

SOKA EDUCATION
EXPERIENCE—CAROL DEROUSSE–HOLLADAY, DEL MAR, CALIF.
BEING A SOKA UNIVERSITY MOM

‘I feel immense gratitude toward and deep pride in the Soka school system,’ says Carol DeRousse–Holladay. ‘Not only did Soka University develop my son’s intellect, it developed his wisdom.’

Ten years ago, I really didn’t think I’d ever be writing this article. At that time, my only child, Craig, made his final decision to enter Soka University of Tokyo’s undergraduate program. Although he would be the first American young man to do so, it was not a total surprise to me. Craig had even wanted to attend Soka High School! Nevertheless, I had my doubts it would ever really happen.

After all, upon graduation from high school, he didn’t speak Japanese, and he wasn’t eligible for financial aid from American sources (since he would be enrolled in a foreign school) and he didn’t even have one friend in Japan! Honestly, I thought he would end up at Stanford or UCLA.

I soon learned, however, never to underestimate the power of a student division member. In 1990, I found myself at Soka University, interpreter in tow, attending Craig’s “entry ceremony” to the 20th freshman class. I then realized that attending Soka University was Craig’s calling—an integral part of his mission in life.

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, founder of Soka University, mentioned in his welcome speech that day that the number 20 holds great significance in Japan—indicating “coming of age.” He said that looking out over the powerful group of students known as the 20th class, he felt Soka University had truly come of age. In many ways, I felt both Soka University and Craig had come of age together.

Now, a decade later, as Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo prepares to take its place in the prestigious lineage of Soka schools, I would like to briefly share with you some experiences of being a Soka University mom. I would also like to address some common misunderstandings about Soka schools.

My initial concerns included thoughts like: “Is this school really right for my son?” “Will this school prepare him to do the things he wants to do in life?” “Will he receive the best education his talents qualify him to receive?” After investigating, I discovered that Soka University’s curriculum would indeed support Craig’s goals in life. I also found the faculty to be a group of highly educated, deeply motivated people, dedicated to providing Soka students with the best of everything. Many of Craig’s professors at Soka University had published well-known books and were highly regarded in their fields.

I also learned that about half of Craig’s professors were not Soka Gakkai members. In fact, most of the department chiefs at Soka University are not members. Also, at no time in Craig’s four years there did any class curriculum include the Soka Gakkai. Craig told me the Soka Gakkai was mentioned only briefly as part of one elective philosophy class.

Religion is simply not an issue at Soka schools—there is no quota for members vs. non-members in either faculty or student body. In fact, it turns out that one of Craig’s favorite teachers during his senior year was somewhat biased against the Soka Gakkai. This led to enriching conversations (outside the classroom) for both the teacher and Craig.

Another important question on my mind was “Can we afford this?” To my relief, Soka

University ended up being more helpful with financial assistance than any university I've ever heard of. Although it was not easy, everything worked out in the end.

I feel immense gratitude toward and deep pride in the Soka school system. However, I do feel it's important to understand that Soka University is simply not right for everyone. Just because it's a Soka school doesn't mean it's the best school for every SGI student. In fact, the vast majority of SGI students will never be able to attend a Soka school, simply due to lack of openings. I feel it's also important for SGI members to remember that entry tests at Soka schools are not tests of faith—they are simply entry requirements, like at every other school.

If you or someone you love applies to SUA and is not accepted, or if your dream is to attend another school, or if your circumstances simply lead you elsewhere—I hope you will feel total confidence that your path is the correct one for your life. I believe every student has their own unique mission that will be played out in the perfect environment for them.

Whatever your dreams may be, I hope you discuss the details of your goals with the outstanding staff of SUA before applying. It is my understanding that SUA staff do not want students to attend SUA just for the sake of attending. I believe it is their sincere wish for each student to find the best school for their individual needs and happiness, whether that is SUA or not.

With that in mind, I'd like to close by mentioning some of the greatest benefits I perceive in the Soka schools. Soka education is truly dedicated to creating global citizens. I watched as my son became well prepared to go anywhere in the world and function effectively for the sake of peace, culture and education. His confidence level was high upon entering Soka University, but grew higher than I imagined possible by graduation.

Not only did Soka University develop my son's intellect, it developed his wisdom. The strength of his character, the strength of his friendships with fellow Soka University students, the strength of his convictions to help relieve the sufferings of others throughout the world—these are all unfathomably profound to me, and I give most of the credit for them to his Soka education. Most of all, I am deeply indebted to Soka University for nurturing my son's individuality and encouraging him to respect himself for who he is. As a result, he returned a much happier person after studying at Soka University.

Although I couldn't have imagined it at first, I can now imagine no more appropriate place for my son to have earned his undergraduate degree. It was the perfect time, the perfect place and the perfect school for his mission in life. Now, part of his mission and mine, as one of the first American Soka University moms, is to support both SUA and SGI-USA students everywhere.

In that spirit, I wish for every student reading this to find his or her own perfect time, perfect place and perfect school for their beautifully sublime missions in life, wherever that may be.