

**FIRST YOUTH DIVISION CONFERENCE AT FNCC
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On the morning of our trip to the Florida Nature and Culture Center for the first-ever Youth Division Conference (Nov. 11–14), we were at the Los Angeles International Airport when a member of our group realized she had forgotten her purse at home. The rest of us had to board the plane without her. As our plane moved toward the runway, I grew worried about her situation and chanted for her under my breath. Suddenly, a passenger aboard the plane fell ill, so the pilots were advised to return the plane to the terminal gate. My friend, who was still waiting there, was then allowed to board the plane with only a copy of her ID that a friend of hers had hurriedly faxed to her.

In the three days I spent at the conference, I heard such countless testimonies of youth overcoming financial, health or family problems to go to the Florida Nature and Culture Center. A young woman shared how this trip was the first time she had ever left home due to difficulties she experiences with cerebral palsy. One young man was going through a painful divorce and wanted to gain hope and wisdom from the conference to create value from his pain. Another youth, born into the practice, had just recently decided to chant after being virtually paralyzed from a back injury. Three young women also shared their determination to triumph over traumatic experiences of abuse, and related fighting injustice in their personal lives to standing up for justice on the temple issue.

The mentor-and-disciple session, as well as the session on the temple issue, were workshops of constructive and straightforward dialogue. What struck me the most was the countless unique perspectives embraced and addressed by the participants. Most importantly, many youth were determined to study more and get more involved in their local activities.

During the conference, I was moved by how Renu Jiandani, SGI-USA young women's division leader, and James Herrmann, SGI-USA young men's division leader, worked tirelessly to give encouragement to individuals, literally until dawn each day. The warm support and friendship among all the participants were awesome, and most of us left with strained vocal chords from cheering, laughing and crying.

On the final day of the conference, SGI President Ikeda sent us the following message: "To my Young American Comrades: I extend my sincerest best wishes and prayers for your continued good health, happiness and prosperity as we advance into the new century—the Century of Life."

My final memory of the Youth Division Conference was when I was walking on the campus late one night. I could hear a chorus of daimoku being chanted by youth who had gathered at the Amphitheater, with the glow of the lake in front of them and the pink hues of a flat, Southern sky above. I felt as if I were walking inside President Ikeda's heart.

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