

SOKA EDUCATION EXPERIENCE—CRAIG DEROUSSE, MANHATTAN BEACH, CALIF. THE MOST VALUABLE FOUR YEARS

Craig DeRousse attributes his many personal successes to his undergraduate education at Soka University.

Every dream I held close to my heart as a child has come true, and way more! As an SGI kid growing up in Southern California, I often dreamed of attending a Soka school. Visiting Soka University in Tokyo for the first time at age 16, I knew it was the place for me. The awesome thought of an entire school filled with students dedicated to improving their inner selves and working for world peace deeply inspired me.

Since there was no Soka University of America at the time, my only choice was to go to Japan. The problem was, I didn't speak Japanese!

I studied hard, began learning basic Japanese, and graduated from high school early. Chanting up to three hours a day and participating in every possible SGI activity, my life-condition soared along with my GPA and SAT scores. (I even managed to have a social life!) Although my academic success gave me the opportunity to attend any American university I wanted, I headed straight to Tokyo.

I spoke almost no Japanese upon arrival, but Soka University's world-class teachers helped me master the language in one year. I then passed the highest-level Japanese proficiency test and every examination required to enter Soka University of Tokyo as a regular, full-time student. My dream finally came true!

As a Soka University student, I also realized a secondary dream by studying in Spain for six months. In 1994, after excruciatingly hard work, human revolution and millions of daimoku, I became the first American man from the SGI-USA to earn a bachelor's degree from Soka University, graduating summa cum laude.

Last week, while attending a life-changing Florida Nature and Culture Center student division conference, I shared in the struggles and dreams of fellow SGI-USA students from all over America. The conference brought back happy memories of the emotional and psychological benefits of attending Soka University — which, in my opinion, far outweigh the academic benefits.

While the facilities, faculty and every detail of education I received at Soka University was "simply the best," one of the greatest ongoing rewards of my time there is the heart-to-heart bond that exists among Soka University students. Soka graduates are like one huge extended family. In my experience, the profound sense of camaraderie shared by Soka University students is unsurpassed by any other institution of higher learning.

I believe Soka students develop remarkably deep, sibling-like bonds thanks to a school environment that promotes higher feeling in addition to higher learning. Soka schools' guiding principles are based on the humanistic philosophy of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, founder of the Soka Gakkai, so it's only natural they promote the "whole person" development of their students. I am not aware of any other school system that places such genuine emphasis on each individual's personal happiness.

I believe it was this emphasis on the development of my whole being, and the character-building life-lessons I experienced as a result, that has led to my happiness and success in the "real world." After graduation, I returned to America and worked as an SGI-USA staff

member for a few years. I then received a full scholarship from a private foundation to pursue a graduate degree.

I am currently working toward a master of fine arts at UCLA. I also co-founded an Internet service that is now one of the fastest growing sites on the Web. We officially launched on May 3 this year, and now have more than 1.5 million subscribers nationwide. In addition, I authored a book on an unrelated subject that will soon be released by a major publisher. From the bottom of my heart, I know these victories are a direct result of my attending Soka University.

There is so much more I would like to say about the merits of Soka education and the personal successes I attribute to it. Suffice to say that Soka education showed me how to become a happier and healthier person, teaching me to cherish myself for who I am while developing the compassion to respect others for who they are.

Soka education nourished my life as well as my mind. Soka education manifested and celebrated my uniqueness, while showing me how to utilize those qualities to create value in both my personal life and my community.

In case you couldn't tell, I love Soka education and I love Soka University. The pride and joy I feel watching SUA, Aliso Viejo emerge from Southern California, where I was born and raised, defies expression. I am fully confident that SUA will take Soka education to an even greater level than its predecessor in Tokyo has. I and all of my Soka alumni brothers and sisters (more than 400 in the United States now) have been waiting for this day with our favorite teacher, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, for many years.

I hope you or someone you love will have the great fortune to attend SUA now or in the future. If your experience is anything close to what I've gained from my Soka education, it's bound to become the most valuable four years of your entire life.