

**TEACHING “HUMAN”
REVOLUTION ON THE HILL
BY CHELSEA HONDERICH, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

For twenty years, Paula Hendry has taught science to middle and high school students in the Baltimore, Maryland vicinity. She has also served as instructional leader (department chair) for the science, health and technology education departments at Northeast High School in Pasadena, Maryland.

Currently, she is taking a one-year leave of absence to work as a Fellow in the office of Congressman Sherwood L. Boehlert (NY, District 23) in Washington, DC. During this time, she is responding to issues of importance to the people of central New York and learning about federal policy-making. In 1999, she also began working on her Ph.D. in education at the University of Maryland.

Ms. Hendry and her husband, Rob, have been practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism for more than twenty-six years. They both play an active role in SGI-USA activities in the Baltimore area and throughout the Washington, D.C. region. Paula is the newly appointed Region Culture Department Education Committee leader and has also been the woman’s leader of Glen Burnie District. In addition, she spearheaded the education subcommittee for the SGI-sponsored Linus Pauling Exhibition, which is currently showing in Washington, D.C. Through the efforts of this committee, many exciting activities have been held to educate people about the life and contributions of Linus Pauling. Rob, who is a photographer for the Anne Arundel Community College in Annapolis, Maryland, is currently the Baltimore Area Vice Men’s leader.

Everyone knows that education is key to the future of our nation and humanity as a whole. Most are aware, too, of the need to improve the quality of American education to ensure that our youth are prepared for success in the 21st Century. In practice, however, politicians often assign many other issues a higher priority than the proper education of our children; the result is a glacial pace for the implementation of positive changes in education. The brunt of the battle is left to a more grass-roots effort led by some very strong individuals with a passion for delivering quality education despite dwindling budgets and a bureaucratic policy structure.

Paula Hendry is one of those rare individuals who not only recognize this important problem, but are working actively for a solution. As a science teacher of twenty years, she says, “I love to learn, I love science and I care about kids. I feel very fortunate to be paid to do something that I can put my life into.” She often recalls SGI President Ikeda’s guidance, that it is the responsibility of adults to make sure that children create many wonderful memories. She sees schools as key venues for creating such character-forming memories.

Reflecting on her decision to become a teacher, Paula says, “The key thing I have gained from my Buddhist practice is the confidence that I can actually make a difference.” After she started practicing and began looking at her future, Paula knew she wanted a job that would require that she test her limits and expand her capacity. She wanted something that would challenge her to achieve the inner-transformation her Buddhist friends called “human revolution.” She decided to become a science teacher. She was thoroughly aware that teenage students can be very challenging and that teaching requires lots of energy, creativity, and patience. In addition, she struggled with a lack of self-confidence. She had always listened to her five older brothers and sisters, and all of them discouraged her from

going into education, expecting her instead to choose a higher-paying career. It was her Buddhist faith that enabled her to have just one thread of confidence that her own dreams and desires were the best guide for her.

For most of the last twenty years, Paula has waged a valiant daily struggle, waking up early, usually at 3:45 a.m., to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo at least one hour before starting to teach at 7:15. Her aim in doing so was always to interact with her students based on a high life-condition. Although she insists she is not artistically or musically talented, as a science teacher she has been able to develop her creativity by striving to make science fun and interesting for her students. She often felt that she could not relate easily to young people, but she wanted to give her students great memories.

Paula says, “As teachers, we often deal with difficult people — unhappy students who don’t want to be in school or their frustrated parents. But when you are intent on respecting each person and realize that you are going to grow from the encounter, you gain the wisdom, courage and compassion to develop relationships and to change situations for the better.” This, she says, is the main lesson she learned from the speech SGI President Ikeda delivered at Columbia University Teachers College in New York City on June 13, 1996, entitled “Thoughts on Education for Global Citizenship.” In this speech, he said, “Buddhism teaches that both good and evil are potentialities that exist in all people. Compassion consists of the sustained and courageous effort to seek out the good in any person, whoever they may be, however they may behave. It means striving, through sustained engagement, to cultivate the positive qualities in oneself and in others” (August, 1996, *Seikyo Times*, p. 10)

That fall of 1996, she had an early-morning class that was filled with tired and complaining students. After studying this speech, Paula realized something. She explains: “When my students would say ‘I’m cold,’ or ‘I’m tired,’ they were not interested in learning how to name ionic compounds or balance equations. Their reality was the cold or how upset they were at some argument they had with their parents or their boyfriend. If I could even acknowledge their physical or emotional needs, they would understand that I respected them. I began to really listen to them with my heart and I encouraged them to help each other. I began to feel that each student was so important, even those who were not academically oriented. We developed a very close feeling and we had such a wonderful semester together. At the same time, another class was very difficult and made me constantly challenge my tendency to be swayed by people.” While struggling to develop compassion for all of her students, Paula says she has no choice but to improve her own skills and capacity — to do human revolution.

After teaching science for thirteen years, Paula took on greater responsibility at Northeast High School and began serving as instructional leader (department chair) for the science department and two other small departments. At the same time, she continued to teach chemistry — her favorite subject — to tenth through twelfth grade students. The new position required her to help hire, train and evaluate teachers as well as to contribute to the governance of the school. When offered this position, Paula recalls, “I felt a total lack of confidence. When I would even think about becoming the department chair, I would double over with anxiety. The other people in the department were all men, they were almost all older than me and they had all been in the department longer than me.” Again, Paula earnestly chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and sought advice from her SGI leaders. She read President Ikeda’s guidance from his 1990 trip to the United States stating that a

leader should be a servant of the people. She determined to take on the position with the spirit to truly appreciate each person in the department, to fully support them and to help bring out their strengths.

After serving in this position for five-and-a-half years, Paula became aware of an opportunity to learn more about education policy-making from an even broader perspective. She heard about a Fellowship program on Capitol Hill and wanted to apply, but the application process was long and tedious. Her lack of confidence resurfaced, and she became discouraged when she was halfway done. A culture department leader who had recently gone through a similar experience encouraged her that she was fully capable, saying, "You have to apply!" Inspired by her leader's confidence, Paula refreshed her determination and finished the application. She ultimately was chosen as one of twenty-five applicants to be interviewed.

She recalls with a sense of relief, "When I went to interview, I sat before a panel of eight people. It was very intimidating. However, because of my faith, I was able to speak from my heart about the inequalities in our schools, particularly the lack of educational opportunities in America's large cities." Despite this, she felt very discouraged after the interview as many of the other candidates for the fellowship had completed their Ph.D.'s, received book contracts or even climbed Mount Everest. Paula summoned up her determination in front of the Gohonzon. She recalls, "My deepest prayer was that if I can bring President Ikeda's spirit to Capitol Hill, if I can bring the spirit of Buddhist humanism to the Hill, then I really want this fellowship." In July 1999, she became one of four recipients, out of 133 applicants, to receive an Albert Einstein Fellowship to work on Capitol Hill.

Paula says that she now sees the value of taking herself out of her comfort zone and putting herself into a new and challenging environment. Through this experience, she has been able to see more clearly the kinds of changes she needs to make in her life to become a broad-minded, capable person. Although she realizes that the kind of change that can be made on the Hill in one year is incremental, she has learned a tremendous amount about education policy and the workings of the federal government.

As a Fellow, she has visited schools within her congressional district and met with school superintendents to talk about their programs and their relationship to the federal government. These visits have afforded her a completely different point of view about schools and how they operate and the impact of government policy on education. In addition, Paula writes letters to constituents in the congressional district, trying to respond to each person with clear and complete information.

For example, one of the school districts in the congressional district has the largest concentration of Bosnian refugees in the country. The federal government allocated money for job-training and housing assistance for Bosnian adults, but they did not put aside any money for their children's educational needs. The urban schools absorbed hundreds of Bosnian students who had been traumatized by the war and spoke no English. Most urban school systems struggle even without the additional burden of so many refugees. After visiting this district, Paula was determined to pray and find additional money for these students. "Strangely, when I returned to the office I carefully read a publication that I normally discarded without looking at. I found a large grant program that the district was eligible for just two weeks prior to the application deadline. In March, we'll know if they received this grant. Through listening to the school superintendents and making lots of follow-up calls, I also found several hundred thousand dollars that many of

the small districts were eligible to receive, but hadn't applied for because of a misunderstanding."

Paula attributes the courage that allowed her to start a career in teaching to her Buddhist practice. Her practice continued to help her push herself beyond the role of an instructor to one of managing a whole department. And she has grown from there, becoming involved in the process of establishing education policy in our nation's capital. Now Paula is also bringing her life experience back to the SGI and contributing to its efforts to create awareness and dialogue in the community about peace through the SGI-USA sponsored Linus Pauling Exhibit. Because she experienced a lot of death in her family—her parents both passed away before she was fifteen—Paula says she became a teacher because she can feel some of the deep pain that children experience when they are abandoned, mistreated or neglected. "Because of my practice, I truly feel that I have truly been able to change poison into medicine. I have changed from a negative, miserable person into someone who can contribute to society. Because of the encouragement and support of President Ikeda and the SGI members, I have been able to respond to my parents' expectations and hopes for me. I have replaced the devastating sense of loss in my life with joy and hope. I want to continue to expand my capacity to care for others and to create a truly humanistic environment." □