

EXPERIENCE—ANDREA WEISSENBERGER, SANTA MONICA, CALIF. DISCOVERING MY MISSION

Andrea Weissenberger challenges her learning difficulty and realizes her desire to become an occupational therapy assistant.

School was difficult for me because I didn't understand the material. As a result, I was put into the lowest learning groups. Because I had such a hard time learning, I lacked self-esteem and other classmates teased me. I never knew why I had so much trouble learning. It wasn't until I attended Santa Monica College that I was diagnosed as having a learning difficulty. Recently I have come to view my disability as a difficulty to be overcome. Therefore, in this experience, I will be using difficulty in place of disability.

Eleven years ago, while still in college, I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. One of my first prayers was to overcome my learning difficulty. I graduated with a degree in child development from Santa Monica College and worked in special education for the past 10 years. I enjoyed this field, although working with large groups of special education children proved unrewarding.

I started chanting to fulfill my unique mission and realized that I was more effective working one-on-one. At that time, I worked regularly with occupational therapists and enjoyed carrying out their treatment interventions with the children. Because of this experience, I decided to become an occupational therapy assistant.

I knew I had to go back to school. It would be a challenge because I needed to learn a lot of medical terminology, take difficult classes such as anatomy and physiology, kinesiology and so forth. In addition, I had to complete two fieldwork internships with patients in a clinic and a hospital. I was accepted to Mt. Saint Mary's College Occupational Therapy Program. I took eight units a semester, finishing in two years.

The first year was rough. I quickly found out that the school was not prepared to accommodate anyone with a learning difficulty, even though they had a designated "learning specialist." She was inexperienced; I struggled to help her understand what my needs were and how she could make the accommodations necessary for my classes. For example, I needed extra time for my tests and extra time for writing papers.

I worked full time while going to school, as well as attending my district, Byakuren and other SGI activities. It was challenging to balance everything and still make time to study. My greatest challenge was to overcome my own weaknesses. Throughout the program, I chanted to be disciplined and organized, to find the right students to study with, to get good grades, for one of the two internships to be in pediatrics, and that through my struggle, I would make a difference for other learning disabled students.

There were many competitive students in the program but I was fortunate in meeting one particular student that opened his home to all of us every weekend for long study sessions. I made sure I took advantage of this opportunity. All of us contributed our strengths and we learned from one another. My grades soared. I was even on the honor roll! He was a true bodhisattva! I learned so much from his spirit.

After finishing classes, the next challenge was the two fieldwork internships. I barely made it through the first internship. The fieldwork was so difficult I felt I couldn't complete it. In tears, I called my friend who chants. I really wanted to give up but she

encouraged me to show up anyway whether I had all the treatment plans done or not.

I arrived at the hospital an hour early to prepare for my patients and at times I'd work through lunch to get the treatment notes done. Often I stayed late to finish my charting. I was so anxious I barely slept at night. I met the instructor's challenge. After this steady, concentrated effort, I passed.

The following internship was much better. I felt at home in the pediatric environment. At this time, I was chanting to bring out my creativity. As a result, I designed several original projects to address the patient's unique disabilities. I received an outstanding review, getting highest marks in areas noted as weak in the first fieldwork!

After passing my fieldwork, my next challenge was to study and pass my National Certification Exam in Occupational Therapy. In order to obtain accommodations to take this exam, I needed current testing of my learning difficulty. I was re-tested at Santa Monica College Learning Disability Program.

My learning scores were well above those recorded 12 years earlier. The learning specialist said I made significant improvement in the test scores, and students whom re-test rarely make such progress. I could clearly see the results of my Buddhist practice over the past 11 years.

At this time, I saw a medical specialist who reviewed my testing and medical reports and expected to see someone with low self-esteem and lacking in self-confidence. When he met and talked with me, he commented on how confident and poised I looked. He was impressed with my accomplishments. The doctor encouraged me to tell my story to other learning disabled students.

On March 18, I took the National Certification Exam. I studied for the exam for three months with a good friend I met in class. She came to my home three times each week to study with me. She is a wonderful person and a great study partner. I feel positive and know I did my best on the exam.

After the exam, I received a phone call from a friend of my study partner who has a learning difficulty. She wanted to talk to me about my experience. I was happy to assist her in locating appropriate services. She was relieved and I'm glad she could benefit from my experience.

Throughout this whole experience my mom was my greatest supporter. She picked up a lot of the slack and was there to talk over important matters. She helped me keep a level head. I'd like to thank her from the bottom of my heart.

I found a wonderful quote that describes my chosen field. It is special because, I believe, it is truly Buddhist in nature and thought:

"The whole of human organization has its shape in a kind of rhythm. It is not enough that our hearts should beat in a useful rhythm, always kept up to a standard at which it can meet rest as well as wholesome strain without upset. There are many other rhythms which we must be attuned to: the larger rhythms of night and day, of sleep and waking hours, of hunger and its gratification, and finally the big four—work and play and rest and sleep, which our organism must be able to balance even under difficulty. The only way to attain balance in all this is actual doing, actual practice, a program of wholesome living as the basis of wholesome feeling and thinking and fancy and interests" (Adolf Meyer, 1922).

SGI President Ikeda frequently speaks about life's rhythm, challenging us to "Do something, start something. As you make consistent efforts you will begin to see your goals come into focus. You will discover your mission—the one only you can fulfill" (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, p. 49).