

## EXPERIENCE—CELIA AND MARGRETTE FRANCISCO, ALTADENA, CALIF. JUSTICE FOR JOAN

**Margrette and Celia Francisco achieve justice for their deceased sister, Joan, by courageously standing up and challenging corrupt authority.**

*Margrette and Celia were born and raised in London, England. Margrette came to the United States in 1981 to study, and Celia followed her several years later.*

**Margrette:** Turning poison into medicine is a very difficult attitude to espouse and apply to one's life. A tragic event that occurred in our lives has helped us to understand the value of reaching beyond one's limitations to put this precept into practice.

**Celia:** On Dec. 26, 1994, our youngest sister, Joan, was scheduled to come from London to Los Angeles to visit Margrette and me. Hours before she was to arrive, our mother called from London and said that Joan had been murdered. She was found strangled in her apartment with a vacuum cleaner cord. I became hysterical. My world turned upside down. The only thing that kept me on solid ground over the next five years was my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

**Margrette:** I was also in a state of shock and disbelief. I immediately called one of my seniors in faith and received guidance that was to change the course of my life. The leader told me that I must further develop myself and become a greater human being because of my sister's death, otherwise her life would have been in vain. I made a determination to follow this guidance.

Celia and I flew home to London that same day. What occurred over the next six weeks, as well as the subsequent four-and-a-half years, proved to us the power of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

**Celia:** At the time of our sister's murder, I had been practicing Buddhism for five years. I did not understand why our sister was murdered despite not only my practice, but also Margrette's. Joan was only 27 and a medical doctor. She was beautiful, talented, full of life and fun. She had everything going for her and everything to live for. I started blaming myself. I thought maybe my practice wasn't strong enough or that I should have tried harder to get her to chant more.

I received guidance from a national leader of the SGI-UK. He told me that in each lifetime everyone is born with a mission to fulfill. Once that mission is completed, we move on. He talked about the Buddhist concept of karma. He said Joan's karma governed the nature and circumstances of her life *and* death. He also said that because both Margrette and I chanted, our prayers had directly affected her life and provided protection. In other words, our chanting could have prolonged her life or lessened the horror of the circumstance in which she died.

**Margrette:** From the time we arrived at our mother's home in London, our family was warmly supported and encouraged by the wonderful members of the SGI-UK. Our prayer was that her funeral would show how life could be celebrated in death. We know Joan would have wanted it that way.

**Celia:** The Catholic priest's sermon was very Buddhist in nature. He talked about the eternity of life and analogized the cycle of life, death and rebirth to the cycle of sleep and

awakening. After the funeral, we felt relieved and at peace. We even received comments like “This is the best funeral I’ve ever been to” and “This didn’t seem like a funeral.”

**Margrette:** After Joan’s funeral, which was covered by all of the television networks, we returned to Los Angeles. I was very concerned about how our mother would cope with Joan’s death without Celia and me there to support her. I wrote to SGI President Ikeda asking for guidance about how to encourage our mother from afar. Mrs. Hachiya, SGI vice women’s leader, answered my letter on his behalf. There was one point in the letter that became the guiding force behind all of the action we were to undertake. She said, “No matter how impossible the reality may appear, you must never concede defeat.”

**Celia:** Despite the police’s certainty that Joan’s killer was her ex-boyfriend, there was no forensic evidence linking him to the scene of the crime. He was not charged. It had been six years since our sister had dated this man. But he had stalked her for several months preceding her murder. Police told us that based on this man’s psychological profile, he would soon confess. However, five months later, nothing had happened.

**Margrette:** We began to lose confidence in the police. I was faced with the frightening realization that if there was going to be justice in this case, I would have to take action myself. I chanted desperately for the wisdom to know what to do. It was at this time that I saw a news report on television about another family fighting for justice in the death of their son, who had been murdered by skinheads. I got in touch with their lawyers. After I explained our situation to them, they agreed to take our case for free.

**Celia:** Over the next three years, the police still did not come up with additional evidence. It seemed as if the man we believed responsible for murdering our sister would never be prosecuted. Our lawyer suggested that we file a civil suit against him, which had never before been done in the legal history of the United Kingdom. Usually civil cases are filed as a way to collect damages after a criminal trial, such as in the O.J. Simpson case. We decided to pursue her suggestion.

**Margrette:** In late 1997, to prepare for the civil trial, Celia and I began a daimoku campaign that spread to all of the members of Pasadena District. Seven days a week, we held two-hour chanting sessions in my home, beginning at 5 a.m. Our district also began a 100-day prayer campaign, with every member of the district setting goals and making a determination to chant a minimum of one hour a day for 100 days. Our goal was justice for Joan. We were determined to show through our civil court action that courage and determination were the keys to justice when fighting a system that had failed us.

**Celia:** In March 1998, four years after Joan’s death, we went to court for the civil trial. On the first day, there were more than 40 reporters outside the high court in London. What had started out as our fight had become a much greater issue. On the day of the verdict, I chanted that no matter what the outcome, we would have victory in our hearts for having fought the judicial system against the odds. So when the judge, reading from his 40-page decision said, “We find for the plaintiff,” we were overwhelmed with joy. Our prayers had been answered. Justice had been done. Coincidentally, the verdict was announced on the 100th day of our district’s campaign.

**Margrette:** But we were to find out that our civil court victory was just the first step in the battle. Despite the judge’s decision that there was overwhelming evidence that our sister’s ex-boyfriend was her murderer, the Crown Prosecution Service declined to file criminal charges. The CPS said the evidence used by the civil court was insufficient to meet criminal case standards.

**Celia:** We were angry and disappointed by the CPS decision. But because of our

Buddhist practice, we knew that this was just another obstacle that we had to overcome. We were not going to allow the CPS to dictate the outcome of our battle.

**Margrette:** We investigated the possibility of filing a private criminal prosecution, which can be done in the United Kingdom. However, one of the drawbacks is the expense. The party bringing the action is financially responsible for its cost, which is estimated to be \$350,000 in U.S. dollars. A private prosecution would also require the launching of an aggressive and extensive national fundraising campaign. However, because our solicitors and barristers believed in our battle for justice, they offered to represent us for FREE. There was no doubt in our minds that we were continuing to reap the benefits of our Buddhist practice.

**Celia:** We were also disturbed to learn that despite our civil court verdict, the police had effectively closed the case. We asked for a meeting with Sir Paul Condon, the chief of police in London. In an unprecedented action, he agreed to see us. During the meeting, he assured us that the police would reopen their investigation. In exchange, he asked us to give him 90 days to come up with tangible evidence. If there was nothing conclusive, we told him we intended to pursue a private prosecution.

**Margrette:** Meanwhile, we returned to Los Angeles and continued to chant. Three months later, our lawyer called. A forensic re-examination of the T-shirt Joan had been wearing at the time of her murder found traces of blood and saliva. A DNA test of new evidence found that the saliva was our sister's, but the blood belonged to a man. Joan's ex-boyfriend was brought in for testing. His blood was a match.

**Celia:** Police told us that although they had always known that there was blood on the T-shirt, the DNA testing capabilities four years ago were not sophisticated enough to have yielded the necessary evidence needed for prosecution. We later found out that this explanation was not true. It was given to us in an attempt to cover up the police's oversight during the original investigation, which was either marred by negligence or their racial attitudes.

**Margrette:** Nonetheless, as a result of the new evidence, the killer was arrested, charged with Joan's murder and placed into custody. The trial was scheduled to start Sept. 20, 1999.

**Celia:** Leading up to the trial, Pasadena District members, as well as members from other areas around Los Angeles, came together to participate in three, seven-hour chanting sessions to chant for justice for Joan. Armed with the support of our members and our daimoku, we landed in London ready to do battle.

**Margrette:** Our Buddhist practice enabled us to draw the most fortunate circumstances. Even though Celia and I were not witnesses, the Crown Prosecution took the unprecedented action of paying for our flights to and from London, including the airfare for my son, Lawrence. They also paid for his nursery school, for our lunch on a daily basis, and for our taxi to and from the court. In addition, they gave us a daily allowance. Even after the trial, we were given a car for three weeks and money for gas.

**Celia:** Every morning before the criminal trial started, I chanted that the truth be revealed. During the cross-examination of the defendant by the Crown Prosecution's lawyers, he showed signs of tension and anger. The stories he originally told the police were proven to be lies. Despite his attempts to show the jury that he was calm and collected, he began to show that he was in fact out of control and had an explosive temper, a temper that we believed had caused him to kill our sister. But despite his best efforts, the jury was not fooled. On Oct. 13, 1999, the anniversary of Nichiren Daishonin's death, the

defendant was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. We had achieved justice for Joan.

**Margrette:** After the verdict, *The Voice* newspaper, which is a leading national minority-owned publication that bestows annual awards for major contributions to the community, informed us that we had been nominated for the family award for our efforts to achieve justice in our sister's case. Our mother and I attended the elegant awards dinner. We won and were presented with a beautiful trophy. It was the first time I saw our mother joyful in the years since Joan's death.

**Celia:** In the aftermath of Joan's murder, I look back over the past five years and am amazed by how much value we have created thanks to our Buddhist practice. Within a month of Joan's death, we established the Dr. Joan Francisco Foundation. The charity gives scholarships to medical students, offers a mentor program and hosts annual medical lectures.

**Margrette:** Also, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced a documentary, which chronicled our legal battle. The documentary aired nationwide on Oct. 27, 1999, two weeks after the guilty verdict. During research for the film, the producer found a forensic expert who revealed the information about DNA testing that directly contradicted the story the police had given us.

**Celia:** The BBC film shows us chanting and talking about our Buddhist practice. It documents how our practice enabled us to prevail against seemingly insurmountable odds. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that the BBC did an extremely negative documentary about the SGI and President Ikeda five years ago.

**Margrette:** Since the film aired, people on the streets of London stopped both Celia and me to ask us about chanting. Also, strangers stopped our mother on a daily basis, hugged and kissed her, and told her how encouraged they were by our family's perseverance, courage and dignity.

The documentary, we recently heard, was nominated for three awards.

**Celia:** Because of this practice, our family was able to unite, stand up and fight during the most traumatic period of our lives. It would have been so easy to accept the decision of the police and give up. But our quest for justice was stronger than our quest for an easy life, and all of our efforts to develop our lives will go back to benefit Joan in her next. By chanting daimoku, participating in SGI activities and studying President Ikeda's guidance, I have been able to tap an inner strength I didn't know I possessed.

**Margrette:** The murder of our sister was one of the most difficult things I have ever endured. But at the same time, I have become more capable. I have learned to challenge my fear and self-doubt in order to fight for something I truly believe in. My family fought and won a difficult battle against the world's second largest criminal justice and legal system. We could not have won without using the strategy of the Lotus Sutra and the support of all the members who rallied around us every step of the way.

**Celia:** The greatest lesson I learned from this was simply to never give up on my dreams and goals. Things may get worse before they get better, but it's imperative to have faith and trust the power of prayer. Most importantly I've learned that no matter how impossible the reality may appear, I must never concede defeat.

**Margrette:** Since the verdict, we have written to the British Home Secretary, who is the head of law enforcement and judicial systems in England, asking him to launch an investigation into how our sister's murder was handled by the police, why it took our family's efforts to bring the killer to justice. It is our hope that procedures and programs

will be implemented in the law enforcement and judicial systems to ensure that this will never happen again to another family.

President Ikeda has taught us that we must have the courage to stand up against injustice and challenge corrupt authority. During our quest for justice, we challenged the corruption and indifference of the British legal system that places value on human life based on the color of the victim's skin. Using our Buddhist practice to fight for justice for Joan enabled us to show others that tenacity and determination can truly yield results that are often greater than we can ever imagine, no matter how big or powerful the opponent. Equipped with the insight, skill and knowledge gained during this ordeal, we are well prepared to fight even bigger battles for others. It is our determination that our battle for justice for Joan will bring us closer to creating a society where there can be justice for all.