

A REPORT FROM SGI-USA GENERAL DIRECTOR DANNY NAGASHIMA REACHING OUT IN THE PACIFIC

Since early January, I have been away from the mainland of the United States. First, I was in Japan participating in the SGI-USA National Leaders Training Course. Then I went to Guam for the 1st Pacific Islands New Millennium Peace Conference commemorating the 25th anniversary of the SGI. I then traveled through the Pacific Islands, meeting with various Pacific Islands leaders, before going back to Japan to report on these activities to SGI President Ikeda. I returned to Los Angeles in early February. I'd like to share with you some of my experiences in the Pacific Islands.

Guam

Guam is a beautiful island, and is an unincorporated territory of the United States. Twenty-five years ago, Guam was the location for the first conference of the International Buddhist League, which was the event that inaugurated the Soka Gakkai International.

To commemorate the founding of the SGI, and to celebrate the great development of our movement for peace, culture and education, Soka University and the University of Guam worked together to host the 1st Pacific Islands New Millennium Peace Conference. This conference brought together representative leaders from many Pacific Island States, including Guam, the Republic of Fiji, the Kingdom of Tonga, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, the Republic of Palau, and the island states of Chuuk, Kosrae, and Yap. To be honest, I did not know much about this region of the world, and these island states were like exotic locations from the movies.

Not only was this the 1st Pacific Islands Peace Conference of the new millennium, but I believe that it was the very first anywhere in the world in the new century! In addition to the peace conference, many activities were held to commemorate the founding of the SGI, which you read about in previous issues of the *World Tribune*. Among these events were two book donations, a conferral of honorary citizenship on President and Mrs. Ikeda, as well as a conferral of an honorary doctorate from the University of Guam, the dedication of a Friendship Pavilion and a peace monument, and a commemorative tree planting. It was truly an amazing few days, packed with exciting and meaningful events.

I strongly feel that the real seeds of this success were planted 25 years ago by SGI President Ikeda. We are a movement of common people, dedicated to improving our lives and communities based on our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. A quarter-century later, we have gained the recognition, commendation and support from leaders of many cultures, and many different sectors of society. I also felt that this peace conference signified the future direction of our movement: We have the mission to bring people from various cultures and religions together. Our personal practice provides the soil from which we can influence society in a positive, humanistic direction.

I had the good fortune to work with the members of Guam who had worked to organize these events behind the scenes for many months. The SGI-USA organization in Guam is a chapter, and is part of the Pacific Zone. I was so impressed with the amazing capacity that they showed. This comparatively small organization was able to coordinate an activity of international scale. What they accomplished would have challenged many larger SGI-USA organizations in the largest cities in the mainland United States. Yet, based on their sincere prayer and deep desire to make these activities a success on behalf of their mentor,

SGI President Ikeda, the members of Guam united with the chapter leader, Bob Erlbeck, and worked very hard to accomplish an amazing victory. I'd also like to praise the youth division of Guam, a small but very capable core of people. The members of Guam Chapter showed me that based on sincere faith, a small group of committed people can accomplish the impossible.

In particular, I was moved by the experience of one local member, Judith Won Pat-Borjas. Her family has a long history of dedicated service to Guam; her father in fact served for a long time as Guam's representative to the U.S. Congress.

In 1975, when the SGI was formed on Guam, Judith had only been practicing for three months. She had graduated from college in the continental United States, and had just returned home. She didn't really understand much about our organization, but she was determined to participate in those events as much as she could. She said that at the time she was very impressed by how sincerely so many people were seeking President Ikeda, and she wondered how it was that these people could have such a deep feeling for one person. She determined that this relationship was something she wanted to understand for herself.

As you all know, at the conference in 1975, President Ikeda encouraged those people present to dedicate their lives to sowing the seeds of the Mystic Law. Rather than seeking to be blossoms themselves, he encouraged them to dedicate their lives to the happiness of their communities for the sake of the future. These words touched Judith deeply, and she rededicated herself to the spirit of public service. In the past 25 years, with the determination to forge a deeper relationship with her mentor, and with the spirit of service for the sake of her community, Judith has been active as an educator and principal, and served in the Guam legislature for two terms. She has recently retired from her work as a school principal, but continues to volunteer her time conducting training for new teachers. Currently, she is finishing her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership.

In the past 25 years, she has grown and accomplished so much, based on her Buddhist practice. At the occasion of the anniversary activities, Judith played a key role in organizing the various events. Because of the respect and trust she has gained through her contributions to Guamanian society, many government, educational and religious leaders of Guam were able to develop an appreciation for President Ikeda, our SGI movement, and the values we are promoting. In other words, based on her experience 25 years ago, she has made continuous and sincere efforts. Her accomplishments are nothing but actual proof of the power of one person's determination to reply to her mentor.

Republic of Fiji

After leaving Guam, I was invited to the Republic of Fiji, to meet with their president, the Honorable Ratu Sir Kamisese T. Mara. I also met the Minister of Tourism and Transport.

Fiji is located in Western Polynesia, and comprises 332 islands, but only about one-third of them are inhabited.

The president of Fiji is considered one of the great intellects of the region. In fact, in addition to his very long and distinguished career in government, he is also respected as a writer and political philosopher. He, in fact, coined the phrase The Pacific Way in a speech he delivered to the United Nations. Drawing from the rich and diverse native traditions, President Kamisese T. Mara defined this Pacific Way as both a political and spiritual path; as the spirit to embrace and harmonize diversity, to value cooperation and consensus

building among peoples, and to recognize the profound interdependence between humanity and the environment.

The president overwhelmed us with a warm and hospitable welcome. I was deeply impressed by his intelligence and leadership. I learned that in April, the ongoing Pacific Islands summit meeting will be held in Japan, and he will be chairing this meeting. In May of this year, President Kamisese T. Mara will turn 79 years old. But his vigor and commitment belie his advanced age. I sincerely hope that he will be able to share his vision and wisdom for many years to come.

Kingdom of Tonga

After leaving Fiji, I went to the Kingdom of Tonga, a neighbor of Fiji. Tonga is one of the world's few constitutional monarchies, and its citizens are proud of the fact that they are the only country in the South Pacific never to have been colonized by a foreign power. Therefore, they have pursued a path of modern development that is in keeping with the preservation of their cultural heritage. I visited Tonga at the invitation of their king, His Majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV.

Before leaving for my visit to these countries, President Ikeda gave me instructions not to stay very long—he suggested that I shouldn't take up too much of their busy schedules and keep my visit to about 30 minutes. I suspect he was concerned about my tendency to become excited, lose track of time and speak at length. I was determined to follow his compassionate guidance! However, the King of Tonga was such a warm person, and was so interested in learning more about our SGI activities and in hearing about President Ikeda's philosophy of peace that before I knew it, three hours had elapsed! We tried to leave on many occasions, but the King insisted that we stay and continue our dialogue. However, to be honest, the conversation was so interesting that it felt like only half an hour!

One person played a very crucial role in inviting the Kingdom of Tonga to participate in the New Millennium Peace Conference. This person is a longtime SGI-USA member, JD Bogdanoff, who is the chief financial advisor to His Majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV.

JD is a member from the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1993, President Ikeda visited San Francisco and stayed in the area for about a week. During that time, JD worked tirelessly behind the scenes doing everything from construction and maintenance work to organizing events behind the scenes. I was amazed at how strenuously he exerted himself to do anything he could to support President Ikeda's activities at that time. Later he shared with me how inspired he was to meet President Ikeda for the first time, and he determined to lead a life of great actual proof.

At the time, JD worked for the Bank of America; however, he wasn't challenged by his work, and did not feel that his position with the bank was suited to his training or to his aspirations. However, based on his behind-the-scenes support for President Ikeda's activities, he wanted to demonstrate actual proof of the power of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. By showing this kind of proof, JD determined that he would open a way to introduce his mentor to the world. This was not simply based on a feeling of personal affection or loyalty; rather, it was based on an ideal—he wanted to share with others the greatness of a philosophy of peace and humanism that his mentor has demonstrated, a teaching that concretely shows us how to live profound ideals within our daily lives.

It's one thing to have such great ideals. It's another to make these ideals a reality. But

JD believed that you take a stand wherever you are. In his case, it meant challenging himself on a daily basis to create value at his place of work. Through his commendable efforts, he was able to meet the King of Tonga, and gradually earn his trust, finally becoming the King's chief financial advisor. At the same time, because of the high quality of his work and the trust he was earning, he was promoted to vice president of the Bank of America.

More important to him than professional success, however, was the fact that he was able to realize his determination. The great support of the King of Tonga and the entire island for the Pacific Islands Peace Conference and their tremendous support for the SGI and for President Ikeda clearly comes from the efforts of JD Bogdanoff. Through his efforts and the trust he gained, JD truly opened a path of understanding and cooperation.

What I Learned

I am so happy to be home in the mainland U.S., and happy once again to travel around the country to meet and talk with as many of you as I can. The reason is because when I meet the members, I learn so many things about the power of our Buddhist practice and the value of SGI President Ikeda's leadership.

The events in the Pacific Islands in late January were truly meaningful — for me, as one of the representative “common people” who constitute our SGI movement, I feel very strongly that the respect and support we are gaining from leaders around the world is nothing but the result of the efforts of sincere and dedicated individuals, proving that “if the people lead, the leaders will follow.” Behind the great success of our many activities in the Pacific Islands was always a single individual who worked tirelessly and unnoticed for many years, establishing trust and respect through his or her work. Then, at a crucial moment, his or her accumulated effort and fortune resulted in an outburst of praise and respect for the SGI, and for the leadership of President Ikeda.

Since the end of last year, we have been talking about “the power of one,” but in the thousands of miles I've traveled in the past few months, I am seeing over and over again the reality of this. Time and again, countless SGI members are showing that when one person makes a great determination and makes continuous efforts based on their prayer, they can open an amazing, literally unimaginable path of accomplishment. Each one of us has an amazing capacity and an unlimited potential for kosen-rufu. When we pledge to develop ourselves based on President Ikeda's vision for the future, our potential is tapped, and we can blossom fully in our chosen paths.