

TEN YEARS LATER...HOW HAS YOUR LIFE CHANGED?

Participants at the reunion of groups established on Feb. 12, 1990 (please see story p. 1) share how SGI President Ikeda's guidance became a turning point for their lives.

Gloria Richardson, Atlanta: "There have been so many personal changes for me over the last 10 years. For so long, I was practicing this Buddhism based on external things. What would make me happy from the external standpoint? In the last few years, I have really started to understand how to do human revolution as SGI President Ikeda encouraged us to do in 1990. I have started changing the core of my life, not just the surface.

"I think that in the past whenever we talked about benefits, we always mentioned external things: a new car, a new job. Those things were meaningful, but today I realize so much more deeply what this Buddhism is all about. It is to be able to change the fundamental darkness of your life. And quite frankly, it is a very painful process. But because I was able to do it, from here on out my life will be a lot more free.

"Before 1990, many of us felt restricted in so many ways. One reason I was so restricted was that I didn't really understand what happiness was. If you go back to read the 1990 guidance, President Ikeda continually compares relative happiness and real happiness. I want to always be a person who's happy from the inside."

Betsy Cook, Boise, Idaho: "The biggest change that happened to me since 1990 regards the commitment I made then to go back to college so I could teach children. I was inspired by how President Ikeda talked of the importance of education for our future. But it took me a while to make this determination happen. I didn't have the confidence to do it, and I wasn't sure where I would get the support. But I was able to accomplish my dream, and I began teaching a year and a half ago!

"Now, every day, I share President Ikeda's guidance with my fourth graders in the morning. It may sound like a cliché, but I was able to reply to President Ikeda in the best way I could—through teaching, through education. And I love it. It's the perfect thing for me. It's a benefit from the Gohonzon.

"I travel an hour each way to my school, a small, private school in Ontario, Ore. People ask me, how can you do that every day? And I think, well, I chant—and I have a mission. None of the kids I teach are Buddhist, but I'm able to share Buddhist concepts and principles with them in a very natural way.

"Based on my youth division training in the past—we were always encouraged in the young women's division to be really strong and determined, to be true to ourselves—I can relay this encouragement to the boys and girls at my school. I know I'm teaching them academic information, but the social, spiritual and self-esteem issues I can help them with are also real valuable. Buddhism is all about becoming a really capable and happy person. I feel like I'm contributing to the cause of the happiness of young people. I'm very happy and fulfilled."

Earl Cook, Boise, Idaho: "By 1990, I had, as a youth division member, devoted everything to organizational activities with no regrets. Everything I did, I grew from. But still I had this laundry list of gripes and complaints regarding things that didn't feel right about the

organization. It was like I had this checklist. When I heard President Ikeda talk about a new start for our organization in 1990, I felt one by one each gripe was checked off.

“President Ikeda’s guidance also encouraged me to do a paradigm shift in my own life. It was the impetus for me to feel more open about my life and to pursue new career paths. Without the 1990 guidance, I wouldn’t have felt the freedom and courage to make changes in my career. I was very comfortable practicing in the organization I had grown up in, which was in Washington, D.C., my hometown. I never imagined that I would move, but I started thinking of myself for the first time as not just a Washingtonian.

“Ten years ago, I never would have thought I’d wind up in Boise. In Idaho, there’s a very small organization, and it’s far away from any big city—Seattle is 13 hours away. I can see how critically important it is for us to really branch out, to really develop the organizations in the rural areas all over the 50 states. I encourage more members to move to small towns! I feel like my practice has started anew since I moved to Idaho.”

Betsy: “We just appointed our first YWD district leader ever. We’re actually having youth meetings now! The Boys and Girls Group is also growing.”

Janelle Washington, Houston: “That was really an incredible time for the organization when President Ikeda came in 1990. The organization went through so many changes. For me, it was like fresh air. The organization was so different in the 1980s—I was wondering then how long I could continue. When President Ikeda gave us new guidelines for the organization toward the 21st century, it was a moment of relief for me.

“President Ikeda encouraged us to be citizens of the universe. I grew up in the organization in Los Angeles, but after 1990 I decided to transfer with my job to Houston. I work for an airlines and travel all over the place. I now feel that wherever I go in the world, I belong. This is my way to reply to President Ikeda. Wherever I go in the world, I try to connect with the SGI members there.

“My life has really expanded since 1990. I feel like I’m a much stronger person. I still have problems, of course, but my character is much stronger. I don’t freak out as much. I’m more of an adult! There’s this incredible sense of power within my life. I go to the Gohonzon and pray for the wisdom to overcome whatever situation I am presented with. I have also really grown as a person in dealing with racial tension. I learned that I have to take responsibility for not putting myself in the position of playing the victim.”

Carol Pelekai, Honolulu: “I decided to come to this reunion because I always get really encouraged when I meet my friends from these groups, whom I practiced with 10 or 20 years ago. I felt this was my opportunity to see everyone again and make that determination again to fight for kosen-rufu wherever I am.

“The biggest change for me over the last 10 years was having to go into the frontlines and into the community. I never did that as a top leader in the youth division 10 years ago. I was basically concerned with the organization on the top level. But when I went to the grassroots, I realized how much effort it really takes to do kosen-rufu. I realized how much patience it takes to really develop a district and bring the SGI-USA into the community. It made me see President Ikeda and his efforts in a new light. A little bit of what he’s doing in the world, I’m doing in my own way in Hawaii. I feel more appreciative of President Ikeda now—to be part of the SGI’s movement. Going in this direction is how I’ve been trying to reply to the guidance that he gave us in 1990.”