

ILLINOIS AREA MEN 'SAVE THE MAN IN THE MIRROR'
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Absolute victory was the goal. Prayer was the foundation. Action was the means. Filled with unwavering determination to prove the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, a dream came true for the men's division of Illinois Area. Hosting their general meeting on Aug. 19, they exceeded all their goals with more than 230 attending, including 55 guests.

The theme of the meeting, Save the Man in the Mirror, was like a battle cry over many months of planning, which concentrated on intense, sincere chanting, then visiting every locatable man in an area that spanned the entire Chicago suburban area all the way to the Wisconsin border, and down to southern Illinois. The results of these painstaking, behind-the-scenes efforts was proven by the brilliant inner transformation of all those involved, and by the conspicuous, overwhelming success of the meeting. Inspired and powerfully motivated by the guidance of SGI President Ikeda, the men's division overcame countless impossible obstacles and extraordinary logistical challenges.

Attending the meeting were Holocaust survivors Lisa and Aaron Derman, who related their compelling stories of being confined to the ghettos in Poland during World War II. Everyone present was spellbound by their account of entire populations of Jews being massacred, including their own families. Mrs. Derman's detailed account of their heroic escape from the hands of Nazi executioners stilled the room. Mrs. Derman is the president of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and Museum, in Skokie, Ill., the largest such organization of its kind in the world. Mrs. Derman and her husband's experiences were featured in an Emmy Award-winning documentary on the Holocaust. Her powerful words cut through all pretense, touching the heart of every person attending. Mrs. Derman was emphatic in her encouragement to create a world that would never allow such tragedies to occur again. Her wise and potent advice was simple: "Stand up. Do not be silent. Silence is evil."

The meeting also included the presentation of awards for Illinois Area pioneers whose many struggles over the past 30 or more years had made the day's meeting possible. The women's division chorus sang an original composition titled "Heroes," which perfectly coincided with a congratulatory message from SGI-USA Women's Leader Matilda Buck that referred to the men's division as heroes of the SGI and of life.

Reggie Morris of Waukegan, Ill., poured out his soul to a rapt audience about his personal battle of confronting and overcoming a debilitating addiction that had broken up his family, destroyed his career and left him homeless. Through the encouragement of his SGI friends, Reggie renewed his practice in the SGI-USA and rediscovered his faith. Over the course of six years, he rebuilt his shattered life into one of supreme confidence, restoring his family, and now commanding an exempt-level position with pharmaceutical giant Abbott Laboratories.

A panel discussion was held and two men who had recently taken faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism gave spontaneous experiences. The first man was the husband of a Japanese women's division member who had practiced in the SGI for many years. He had been neutral to her practice, preferring to rely on his own logic and abilities to deal with life's challenges. A problem appeared in his life that was beyond the powers of logic, will or ability. He was referred to the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Inspired tremendously, he embraced the practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism and completely overcame his great problem. A college professor then spoke of his consistent involvement with the peace movement since the 1960s. Having been an integral part of many of the grassroots peace movements for more than 40 years, he proclaimed that there is no peace movement in the world to rival the greatness of the SGI.

To everyone's delight, a congratulatory message was read from President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners John H. Stroger, Jr. His message praised the Illinois Area Men's Division for their "commitment to the values of peace, culture and education." His insightful words encouraged the participants: "Be proud of your growth and be mindful of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and prosperity within your community."

SGI-USA Vice General Director Darnell Pulphus closed the meeting by relating how the power of Buddhahood found in chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo relieves people of all suffering and conquers evil. The consensus of the participants was that the success of this meeting was not an end, but a beginning to even greater things to come.