

**CEDAR MOUNTAIN DISTRICT EXPERIENCE
AND ONE TO GROW ON
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Welcome, baby Frances Antoinette Nesmith! Attending her first district meeting, she did not lack attention, considering Cedar Mountain District had 20 children there to welcome her.

As newly appointed district leaders of Cedar Mountain District, a very large district formed in November 1997, my husband, John, and I were both a little concerned about accommodating so many people at monthly meetings. We realized we had an even bigger challenge with 20, excuse me, 21 children of various ages. It was very important to us to create an atmosphere at our meetings that met one of the SGI guidelines for last year, "Nurture the family." More than anything we wanted to have district meetings that the family could enjoy together.

Now having learned from past experience, I know that individually all these kids are good kids. I have also learned that something mystical happens when children come together. Creative juices flow and the most interesting things come to be with items as simple as a bunk bed and a belt. So needless to say, the first thing I did was develop a "Do's and Don'ts" list for district meetings. I paid special consideration to put "Do know you're welcome" as number one on the list. This was handed out to adults and children at the first meeting as a new district. At that same time, I met with the children separately and went over the list. We talked about the purpose of district meetings and why it is important to support them. I explained that my house was the district meeting house but it is also a home that deserves respect. I also let them know that the grown-ups had to follow the same rules.

We then talked about what they would like to do at district meetings. Everything from "EAT!" "PLAY!" and "MUSIC!" was shouted out. They were then reminded of something on the "Don't List," "Don't yell or create excessive noise that would disturb others." After a good laugh, we concluded that they wanted to be involved, somewhat, in the meetings, then spent the rest of the time getting to know one another and developing friendships.

In the beginning, with our children's enthusiastic approval, the boys and girls were allowed to play in their rooms. But naturally Andrew and Emily grew to cherish their privacy and we needed to make some changes. We then closed off that end of the house and arranged our garage so that on district meeting night, it easily converts into a really hip pad. The kids can play their music without disrupting the meeting, visit with one another, play board games and share events in their lives. I might add that they are never unsupervised.

The kids are always considered when having the planning meeting. They have shared in introductions and cultural performances. In December 1998, the members had the pleasure of hearing "Up on the House Top" played on keyboard, clarinet and trombone. In March of last year, we viewed a music video produced by several kids and their parents. My favorite activity was in July when we made homemade ice cream to be enjoyed after the meeting, brought our favorite toppings, and while the ice cream cranked we turned on the sprinkler system in the back yard and the kids got to go wild on a hot Texas evening.

This may sound like all we do is have fun. To give an example of how doing so we instill Buddhist concepts and the spirit of the SGI, here is a recent example:

In February 1999, Cedar Mountain District was responsible for planning the World

Peace Prayer meeting at the Dallas Culture Center. Naturally we wanted to include the children because as one member put it, "One of our district's strong points is the fact that we have so many kids." The next question was, what should we do?

An idea was born one evening when my husband and I were doing our "clean the kitchen ritual" which requires upbeat background music. We decided to put in a new tape. We have a friend in our district who keeps us supplied with un-usual recordings we affectionately call "The Stanly Tapes." We chose one we had not heard before and came to a stand still as we listened to the words of "The Swamee Rap." It goes like this: "If you want the truth to come across, clear your mind with mental floss / Back and forth twice a day, helps prevent truth decay." My first thought, "The kids!"

At our planning meeting, we presented the idea and played the tape. With everyone's support, we then presented it to the kids. They loved it! Immediately the children came up with some fantastic ideas concerning costumes, props and dancing. Let the rehearsals begin!

At each practice we began by sitting in front of the Gohonzon chanting as a group. We then used our cultural performance as a medium to discuss many Buddhist concepts; many bodies of the same mind, cause and effect and *Soka Gakkai* means value creation. Our goal was to create value. It was made very clear that the reason we were performing was to inspire people, unite with one another and challenge our own negativity. This was not a talent show or just an opportunity to get on stage. We wanted to show actual proof so if the members see our success at uniting with one another, they might be encouraged to do the same.

Of course we did not lack obstacles. The biggest one was illness. So many children were sick. At rehearsals the adults sat in for the sick kids on a regular basis. One of the little girls had to be hospitalized because her fever would not go down. Even this provided an opportunity to talk to children about the important Buddhist trait of compassion. We dedicated our next chanting session to our friend's recovery. Even though she did not perform with us, she was able to attend the meeting. After overcoming so many hurdles, and everyone ready to go, the day of the meeting the sound system at the Culture Center began to snap, crackle and pop. The sound system !?! Didn't think about that. This was a recording. We need sound. We need GOOD sound!

With some last-minute encouragement never to give up no matter what and a lot of trust the kids went on stage. With the exception of a very brief break in the music, the performance was a huge success. We were so proud of our Cedar Mountain children, and they were proud of themselves.

Some people may look at 21 children and think, "That's too many kids." We in Cedar Mountain District say, "That's a lot of fortune!" To work with children or to just be around when they play provides us with a great chance to contribute to world peace. Children give us the opportunity to put Buddhism into action. They know when you care and they know when you don't. We wanted to say with our actions, "We notice you and you are important." I feel we should never waste a single moment to share with them the tremendous mission our SGI organization has for the world.

So until the winds of change blow, Cedar Mountain District will continue to nurture the family by making our district an inspiring place for everyone.

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