

Nurturing Creative Disciples



Youth Performance Groups Conference 2000



by Willie Mack,
Los Angeles

The SGI-USA youth performing groups met at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, July 6-9, for an amazing conference. For 85 percent of the participants, it was their first visit to the FNCC while 70 percent were under age 18.

The various youth performing groups were represented—the Music Corps, Fife and Drum Corps, dance groups, Taiko Drummers, a martial arts group, and theater groups. There were also youth not yet part of a group but determined to start one in their region. Participants came to the conference in an effort to deepen their understanding of SGI President Ikeda's spirit through their talents and to deepen their faith and understanding of Buddhism.

There were a total of five conference sessions, each of which was filled with dialogue about friendships, school, work, relationships

and the development of performance groups.

Session 1 was a lecture on the mentor-disciple relationship by SGI-USA Youth Division Leader James Herrmann where he shared his personal experience with SGI President Ikeda and his continuing efforts to develop this relationship.

Some key points that James made were:

- ❖ a mentor helps the disciple discover his/her identity;
- ❖ discover who you are through the mentor-disciple relationship by breaking through your ego and recognizing not only your own potential, but also the potential of others;
- ❖ the responsibility of the disciple is to seek out the mentor's heart;
- ❖ the mentor-disciple relationship cannot merely be understood at a conceptual level, rather, it is best understood and appreciated through continuous struggle and hard work.

Conference sessions 2 (Our Vision for the Future) and 3 (Cultural Expression of Bodhisattvas) consist-

ed of break-out sessions. During this time, participants shared experiences of practicing in their regions, their hopes and determinations for their respective groups and overcoming various struggles within their lives through daimoku and participating in activities. They also studied President Ikeda's "Precepts for Music Corps" and "Angels of Peace" (a poem written to the Fife and Drum Corps). Each person thoughtfully and sincerely answered the question: "How can we inspire members through our performances?"

During the divisional conferences (meetings by gender), one young man admitted he was struggling with understanding other young men and as of yet, he had never been able to bond with them. However, through the dialogue, he felt he was bonding with other young men for the first time. It was a definite breakthrough. Other experiences included overcoming difficult family situations that seemed hopeless only days before.

On Saturday, there was a Soka Spirit session presented by mem-

bers from San Francisco done in a talk show format with a panel that included SGI-USA Student Division Leader Daisaku Leslie and SGI-USA Music Corps Leader Andy Matsuda.

That evening, at an incredible talent show, there was a profound feeling that everyone was performing together; no one was left to perform alone.

During the final session where members gave their impressions of the conference itself, one young woman, deeply moved, said, "I have changed my life not only in this life, but all my lifetimes to come." Another shared her struggle in overcoming her fear of sharing this practice with others, saying, "Now I can tell people I'm a Buddhist."

The unity and friendships created over the weekend were incredible. No one wanted to leave—people spent hours saying goodbye. Everyone left with a new spirit to fully challenge themselves to seek out President Ikeda's heart and develop into youth that will touch people's lives through performance. ♪

SGI President Ikeda's Message to the FNCC Youth Performance Groups Conference:

Expand Your Network of Friendship



I would like to convey my sincerest congratulations on the holding of your hope-filled Youth Performance Groups Conference. In addition, thank you always for your continuing efforts.

Youth possess infinite strength. Boundless hope and a promising future await you. Buddhism teaches the source of hope. Therefore, I would like each of you, the youth of SGI-USA, to live out your youthful years like strong-hearted kings and queens.

With these strong hearts that you have developed through faith, please value "friendship" above all. Nichiren Daishonin states, "You have associated with a friend in the orchid room and have become as straight as mugwort growing among hemp" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 23). As this passage explains, the bonds among good friends in faith will enable you to shine and to follow a correct course in life. With hearts of strength and

richness, please chant sonorous daimoku and walk with dignity straight along the path of kosen-rufu, engaging in SGI activities freely and to your heart's content.

Please be convinced that your performances will express the bright, fresh life force that you have polished through faith, giving hope and courage to many people.

I pray that you will thoroughly enjoy your conference as you expand your network of friendship.

Please give my warmest regards to those who could not participate in today's conference.

Daisaku Ikeda
July 6, 2000

Impressions from the Youth Performance Groups Conference



John "Amante" Pequese, San Francisco

On my way to the FNCC, I was dealing with my low life-condition, but during the flight, I began to change because I realized the major cause that I was making by attending this conference. I looked at the powerful youth members that were with me and thought about all the fellow youth I would be meeting from around the country and the fact that we would be united.

Upon my arrival, I met so many great people that encouraged me. I thought of how significant it was that youth were gathering from across the nation to discover and create causes toward our missions in the kosen-rufu movement through the art of performing.

I was so happy that we were able to fulfill SGI President Ikeda's desire to "value friendship." We not only valued our existing friendships, but also established new ones.

The unity of all the groups reminded me of my inner-potential to develop as a strong individual. Through the conference, I made the determination to support the San Francisco Red Phoenix Drama Group so that we can become stronger in faith and make consistent efforts to develop a personal connection with President Ikeda.

I would also like to offer my deep appreciation to all the supporters and participants of the Youth Performance Groups Conference who made it such a success. Thank you all very much! ♪



Martin "Free" Ramos, Los Angeles

I finally understand what everyone says about the FNCC experience. It is truly life-changing. I will forever treasure the bonds of friendship I developed there, knowing that we are all brothers and sisters in faith who will see one another at next year's conference and every conference after that! Thank you to everyone who attended for sharing your lives with me and allowing me to share mine with you!

I love you all! ♪



Shante Berrios, Las Vegas

Upon arrival at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, I must admit I was pretty negative. I had been through so many obstacles to get there, and they had taken a toll on me. My Buddhist practice was not strong, but I was fighting hard within my dance group. I didn't realize that without a strong Buddhist practice (no matter how many activities I did), I would not truly become happy.

During the conference, I made many lifelong friends. I saw people from all over display their great talents. Their fighting spirit inspired me so much. Through their inspiration, my own fighting spirit returned and I was able to battle a knee injury and participate in everything. Through this conference, I realized the importance of having friends who practice this Buddhism.

Throughout the weekend, the lecture and dialogue about the mentor-disciple relationship showed me how fortunate I am to have my mom and grandmother practice and, most of all, to have SGI President Ikeda. I now realize how much he cares about all of us. He dedicated the FNCC to everyone so that we can refresh our practice and build great friendships. His spirit is what will continue to propel me to work for kosen-rufu forever. ♪



Reisha Boqan, Chicago

This was my first time attending a conference at the FNCC. I can truly say that I had the best time of my life. The emotions I feel from the friendships I made are overwhelming. The bonds that were created with both the leaders and members I met from all over the United States will last forever.

I now have a stronger determination to stand up in Chicago to increase the participation of youth in the "Era of Humanity" dance group and also to encourage and support them in attending the next Youth Performance Groups Conference.

I left the FNCC with a better understanding of Buddhism and why I practice. I also have a greater desire to study. I will treasure this experience forever. ♪

(See page C for another Impression)

Ashley's Experience

Albany, N.Y

Hil! My name is Ashley Bunn and I am 13. I was pretty excited to go to the FNCC for the Youth Performance Groups conference. It was my first time going somewhere without my family. I had heard people share how attending conferences at the FNCC had changed their lives. I was skeptical at first, but I really began to seek that "Soka Spirit" and hoped I would feel it once I got off the bus.

On the first day, it never really struck me that I was in Florida at the famous FNCC, but I began to feel a bond with my fellow participants. I still felt somewhat alone, but I wanted to dive right in so I could get that life-changing experience that everyone talked about. The people there were so great. It was as if I had known them for years — and I learned almost everyone's name. I just felt so at home, like they were my family, my friends, even my best friends. It was the best time of my life!

I've always known how much of a privilege it is to be Buddhist, but never truly felt it in my heart. It was as if I was hiding a secret. However, connecting to other Buddhists my age at the conference actually made me proud to be a Buddhist. All my life I have lived with so many insecurities about myself and how I looked. But there I was and I didn't have any insecurities. It was always a lot easier to try to be someone I wasn't than to honestly look at myself. I guess you could say that I would act as if I was superior to everyone around me to help me feel better.

As a result of this conference, I found a new me and I love it. The friends I made at the FNCC helped me see that I wasn't a princess or better than anyone else. I was just the same as they were while at the same time unique in my own way. I gained more confidence in myself and wasn't scared of what people thought.

On Saturday, there was a talent show — my life-changing experience.

I had no shoes (because they got stolen at the beach when I went sightseeing earlier that day) and no hairdryer so I couldn't fix my own hair. Then I did something I'll never forget. I dropped into the chair in front of the mirror in my room and started to cry. I was going to sing and, usually, I don't get nervous before a performance because everything is always perfect. But this time was different. I was faced with what I thought at the time were major obstacles. I started to chant to have the confidence to change my situation.

After chanting for a while, I felt different. I got up, wiped the tears from my eyes, did my make-up, put my hair back, got my music and left my room. I was still scared, but somewhere in my mind I became confident that everything would be okay. I determined that if I had to perform bare-footed, I would; if my hair got messed up, I would put it back; and if my make-up faded, then that would just be less that I would have to take off my face at the end of the night.

When it was my turn to perform, it was as if my bones were rattling. Everyone was taking pictures and recording the performance on their cameras, and when the emcee called my name,

it was like a dream. Everyone was so supportive and made me feel so comfortable. It was as if nothing could go wrong and nothing did go wrong. I gave an incredible performance and so did my newfound friends in the talent show.

Then, on the last day, it really hit me when I was chanting — I was at the FNCC and just had the best time of my life. I felt so happy and yet so sad. I started to cry again. I was happy because I met friends for life and people I will never forget. But I was also sad because I didn't know when I would ever see any of them again.

However, I know now that because I chant and practice with the SGI, I will always be with my new friends! We are connected through our hearts and our daimoku. Also, a member from Los Angeles inspired me to develop a chorus in Albany. This has become my determination: to develop a chorus in Albany and bring them to the FNCC so they can experience the same kind of joy and Soka Spirit that I felt, still feel and always will.

I would like to say a special thanks to my father because without him it would not have been possible for me to attend the conference. And of course, thank you to everyone else who made it possible for me to go to the FNCC.

To everyone who hasn't been to the FNCC yet: You should try to go because it really does change your life. ♪



(Impressions continued from page B)



Traci Wilson,
San Francisco

"Now is the time to greatly expand your state of life and begin your real struggle for kosen-rufu. Please challenge every difficulty earnestly and try to embrace everyone around you warmly. Laugh off any unpleasantness you encounter and forge ahead boldly" (*The Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 38).

I truly believe that nothing but daimoku and my faith in the Mystic Law could have prepared me for this wonderful journey. I had no idea what to expect. All I envisioned was a warm tropical setting with every amenity I would ever need for the four days

at my disposal (including air-conditioning and a swimming pool). What else would a girl need?

Well, this girl realized during four heavenly days with youth from all across the country how very important it is just to be "present" and listen to somebody, or just know when someone needed a hug or a smile. I remember my friend telling me that when you get to the FNCC President Ikeda's spirit is so present that you can feel it.

The first evening, I remembered being excited and could barely wait to do gongyo. During gongyo, I was so focused on the Gohonzon and its beautiful home that I felt tears well up inside of me, blurring my vision. I knew at that moment that I had felt what was in President Ikeda's heart.

This meant to me that all my dreams and goals I set for myself in preparation for this conference were attainable through my sincere efforts at this conference and the friendships I made would be everlasting.

The imagery of all the bright,

smiling, crying, joyful, determined faces will stay with me. I am forever indebted to all the youth and leaders who attended this conference and I will never forget the staff and volunteers that cleaned up after us all. Peace and blessings! ♪

MATERIAL REQUEST

SEND IN YOUR STUFF
Our youth publication is only as strong as what you bring us.
Poems, Articles, Pictures, Stories, Commentaries, Pulitzer Prize insight ... whatever you got, get it to us.

HOW?

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SGI-USA
Attn: Kim Herrmann
Seize the Day
606 Wilshire Blvd.
PO Box 1427
Santa Monica, CA 90406-1427

Email:

seize@sgi-usa.org

Announcing New SGI-USA Youth Music Groups Leadership



**SGI-USA Youth Division Leader,
James S. Herrmann**

Since the 1960s, Youth Music Groups in America were composed of Music Corps for young men and Fife and Drum Corps for young women and had completely separate leadership. When I first started participating in SGI activities as a young men's member, my first activity group was the Music Corps (formerly called the Brass Band). The support I received and the friendships I developed in those days still remain today.

However, in various parts of the country, Youth Bands have emerged as a co-ed activity. In other words, those groups now involve both young men and women, adding a new dynamic to the SGI-USA Youth Music Groups. Since the establishment of the Jr. High School and High School

Division in 1993, it has become natural for young men and women to meet together and encourage one another. Moreover, the majority of our Youth Music Groups' members today are also 18 years old and younger.

In support of this grass roots movement, a new SGI-USA Youth Music Groups leadership team and structure was recently announced to reflect these growing changes. This leadership team consists of co-leaders, a vice leader and a secretariat.

This new structure does not suggest that the groups who are now functioning separately as Music Corps and Fife and Drum Corps must combine. Rather, the Music and Fife and Drum Corps, along with Youth Bands, will now be supported by and fall under the leadership and coordination of the new SGI-USA Music Group Leaders.

It is our hope that through this new beginning we will be able to better support and nurture existing groups as well as foster many new groups across the country. ♪

Inspiration and Hope Through Performances

SGI-USA Youth Music Groups Leader, Andy Matsuda

Since my appointment as SGI-USA Vice Music Corps leader two years ago, it has been my privilege and honor to work alongside Daisaku Leslie and Emy Mukumoto. During those two years, I have witnessed both Daisaku and Emy working tirelessly for the sake of their respective groups.

Likewise, in my new responsibility, together with Emy, Jason and Willie, I am determined to work even harder for the sake of the development of the SGI-USA Youth Music Groups. I am praying for the growth of each individual Youth Music Groups member as well as the growth of their respective groups. It is my hope that new groups will continue to develop across the nation giving hope and inspiration to every corner of our organization.

Recently, in the series *Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra*, SGI President Ikeda talks about Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound: "Through his august form and with his music, Wonderful Sound lets all present know of the incredible benefit of the Lotus Sutra. He expresses the invisible state of life he has attained in such a way that anyone can understand, in both a visible and audible form. It comes down to expression; unless we express ourselves clearly, others will not understand. Take love as but one example. If you keep your feelings to yourself, the other person will never know! It is only by conveying to others in some way the state of life we acquire through faith that they will receive our light." (March



*Newly appointed SGI-USA Youth Music Groups Leaders
(from left to right: Andy, Emy, Jason and Willie)*

Living Buddhism, p. 33).

It is also my determination that through our performances, we can inspire this type of expression in everyone. Our pure-hearted performances will give abundant hope to those who are suffering and our lives, overflowing with joy, will encourage people to share their confidence in the Mystic Law with everyone around them. I look forward to working together with all of you to make this a reality. ♪

New Departure for Youth Music Groups

SGI-USA Youth Music Groups Leader, Emy Mukumoto

I have been the SGI-USA Fife and Drum Corps leader since March 16, 1998. I appreciate the time I have spent working alongside Daisaku Leslie, who was the SGI-USA Music Corps leader. For more than 17 years, I have been a part of the Fife and Drum Corps and have seen many changes throughout this period of time.

This new national leadership structure is a fresh departure for the Youth Music Groups, and I am hon-

ored and proud to be a part of this team of leaders. It is my determination to challenge myself and work tirelessly for the youth members in each group comprising the Youth Music Groups, supporting them in any way I can. And I am determined to share all that I have learned with them and vow to work together with Andy, Jason and Willie. ♪

Leaders of Kosen-rufu

SGI-USA Vice Youth Music Groups Leader, Jason Berg

Based on the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, it is my greatest hope that the SGI-USA Youth Music Groups will lead the kosen-rufu movement in America. I am praying that each of us develop unshakable conviction and faith in the Mystic Law, developing a direct connection with SGI President Ikeda. In addition, I pray that each of us form bonds of indestructible trust and friendship, fighting 100 percent within the SGI, 100 percent in our jobs, 100 percent in school and 100 percent in our families.

In areas where there are no Youth Music Groups, let's start them! In

areas where these groups already exist, let's double our participation! For the culture festivals next year, I encourage each Youth Music Groups member to bring one friend to participate with them, becoming confident in sharing this philosophy with others.

And my personal resolve is that I will not begrudge my life and that I will help realize my mentor's dream. ♪

Surpass Your Limits

SGI-USA Youth Music Groups Secretariat, Willie Mack

When I was first told that I would be appointed one of the SGI-USA Youth Music Groups leaders, I wasn't very excited. Quite honestly, I was scared and did not really feel I was the right person to do it. However, I chanted and accepted this responsibility with the determination to challenge myself, not only as a leader but also to become a better person.

A friend shared with me the following guidance from SGI President Ikeda: "Never forget that other people are other people, and you are you. You mustn't feel envious or jealous of others...Please forge a solid, unshakable self-identity. The important thing is to always concentrate fully on the challenges at hand. If you do that, your mission will reveal itself to you naturally..." (*World Tribune*, 9/10/99, p. 6).

With this in mind, it is my determination to work together with Andy, Emy and Jason and create a SGI-USA Youth Music Groups that surpasses all others throughout the world. ♪