

## **CHALLENGING FINANCES EXPERIENCE—EARNESTINE HARRIS, NORFOLK, VA. PURSUING MY DREAMS**

### **Earnestine Harris gets off welfare and dares to pursue her dreams.**

When I began my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1984, my life was so different than it is today. I was a single mother on welfare with two daughters ages 11 and 2, and living with my boyfriend. I hated my life and felt worthless and inadequate.

This feeling stemmed from the sense of sadness I always had about my father not being around. Though he promised many times that he would come to spend time with us, he never showed up. I would see other kids with their fathers and wonder what that must be like. Our family was so poor, though my mother, grandmother and aunt tried their best to provide for us. When I went to school, the other kids teased me about my clothes and play cruel games to embarrass me, which all made me feel I just wasn't good enough. Though I had dreams of being a model or a dancer, I didn't even feel good enough to try to achieve these dreams because of my very low self-esteem and lack of confidence. When I talked to my mother about my feelings, she encouraged me to pray, and accept my life as God's will. I became a very depressed person.

By 1984, I had been on welfare for five years and had little hope of changing my circumstances. Nevertheless, my sister encouraged me to go to beauty school, which I did and then got my license. While I had a desire to own my own business, I just didn't think something like that could happen for me. Seven months passed and I still didn't have a job.

Around this time, my neighbor introduced me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. She told me to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for my own happiness. I was very skeptical of this Japanese woman but frankly felt I had nothing to lose. As I chanted and attended meetings, I became determined to show actual proof to my family. I started feeling relieved of my depression and more confident.

The time came for me to renew my eligibility for welfare. In the middle of completing the forms, I stopped and told my social worker that I didn't want welfare anymore. She asked me if I had a job already. I told her no, I had Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Of course, she looked at me like I was crazy but I was already feeling that I could overcome the financial poverty in my life. I chanted with the belief "I will get a job."

Right away, things started to get worse instead of better, but with the encouragement from the members that "Winter never fails to turn to spring," I kept on chanting. My family was totally against my practice, and said "this mess"—as they called it—was doing nothing for me. I determined I would try even harder to find out for myself.

Just three days after I received my Gohonzon, I rented a booth at a hair salon. I had no customers and only the money required to pay the first month's rent. Days would go by with no customers coming into the shop but I remained confident and spent the time chanting as I paced back and forth.

Slowly, customers started to come. I had to get money from each customer in advance so that I could purchase the supplies needed to even start the hairstyle. I was only able to collect enough each month to meet the booth rental.

It was at this time that my leader strongly encouraged me to participate in the monthly contribution. This would mean pledging to contribute a set amount each month to support

the SGI organization. I thought she must be crazy. I was already squeezing out \$6 to pay for my publications and did not know where this additional money would come from. Still, I agreed to participate and challenged myself to stretch every dollar. Instead of drinking 7-11 coffee two or three times a day, I saved my money and it added up. Every month I was able to participate without fail. More customers came, and I found that I was able to move out on my own into an apartment with my two children. It felt so good to be able to pay my bills and take care of my family all by myself!

After suffering through so much financial difficulty, I was finally beginning to see a change. So when I heard about the May contribution, I was excited to be able to contribute more. I still have the little yellow container that my district leader gave me for my first May contribution so that I could save all of my change, tips and any other money that I would have spent wastefully. It was such a joy to present this money in support of this organization that had helped me find the guts to pursue my dreams. I did this without expecting anything in return. Since then, I look forward to contributing every year, always giving more money than the year before.

Over the past 15 years, my business has grown to the point that I have my own salon and many loyal customers who have stuck with me through two changes in location. Now, I'm even able to reduce my work schedule to four days and still meet my financial obligations. I am also a proud homeowner and have investments that will allow me to retire someday. I never thought I would have this kind of financial security and I know it is all through my hard work, consistent Buddhist practice and faithful support of this great organization. I am now working toward my next dream, which is to be a fashion designer; I want to make it possible for any woman to afford the total transformation — for a woman to feel good about herself.

In February, I attended the Women's Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. I had an opportunity to hear SGI-USA Women's Leader Matilda Buck's experience. She explained how she discovered the source of the unhappiness in her family and how she found the guts to change it. Listening to her, I realized that I still had anger toward my father and had not forgiven him even at his death. For the first time, I began to appreciate him for giving me life.

Through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and taking bold action, I feel that I have totally changed my life and can provide hope for my daughters that they can do the same. SGI President Ikeda encourages us that "Buddhism is win or lose." I am winning!