

## HAWAII'S 40 YEARS — A JOURNEY FOR WORLD PEACE WE DID IT!

The pioneers of Hawaii share how they built the organization's foundation with their mentor, SGI President Ikeda.

**Tom Hara:** I went to meet President Ikeda at the Honolulu Airport the evening of Oct. 1, 1960, because my leaders in Japan had written encouraging me to do so. [Mr. Hara was the only member to meet President Ikeda's party at the airport. The other members, whom Mr. Hara had not met yet, did not show up because they had received some misinformation about the flight's arrival time.]

When I saw President Ikeda, I said, "I am youth division member Tom Hara." He said, "I know you!" We had met two years before that in Japan.

The *Seikyo Shimbun* that my sponsor had sent me about President Ikeda's visit said that four people were coming, so I had prepared four leis. But there were six people!

The *Hawaii Times* came in to take a picture of them to announce that Soka Gakkai leaders were visiting. I remember that President Ikeda and his party was wearing overcoats. In Japan in October, it is kind of cold. And I do not think that they had the correct weather information—Hawaii is always warm, but they had heard that Hawaii would be like New York in November!

I had given them the leis, so I was about to leave. Then a voice said, "Wait...." I turned around, and it was President Ikeda. He said that I could stay at the Kaimana Hotel with them. But I was supposed to stay at a relative's house close to the airport. I started to leave, and then President Ikeda said, "Let's meet at the Kaimana Hotel tomorrow." Then I had to go. That is how I welcomed President Ikeda.

The next day, Oct. 2, everyone met President Ikeda at the hotel, and the first discussion meeting was held that night.

**Mitsue Rife:** The first time I met President Ikeda on Oct. 2, 1960, at the Kai-mana Hotel, I really knew nothing about him. I had no preconceptions.

But I was so impressed by his character. Every time I met him from then on, I was more and more impressed. In those days, he was so young, but he had such capacity. In the bottom of my heart, I was determined that I wanted to learn from him throughout eternity.

**Nobuko Ishiro:** After the first discussion meeting, President Ikeda said, "If anyone has any more questions, please feel free to meet with me at the hotel later." Harry Hirama, the first district leader, and I went.

There were not so many restaurants open that late. I thought that Ms. Kashiwabara, who was accompanying President Ikeda, might be hungry. So I made rice balls at home and then went. President Ikeda was hungry too, because he had not had time to eat.

receive the Gohonzon from Japan for the members. Soon, the Soka Gakkai started sending us the Gohonzon when we sent in the applications.

**Sheila Mier:** Back in 1962, my mom was searching for a solid religious practice or faith. She was struggling with bad health. Mr. and Mrs. Kawamoto invited us to a Buddhist meeting. We were farmers and lived close to the Kawamotos.

I drove my mother to the meeting because of her poor health. Mr. Kawamoto spoke to my mother about her health. My grandmother gave my mother her blessing to practice Buddhism—this is rare in Hawaiian culture.

That is how my mother joined. I was 14 years old, and I became curious because they talked about happiness and fortune—things I never heard a religion emphasize.

It was good to see my mother stick with it over the past 38 years. She has overcome two major bouts with cancer. She is now 86 and has lived through so much.

We now have four generations in our family who practice. My mom had many people oppose her in her family, but one by one they came to understand. My mother was able to share Buddhism with many Hawaiians in the community.

**Mariko Ueno:** I met President Ikeda in January 1963, when he came to Hawaii for the second time. I did not know who he was. I did not even really know what the Soka Gakkai was, because I joined on Dec. 26, 1962.

Somebody encouraged me to go to Kaewai Elementary School for a meeting. I sat in the back in the cafeteria. I remember when President Ikeda came to the stage, he did not want to talk to us from above, so he came down to talk with us. I thought, “This man is different than other leaders.” I got a warm feeling from this man.

After the meeting, he came to meet us outside. He passed by me, and our eyes met. Once again, I felt such a warm feeling from his life. I became interested in practicing Buddhism from that time, and I started to go to district meetings. Slowly, I got involved. I am glad I did!

**Roy Oda:** I joined in June 1963. The reason I decided to was that, although it was a Buddhist religion, at my first activity I saw so many Caucasians, like T.J. Rife or John Kindt, talking about Buddhism. I had expected that mostly it would be older Asian people explaining Buddhism, but they were young Caucasians. They knew so much about Buddhism. Mr. Hiram was there, but he did not say too much—he did not have to, because all these people like Mr. Rife were doing a great job.

I grew up in another Buddhist sect, but they never actually taught us about Buddhism, about the philosophy. That is why I became curious and decided to give the Soka Gakkai a try. I was the 26th young men’s division member to join in Hawaii.

What kept me going was that I kept meeting different people and hearing their different experiences. Those were great to hear. The more I attended the meetings, the more I thought: “Well, I have listened to so many good experiences that the members have. What

all of us on the lawn. And he came out to see us.

We were all trying to sit Japanese-style, but he said: “Relax! You don’t have to sit that way!” He talked to us and answered our questions. We were in shock—that was a great moment. I really wanted the YMD members to have that chance to meet with President Ikeda.

The Hawaii YMD came to be known as the Pineapple Corps. We all wore white shirts and black ties then. And the ties had pineapple-shaped tie tacks.

**Melvin Padayhag:** What impressed me at my first meeting in 1963 was an explanation of the three proofs in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism: literal, documentary and actual. And I learned that actual proof was the most important—that got me interested.

So I attended my second meeting two weeks later, which was a young men’s meeting, where I first chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Hawaii was only a chapter at the time.

From the 1960s until now, we have shared this Buddhism with a lot of people. And we have always emphasized actual proof.

**John Kindt:** As far as I am concerned, if it were not for Mr. Hiramama, I would not be an SGI-USA member today. He was the type of person I could talk to anytime.

Mr. Hiramama is the person who kept me and a lot of the members going who could not speak Japanese. Most of these members were in the military. He was able to explain Buddhism to us. He could explain what the Soka Gakkai was. People complained all the time, and he listened to their complaints. And he would give them satisfying answers. That is why they kept developing.

President Ikeda placed a lot of responsibility on Mr. Hiramama. No one had the affect on the members that he had. We could relate to him. He really listened to President Ikeda’s guidance, and he passed that guidance on to us. That was very important to us.

**Ryuko Hiramama:** In 1974, right before the San Diego convention, Mr. Hiramama collapsed. He was unable to meet President Ikeda at the convention.

We did not think that President Ikeda was going to visit Hawaii, but hearing about my husband’s condition, he stopped by on his way back to Japan. When he saw Mr. Hiramama, President Ikeda acted just like my husband was his own son. He really prayed to the Gohonzon for my husband’s recovery, and my husband lived several more years.

I felt that President Ikeda’s concern for my husband—and for all the Hawaii members—was more than our own parents’. Whenever my husband and I had a crisis, President Ikeda warmly encouraged us. Mr. Hiramama and I gained the confidence that no matter what happened, we would never be swayed.

**Albert Mier:** In 1975, we had a pre-bicentennial convention in Hawaii. I was in charge of the warehouse. I was halfway between YMD and men’s division. Many disasters happened along the way, but I took full responsibility for it all. I chanted so much.

successful convention. President Ikeda is a great leader who, no matter how far away we are or what we are doing, knows what we are going through. There is no other organization in existence today where a member can feel such a connection to the central figure or mentor.

**Aileen Oda:** One thing I have learned as a pioneer of Hawaii—that I really want to share with the youth—is that, no matter what, you should never leave the family of the SGI. People in Hawaii are very open. That is why people here were able to create a great family atmosphere in the organization. That is the Aloha spirit that makes the SGI-USA in Hawaii great. No one should ever leave this wonderful family!

**Kimiko Kindt:** I am doing activities with Mrs. Hiramama now, because she cannot drive. I make appointments for her to do home visits all over, and I take her. I help at the culture center front desk and the bookstore, too. I would like to do even more activities, but my problem is there are too many things that I like to do!

When I joined, I wanted to have children, but I lost three times. However, now I can see that I have the greatest family. All the Hawaii members that I have had the fortune to take care of are my family. I do not like it when people try to take care of me—I like to take care of other people. That is why I am still healthy today, and I am getting younger!

Of course, the pioneer times and today are a lot different, but I can never forget what I learned as a pioneer—to have faith in the Gohonzon and to put President Ikeda's guidance into action.

**Susan and Minoru Nishida:** What we learned as pioneers of Hawaii is that when you have problems, don't give up, no matter what. Stick with the Gohonzon and the SGI. All your prayers will be answered.

**Nora Padayhag:** Our family has had a lot of actual proof over the years from this practice. In 1965, I attended my first SGI meeting while I was visiting my sister, who was a member in Los Angeles, although she couldn't attend. I'll never forget the great experiences I heard at that meeting, especially that of a new member who overcame paralysis of half of her body. In December of that year, I started practicing. I used to think that life was so boring, a routine of work and partying on the weekends. But joining the SGI changed my life for the better!