

## **BUILDING OUR COMMUNITIES**

In *The Human Revolution*, SGI President Ikeda says, “The change in the destiny of a single human being can change the destiny of the world.” But what happens when four Buddhists with strong practices all change their destiny at the same time and find themselves all given the same mission “to change the destiny” of America? The answer is human revolution. Here is their mission and their story.

In 1998, Secretary Andrew Cuomo of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) decided to humanize the face of HUD by hiring and training the “best and the brightest” from related professions such as local government, real estate and community organizing.

These new HUD employees, combined with others recruited from inside the organization, would form a new Urban Peace Corps called Community Builders. They would work with mayors, businesses and nonprofits to help solve problems in America’s cities and towns.

Not surprisingly, this big effort to change a big organization and build America’s communities from within, attracted SGI members to its front lines. From very different backgrounds, SGI members Mike Levine (Philadelphia), Martha Edmonds (Albany, N.Y.), Donna Levy Wray (Boston), and Irma Gorham (Manhattan, N.Y.) have each made their unique contributions over this past year — SGI’s Year of Victory in the Community for the New Century — toward making the vision into reality. Each has overcome obstacles, internal and institutional, to demonstrate the power of their Buddhist practice and further their own human revolution.

### **DONNA LEVY WRAY, BOSTON**

In the summer of 1998, I was recruited by the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, (KSG) to direct of a new program in executive education—the Community Builders Program. Sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the two-week program offered a variety of courses including leadership, negotiation, team building and real estate finance. Because of my previous work experience, I was familiar with community building and had played a role in strategic plans for addressing urban issues—KSG thought I was a good fit for this new position.

Even though I had never held a position that was so administrative, I felt the challenge would be good. Besides, I had been chanting for a job change and felt pretty sure this was it.

The directors’ responsibility is primarily to make sure the trains run on time. We are in charge of all administrative details from curriculum to outside events, as well as managing a three-person operations staff. When you hear the expression, “the devil is in the details,” I can tell you it’s the truth. My first day on the job was five weeks away from the start of my first program and I had a lot to learn, real fast. What I didn’t know was that the HUD programs scheduled through the end of that year included some of the largest class sizes ever to participate in executive education programs. Class size directly impacts the amount of work that has to be done. These numbers indicated we would have to use two classrooms, develop two curricula, possibly two meal locations, and so on. The challenges

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began on day one.

If I have learned anything from my eight years of Buddhist practice, it is patience and tolerance. I have experienced many, many times the outcome of changing someone's behavior toward me by first changing my own. Additionally, I knew that my Buddha nature was able to provide me all I needed to be successful.

The challenges were not mine alone. The staff was challenged, as were my colleagues, the food services and facilities personnel and the housing organizers. When people become stressed, they start to complain and blame. The problem was seen to be with the Community Builders and their demands, not with the individuals that worked at the school. As I observed what was going on, I began to rally for the truth. How could we change our organization to meet the expectations placed upon us, and at the same time make daily life more palatable for everyone? I had to work one day at a time, one program at a time.

The first thing I did was to stop complaining myself. When I began to act more graciously toward requests and demands, the staff took notice. I then began a public relations campaign on behalf of the participants, spreading the word about how talented and well-educated they were. (A good educational background goes a long way in this institution.) This was a profound truth because I had never seen so many lists of law degrees, Ph.Ds and master's degrees in all areas of science and liberal arts, as I saw on the biographical forms of the Community Builders. The participants were coming from positions of leadership and authority; most had served as executives in nonprofits, government or in their own businesses. The real issue was not with them, but with our lack of understanding of where they were coming from. These were not ordinary students.

I also began to respect more fully the participants' commitment to urban issues. When we read the daily newspapers or watch coverage on television, it's hard to imagine that anything concrete is being done by anyone to improve our inner cities. *Inner city* might be another term for *wasteland*, if your only information source is the daily news. This is just not true with Community Builders on the job. All of these talented, educated people could probably earn a lot more money doing other things or working for private industry rather than government. Their education highlights their qualifications to do other work. But, for whatever reason—and there are many varied reasons—they choose to work for the disenfranchised in cities. I believe that we, at KSG, should be honored to have these participants among us.

The composition of the Community Builder classes featured more racial diversity than is typical for a program at the school. As I spread the good news about Community Builders to whomever would listen, I began to feel a slight thaw in the climate. I began to host "end of program" parties so everyone could get together in a relaxed environment with music and dancing. I served as DJ, featuring my husband's "Big Box of Soul and Shout." Some people learned to salsa, while others learned the electric slide! Right now, I believe the staff is coming along remarkably well and developing a sense of humor as well. I think they look forward to the end of program bashes as much as the participants.

In one year, I believe the Community Builders have had a very positive effect on attitudes at KSG, although it didn't start out that way. I think cultures have mixed well and honesty is encouraged in and out of class settings. For KSG, this is the first of many steps we have to take in adjusting our expectations to our changing communities.

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## **MARTHA EDMONDS, ALBANY, N.Y.**

I have always wanted to help people. Injustice and poverty have always been a deep concern of mine. When I moved back to my hometown to complete my master's degree, I was devastated by the condition of the community I had grown up in. The South End of Albany was the city's first neighborhood and the point from where the whole city grew. At one time, it had a busy port and trucking industry, pharmacies and green grocers who kept neat friendly stores. Pizza parlors, restaurants and businesses used to line the streets .

When I moved to California in 1987, the community was once again on the road to being vibrant again after a slight dip. New homes were being built, buildings were being rehabbed and the town was booming.

But when I returned there, it looked like a war zone. Businesses were closed and buildings were vacant and boarded up. As I looked around, I kept asking my sister what happened. Many people were just like me. After they got an education, they moved to the suburbs, leaving behind the poorest residents. It really bothered me and I began to chant that somehow I could help improve conditions.

I never would have guessed that just two years later I would be given the responsibility from the federal government to do just that. HUD had just instituted a new initiative called the Center for Community and Interfaith Partnerships. My job was to organize local churches to create partnerships that would work on the numerous problems facing inner-city communities.

I knew immediately where I would start. I went right back to my old neighborhood, and to the church where I had been baptized as a young child. Although there was a new minister, I could see faith at work from the moment we began to talk. He was just as frustrated and disturbed about the community as I was and was ready to make a change. Over the next year, we worked hand in hand to build a partnership of all the neighborhood churches. I helped them to develop a survey and identify what residents felt was needed in the community. The list was long.

The community had a problem with drugs, unemployment, dilapidated housing and violence. Working with no budget, I began to partner with local organizations to help them solve these problems. Through the strength of my Buddhist practice and tremendous effort, I established a partnership with the three major universities in our area, the State University of New York at Albany (SUNYA), the Albany Law School and the Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute.

SUNYA agreed to work with the community to create a redevelopment plan. The Department of Planning identified funding sources, surveyed open spaces to determine the type of use that would most benefit the community and to identify a strategy that would lead to a new revitalized community. In the spring, Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute's Architectural Department will take that vision and expand on it by providing architectural drawings of the community's vision for the 21st century.

All of the churches were actively doing social service work in the community including food kitchens, food pantries and clothing pantries. Many of them fed over 100 people on a single afternoon. But all of the funding was coming out of church donations.

I began to educate the ministers on how to access federal and state funding to assist them in their efforts. The Albany Chapter of 100 Black Men, a group of black professors from the State University of New York, and the Albany Law School offered to develop a leadership training program to educate local ministers and residents about how to develop and manage a major program to seek outside funding. The group formed a task force that

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is developing curriculum on leadership development for ministers, local residents and youth.

HUD also provided \$100,000 for the City of Albany to create a task force to tackle the largest problems facing the city and through citizen input come up with a master revitalization plan. HUD further provided technical assistance for an assessment of the needs for affordable housing in the community.

After much chanting and a year of hard work, I am finally seeing a glimmer at the end of the tunnel. The community has forward-moving activities and successful partnerships that will lead to a new future.

When I first came back to Albany, all I could see was abandoned houses and boarded-up stores. Now when I drive through the South End of Albany, I see how the power of faith and cooperation can make a difference. Although there are no new buildings, the fact that the plans are in the works and that people who have never worked together before are all working together, means that we are ending 1999 in the spirit of hope, cooperation and progress. That alone is a cause for this community to one day be a shining example of the power of faith in the 21st century.

### **MIKE LEVINE, PHILADELPHIA**

Mike Levine, a 20-year HUD employee and a 21-year SGI-USA member, had directed HUD programs at a national level. His entire family, including wife Christine and 3-year-old son, Seth, relocated from Washington, D.C., to Philadelphia for Mike's dream job. "As a college undergraduate, I wrote an essay on what I wanted to do when I grew up," he explains. "What I wrote on that paper is now my job description as a Community Builder. When I was first hired by HUD, I chanted that I would stay in the capital a few years, learn the bureaucracy, then take my knowledge to the local level to help communities. Now, unexpectedly after 20 years, this forgotten dream became a reality! It is amazing that this happened without my sacrificing the salary and retirement benefits I need to help support my family."

Mike's focus as a Community Builder is to help people move from welfare to work. Philadelphia has 60,000 welfare families who must find jobs. One-quarter of them live in HUD housing. With Mike's leadership, the HUD Pennsylvania Office seizes any opportunity to help their clients succeed. He trained 1,000 housing managers and resident leaders on welfare reform laws, welfare-to-work resources, HUD grant programs and children's health insurance. He and his colleagues promote electronic education where welfare families live, starting computer learning centers in housing projects, sending 300 recycled computers to nonprofits, and bringing child-care training to 70 low-income residents. They enhance access to jobs and wealth by promoting housing mobility and home-ownership programs. Mike works with other federal agencies in a Mid-Atlantic Federal Welfare Reform task force. He wrote Pennsylvania's state policy for including HUD on local Workforce Investment Boards, and is cataloging HUD resources for the State Workforce development and Welfare systems.

Mike's work earned him two of very few 1999 HUD Best Practice Awards given to HUD employees, and one of 13 HUD year-end Outstanding Achievement awards. He was praised with two colleagues in a prominent feature on Community Builders in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Pennsylvania's largest daily newspaper. President Clinton's report on the campaign to promote free children's health insurance singled out his work.

Mike reports: "After 19 years in Washington, D.C., I felt like a paper pusher with no way

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to see how my policies affected people's lives. As a Community Builder, I enjoy building partnerships between community organizations, colleges, businesses, states and local agencies." These partnerships are key to assembling the needed resources to solve urban problems.

Using computer learning centers as an example, these resources include: the physical space for the center, space renovations, computers, computer repair work, software, staff, volunteer teachers and tutors. Mike says: "The results are clear and visible. People's lives change when they first turn on a computer, earn a GED, get a job, partake in after-school programs or correspond with older or younger generations.

"I see myself as a social entrepreneur whose big challenge lies in constantly pushing myself to develop, engage and bring together an ever-widening circle of contacts. At times I perceive a dead end when I get off-track, run out of energy or face rejection from a desired partner. At such times, I dig deep into my life and SGI experiences to win over that obstacle and move on to the next. I attribute my success to my daily chanting, SGI youth division training, and my relationship with my mentor, Daisaku Ikeda."

### **IRMA GORHAM, MANHATTAN, N.Y.**

One of my many benefits upon receiving the Gohonzon in 1982 was to land a job with the New York Housing Authority — the largest and best-run housing authority in the country. I joined them in 1984 and for 15 years played a major role in the construction of public housing in New York City. I was responsible for a development team consisting of city planners, architects, engineers, housing developers and builders. Under my direction, more than 2,500 new units of housing construction were completed with federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

I know that my success on the job was the direct result of my Buddhist practice. My life had purpose and at the center was the need to be a capable person in society. SGI President Ikeda's guidance emphasizes that Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism embraces the universe, the world, reality, daily life and human beings who work to save others from suffering one by one. It is the fundamental source for self-improvement encompassing society and eternity. Therefore, we should live out our lives basing ourselves upon this Buddhism and build a superb existence and a tremendous state of life. Whenever I encountered an obstacle or challenge in my workplace, I would return to this prime guidance, chant with the members and study Nichiren Daishonin's writings.

By 1997, I was at the top of my career both professionally and monetarily. However, my work environment started to change drastically. A rash of new executives appointed by elected city officials came on board to run the Housing Authority. Low morale, infighting and employee firing were at an all time high. Those in power possessed the tendency to control staff and used staff merely as means for their own benefits. These actions were indications to explore looking for a new job, although I had been at the Housing Authority for 15 years. I determined to find a new position by the end of 1998.

In November 1998, I was interviewed by HUD for a Community Builder position. After I participated in the temple issue seminar at FNNC, I was offered a position to start my fellowship at HUD New York office a few months later in March 1999.

Selection as a Community Builder Specialist was the answer to my prayers to find a new position that would allow me to use both my humanistic and technical talents to work for the betterment of society. I am one of 84 Specialists in the country. My primary responsibility as a Property Disposition Specialist is to promote and formulate partnerships among

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leaders from a broad spectrum of the community to increase home ownership especially in under served areas in New York and New Jersey. As a result of my efforts, community groups and local government entities are offered the opportunity to form partnerships to purchase HUD owned single family properties to make the American dream of owning a home a reality.

In performing my duties I am always cognizant of the fact that I am here to serve the client by sharing my experiences. I am very happy that I am able to draw upon my ability as a team leader to listen to the client's concerns and assist them in figuring out how to best use HUD and other agencies' resources to reach their goals.

During the last nine months I have been very happy working on a diverse array of issues. These issues range from organizing and conducting workshops on homeownership opportunities, to educating lenders of the benefits to participating in HUD housing programs, as well as conducting advance work for President Clinton's visits to New Jersey to promote his new Market Initiatives for cities left behind in the economy.

At times the job can be very frustrating because the property disposition program is driven by federal regulations. Compliance to the regulations is a must to obtain the necessary approval and funding. However, through my prayer and as partners working for change and making the dream a reality, we always find a way to resolve the issues and create a win-win situation for all.

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