

330 NATIONWIDE YOUTH GATHER FOR A 3-DAY CONFERENCE

More than 330 youth, including one participant from St. Maarten, gathered in Los Angeles from around the United States on Sept. 24–26. It marked the largest nationwide youth event this year. In lieu of the youth summer conferences at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, representatives from the junior high and high school, student and youth divisions took part in the three-day conference as a departure toward the new century. These activities are the first in a series of commemorative events that will celebrate next year's 70th anniversary of the founding of the Soka Gakkai and the 40th anniversary of the SGI-USA.

The youth kicked off their weekend with an inspirational meeting at the Los Angeles Friendship Center attended by SGI General Director Eiichi Wada and SGI Vice Women's Division Leader Yumiko Hachiya. They encouraged the youth to "continue to practice throughout their lives so they can become people who are devoted to the happiness of others." Through deepening their friendships based on warm heart-to-heart exchange, the participants were challenged to stand up and take responsibility for American and worldwide kosen-rufu.

The weekend itinerary was loaded with faith-filled, as well as fun-filled, activities. The first stop was a tour of the Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo, campus. Although the campus is still under construction, the tour offered many the opportunity to see the life-long vision of humanistic education—that of Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda—coming to fruition.

Other highlights included: an afternoon of shopping and "kicking around" at Laguna Beach; a BBQ at Aliso Viejo Ranch; spirited talent shows; group discussions on various topics, including the mentor–disciple relationship, Victory Over Violence, time management, sharing Buddhism, the temple issue, the importance of study; a lecture with Arun Gandhi; and, of course, treasured memories of the Youth Grand Culture Festival! And lots and lots of new friendships and commemorative photos!!

— *STEPHANIE CELANO*

Art Congdon, 20, Philadelphia, Pa.: "I'm a physics major at Temple University in Philadelphia. One of my determinations for this conference was based on President Ikeda's guidance that when you are a student you should focus on your studies wholeheartedly. I determined that my schoolwork would not be adversely affected by my coming, because that would defeat the whole purpose of coming. Rather, I tried to use this activity as a chance to boost my determination so that I could make it through this semester successfully."

Essien Ita, 29; South River, N.J.: "The most meaningful part of this conference has been meeting new people and coming to understand more about the vision we have in America for worldwide kosen-rufu; also understanding the in-depth mission we have regarding the temple issue. I really understand the compassion President Ikeda has for all the members. He wants us to grow in America. I'm learning that through this visit."

Monique Compton, 22, San Francisco: "My group discussion with the Student Division was on time management. It helped a lot because that's my struggle right now. I was at Cal

State Hayward but now I'm working part time. My goal is to go back to school this fall. Why shouldn't I pursue my education? What's taking me so long to get back into school is my lazy nature — that time management struggle.”

Michael Lewis, 23, Radcliff, Ky.: “One other person came from Kentucky. Financially it was a struggle to come to this activity — I had to work and chant a lot. Now in my youth I feel like I'm at the cusp of realizing what I am going to do with my life, what profession I'm going to choose that will help benefit the kosen-rufu movement. I felt this activity would give me a jump-start to help me realize that. I'm chanting about what I want to do. I'm learning a lot from other people's experiences. The dialogue in the group discussions were great. I have developed a better understanding of President Ikeda's dream and seeing it become reality. Because he works so selflessly for others, that helps me not to be so self-ish. Seeing Soka University (in Aliso Viejo) was really awe-inspiring.”

Shane Fawcett, 16, Denver, Colo.: I had a lot of obstacles before I came. My mom and aunt recently started talking after not speaking for about six years. But right before I came, they started fighting again. I felt really discouraged, but I knew I had to come because I know when something bad happens, something good usually follows. I knew I had to get to the good part. I love my mom a lot and I love my aunt a lot. I want this activity to be the cause for my family to stop fighting.

Atiba Joseph, 16, New York City: There was no FNCC conference this year for the youth and I missed it so much, so I wanted to participate in this activity. I had \$400 to go shopping for school; it was the exact amount for the downpayment to go on this trip. I decided to put the money to better use than buying clothes. I got new clothes anyway.

“I'm involved in creative workshops in New York — acting, singing, dancing, hip-hop. I'm part of the video crew. I'm hoping to bring back the spirit of this event — everybody's so peaceful. I want to bring back this peace and harmony.”

Michele Howland, 16, Boise, Idaho: I'm proud to be the only person from Idaho. I have to bring a lot back. There are about 13 youth in my area. I'm here to see what everyone is experiencing. I'm taking in a lifetime of lessons.”

Julie Szarowski-Cox, 30, Buffalo, N.Y.: “I hope to gain a deeper relationship with President Ikeda through participating in this activity, to bring the mentor-disciple relationship back to the members in Upstate New York. To bring it alive, to start fresh. I've been reading *The Human Revolution* again. President Toda talked about preparing Japan in 1951–52 for take-off, like a plane that has to gain enough momentum down the runway in order to lift off. The way they did that was to propagate in rural Japan; they started building the organization in the outlying areas so they were on the same level as Tokyo. For me kosen-rufu means propagating Buddhism widely, helping this philosophy take hold in American society.

“Society today is filled with violence, corruption and war. In order for us to change the world — to really be able to reach people — we have to start by changing our own lives. We have to help people realize the truth, even if they don't practice Buddhism. If they can embrace the concept of the dignity of human life, then we can help bring about fundamental changes and a peaceful society.

Nobu Massiah, 13, Bridgeport, Conn.: “I met Atiba at the FNCC last year. My brother introduced me to him and we’ve been friends ever since. We went to a Boston activity together, too. This activity I want to develop a new state of mind, how I think about the world. Sometimes I think negatively and I catch myself. I want to be a better person. I want to help people as much as possible and live the moment.

One of my leaders told me that these are golden memories and I should always remember this activity and encourage other people. So I want to encourage people by taking pictures and bringing back all the souvenirs I can and telling them what a great experience I had. I think people will have more faith in this practice knowing that there are people that want to practice this Buddhism just like them. This will help them to keep practicing with their whole heart and not give up at times. This will give them some reinforcement. I think I should be that.”

Yumi Kobayashi, 28, San Diego: “I really wanted to improve in my life. I really want to enjoy my life. That’s why I joined Byakuren. I wanted to meet other members too. In fact I’m so excited because I met so many people. There’s no difference for me in kosen-rufu here and in Japan. Everyone’s heart is the same. I was never allowed to join Byakuren in Japan because my hair is dyed and I’m suntanned. I like doing Byakuren in America. It’s too strict in Japan. Everything in America is great

“I want to encourage people to never give up and that they are always a Buddha and that they can always solve their problems. Even if your life is not good now you can change it.

Steven Orgas, 22, Wenatchee, Wash.: “I grew up in a gang in Corpus Christie, Texas. We grew up in a violent community and we reacted through carrying guns and fighting and all kinds of violence. That was all we knew. I’ve been chanting for four years. I got my friends to chant. I could feel the cage door opening.

“The theme of Victory Over Violence is perfect. The main thing I understand from Nichiren Daishonin and President Ikeda’s guidance is the fusion of our lives with the Gohonzon—that it’s within us—and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo brings our potential forward. I take the fusion seriously. When this VOV came about, my friends were interested in getting involved—everyone wants peace.

“Since I’ve been telling them about VOV, I have had a lot of opportunities to tell them about Buddhism. They understand that Buddhism is life. Now their environments are changing.

“I’m a musician. My friends and I did a concert together for VOV. My friends loved it so much they want to do it again and VOV is the cause.

“I’m reading “The Opening of the Eyes” because I’m ready to take my faith to the next level. I want to take back all the energy, guidance and friendship.

“I started practicing alone in my family and my now father and four of my six brothers started in the last year.”

Paul Wetzel, 35, Torrence, Calif.: I got involved with Soka Group because I wanted to put my practice into ‘turbo speed.’ I enjoy protecting people. I’ve gotten so much out of this activity, like challenging my weaknesses and fears—fear of failure. I have passion now to practice. It’s great to be with all the youth when they’re creating such great memories that they’ll remember forever. This is the most fun activity I’ve been involved in. I

want to keep this energy alive. I want to use it to get involved in the temple issue. I want to meet with temple members to encourage them. Recently, I read President Ikeda's poem, 'Be Strong,' I understand what he means when he said 'Fear is Hell. / Courage is joy.' I realize now I can help other people."

Roshni Ray, 17, Weehawken, N.J.: "We are having our own festival in December in New Jersey. This activity is very encouraging to me. There is no end to the details. The Byakuren are everywhere—I feel so protected. We can learn a lot for our festival—learn how much you can care for just one person."

Angel Latterell, 21, Minneapolis, Minn.: "It's really been refreshing to meet so many members from all over the country. I very fortunate to attend an event of this size and I will bring back the energy I experienced here to Minnesota."

Jessica Mentzer, 21, Corvallis, Ore.: "Arun Gandhi seemed really down to earth. He was just talking like he was having a conversation with us. He wasn't lecturing us about how we should act. He was sharing his view about the importance of nonviolence. He seemed to be an easily reachable person. That's what touched me the most."

Kimberly Parks, 19, Washington, D.C.: "Seeing Arun Gandhi and meeting him and listening to him tell these stories that his grandfather had told him makes me feel so connected to everybody and makes me really feel like I am doing my mission. When I was young and I would chant to the Gohonzon, I would envision myself as I am right now, at this age, old enough to have an effect, but still young. It's just as Arun Gandhi said, you don't have to be a Martin Luther King or a Gandhi to make a difference."