.

I went to my seniors in faith for support. I was encouraged to chant with appreciation for having such a good job that allowed me to provide for my family, and to chant to be able to recognize negative influences that would keep me from advancing. I chanted a lot, and made the determination not to be defeated. In his writings, Nichiren Daishonin says that a sword in the hands of a coward has no power.

Determined to win, I increased my efforts in SGI activities. I became a member of the stage crew where I was also the only female. My training in stage crew gave me a different insight into working in a male-dominated field. I realized that the men on the job probably had just as much fear of having me around as I did being there. I was invading their space. One guy came forward to help me learn the radio system. Being the newest person besides myself, he felt that it was only natural that he help me get started.

I started thinking there must be other women who were going the same thing I was. Then I remembered the time I asked my district leader what was meant by having a mission. She told me to chant for my creativity to manifest itself. I had no idea what she was talking about then, but now it had meaning. I needed to share my work experience with other women, and I needed to hear theirs.

In 1987, along with a colleague who was also an SGI member, I formed Women's Work, Inc., a support group for women who worked in or were interested in working in nontraditional occupations. For three years I taught myself how to research, and I learned all I could relating to women in nontraditional work. In 1990 the executive director of Wider Opportunities For Women, the training program for women that I graduated from in 1981, offered to assist me in sponsoring the first support group meeting.

In April 1991, I realized my dream. Women's Work had its first support group meeting. It was attended by nine women. We met once a month and the number of women attending grew with every meeting. We traveled to conferences nationwide to network with other women in these occupations. We volunteered in the community speaking to groups of women trying to get off welfare. We also spoke to teenage girls and boys about women in nontraditional occupations.

President Ikeda encourages us to seek out a mentor in our line of work, and I was fortunate to have such a person who taught me about consulting others on how to bring about positive solutions in the workplace. For this I am grateful to Cynthia Marano. We ended up with over 100 women who had attended our meetings.

In 1993 I was encouraged by another friend to apply for a part-time job training women in prevocational skills that would allow them to move on to skills training (computer repair, commercial driving, etc.) or apprenticeships (plumbing, carpentry, etc.). I was excited, so I applied. I didn't have a master's degree, which was a requirement. I felt I had no chance.

Again, my seniors in faith encouraged me not to give up. One leader said to chant to the Gohonzon to offer what was needed by those who could best benefit from it. At first I didn't understand what he meant. All I had to offer was that I was a single mother that had once been on welfare. I had not accomplished anything great. He then pointed out that I had raised three daughters who had attended college and one was in medical school, and I was working in the community trying to help other women get off welfare. He asked me

how I accomplished this? I replied, “By working on my basics: faith, practice and study.” He told me to continue and to have no fear.

After a few interviews and many references, I was hired as coordinator of the Non-Traditional Employment For Women Program at the YWCA of the National Capital Area. This was definitely proof from my Buddhist practice. I designed a prevocational (work and life skills) curriculum, and started to build the foundation of a program that later became known as one of the most successful in the country for helping women to leave the welfare roles, and to dramatically change their lives. The women could relate to me because we shared similar experiences not only dealing with welfare, but also related to our children and families. I would say to them, “If I could do it so can you, and I’m here to show you how.” I worked the two jobs for three years.

I reached a turning point in my life and my Buddhist practice in 1995. I received a national award for my work training women to be prepared for work. I was presented with the Individual Leadership Award from the National Commission On Working Women and Wider Opportunities For Women. When I received this award one of my daughters said that she was proud of me, but did I have to tell the world that we had been on welfare? I explained to her that I did. Because we had been. I knew through my experience how to help others trying to get off welfare. This was my mission.

In 1996 I attended the NGO Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China where over 30,000 women participated. Every workshop we attended, the cry was the same: women just want equal rights. I felt fortunate to be from the United States — some women risked execution in their country for attending the conference. I thought about President and Mrs. Ikeda and their travels around the world promoting peace through culture and education. They are truly great examples! President Ikeda shows that he has a natural ability to reach all kinds of people.

I received a call from the White House in June 1997 saying that I had been selected as one of the honorees to participate in the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Title IX. [In 1972, Congress passed the Educational Amendments. One section of this law, Title IX, prohibits discrimination against girls and women in federally-funded education, including in athletics programs.] I was one of six women selected who had broken down barriers in their professions, to join President Clinton on stage — track star, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, astronaut, Sally Ride were among the six. In previous years, I had been fortunate to participate in women’s events at the White House with both Vice President Al Gore and First Lady Hillary Rodham-Clinton — who I think is a remarkable woman. Now I was going to be able to participate in this great celebration with both the President and Mrs. Clinton. What a great opportunity!

While at the event, another woman being honored, Nelba Chavez, who is the administrator for U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, asked me if I would present a workshop at a national women’s conference that was being sponsored by her agency in September 1997 in Arizona — all expenses paid. I accepted.

I presented a workshop on training women to enter nontraditional occupations that would pay them about 30% more than traditional occupations. After my workshop I was approached and asked about possibly sharing my curriculum with an organization in the Compton and Watts areas in California.

About a month later, I visited Shields For Families Project, Inc., an organization that deals with people that have substance abuse and alcohol problems. I met with one its

founders and Executive Director, Kathryn Icenhower. I was very impressed with Shields because it deals directly with the whole family and not just the person with problem. They believe that if a parent has a problem it affects the entire family, so there are also programs within Shields that address the needs of the other members. To me this really falls in line with my practice, because President Ikeda always talks about building beautiful families.

I accepted a consultant position to help Shields to set up a Vocational Services Center. Now I had three jobs! I remember when I didn't have one. I traveled between Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles for about three months. I was also setting up an additional program at the YWCA in Washington, D.C., to prepare women for work in highway construction.

After the second program got under way in Washington, D.C. I decided to move to Los Angeles. I knew there was a challenge there and I wanted to be a part of it. As Buddhists we are always encouraged to grow. I started teaching prevocational classes at Shields and there are women who, I'm happy to say, are working and training in areas such as auto mechanics, environmental positions, and electronics. They are changing their lives and their families! They are moving out of those low paying jobs that don't allow them to properly take care of their families.

I was presented with another challenge at Shields. The director asked me why wouldn't I consider offering the same training for the male clients? My immediate response was because guys already know about tools and stuff. She shared with me that the problems were not just gender-based, but economic. I was still not convinced.

I decided to chant about it. Nichiren Daishonin's teachings clarifies that everyone has the Buddha nature, and President Ikeda has always encouraged us to keep an open mind. So I went to the director and told her that I wasn't promising anything, but I would develop a survey, and present it to the men. Much to my astonishment the director was right. Some of the men didn't know what I took for granted they knew.

Further proof of the need to train men as well as women came when a couple of weeks later, a segment aired on *60 Minutes* on women in nontraditional occupations. The woman being interviewed was someone I had worked with on occasions concerning this issue. As I listened to her I realized a horrible truth. I have been in nontraditional work for over 25 years, and in essence she was saying that there were no significant changes made with regard to women working in, or entering these occupations. The remarks that the men made on the show were the same as they were 20 years ago. I thought, "This is not progress." Now the reasoning seemed more real to me why I had to teach prevocational classes to *both* men and women.

On Oct. 5, 1998, I started the first coed prevocational training class at Shields. The women and men not only learned skills that would prepare them for work or apprenticeships, they learned what they could contribute as men and women and about their differences in the work environment. It has been a wonderful learning experience for me, too. I love them all.

I feel proud to be part of the SGI, an organization, that since its beginning, has had the goal of showing compassion for all human beings. We are working through our individual Buddhist practice, to do our own human revolution and change the world. I can really see the growth that I have experienced. I will continue to work throughout my life to affect change in my family, work, and the community by taking responsibility in helping others.

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