

We Are the Hope of the World



Junior High/High School Leadership Conference 2000

Participants at this jam-packed conference, already taking leadership in their hometowns, came to deepen their understanding of and commitment to helping others.



By Shan Serafin, *Seize the Day* Co-Editor

“We Are the Hope of the World”

was the bold theme of this year’s Junior High/High School conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. Judging from the feedback and reported impact from around the nation, members at this conference underwent life-changing growth.

From day one, things got off to a booming start...literally. Midway through Thursday afternoon, when most of the participants were arriving at the Florida airports, a massive thunderstorm cracked down. Flights were delayed and planes had to re-route for fuel. But most participants were too excited to be inconvenienced. Members like Alex Castro from California, who endured an onslaught of rejections seeking jobs to pay for airfare, and Kristina Davis of Massachusetts, also fighting to get to the FNCC, were bursting with smiles just being there. Both of them managed to find money for the trip at the very last minute, in clutch victories.

Friday morning began with a lecture by SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima. Danny flew out to Florida solely to attend this one session. He returned home later that day, leaving behind 180 wiser participants. He discussed the writing “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the

Peace of the Land” and the profound connection between Nichiren Daishinin’s life and the spread of Buddhism 700 years later. Whew!

Next up was a choice: participants attended either a session on leadership or a session on being the “Amazing Teen.” The leadership session, as Andrew Steiner of Seattle put it, “reinforced everyone’s understanding of real responsibility.” The “Amazing Teen” session, consisting of small discussions on both the suffering and unlimited potential of young people, allowed members to share intimate dialogues on key issues.

Participants then had another choice, this time between “The Creativity Workshop,” a session helping future leaders practice conducting their own creative activities, and a Victory Over Violence session, wherein young people assembled in small groups to share their struggles with and triumphs over violence.

The day culminated with a great session on the basics of Buddhism. The room lit up with input as people shared various questions they’d been asked about this religion. It became clear that teenagers are hit with a broad range of questions, from odd interrogation like “Do you chant under a waterfall?” to stimulating inquiry — “If you don’t have a priesthood, how do you reach enlightenment?” With great impromptu gusto, the session morphed into a lively panel discussion.

The next day, on Saturday, Ed Feasel, dean of students at Soka University of America, shared

details about the university. The SUA campus in Aliso Viejo, Calif., opening next May, will launch SGI President Ikeda’s final endeavor, which is to establish the Soka system of education in the United States. Upon hearing that SUA will accept only 100 students in its first year, one participant exclaimed: “Only 100? That’s too competitive!”

Ed allayed such concern remarking that SUA will have no minimum cut-off for GPA or SAT scores. Acknowledging that every student is unique, SUA will evaluate candidates based on their talents, interests and passions and what they can contribute to the university. So, truly, SUA stands as an ideal nurturing environment. Andy Worshill of Los Angeles commented that going to SUA would be like attending an FNCC conference for four years!

After divisional time (discussions grouped by gender on issues directly related to being a young man or woman), the conference progressed in the traditional FNCC way — afternoon excursions to the Everglades, the mall and the beach; an evening of camaraderie and fun at a talent show; and a night full of deep conversations.

The next and final day, bittersweet for some, new and old friends exchanged good-byes and made determinations about staying in touch and when to see one another next. A few of these expressions are included in this issue of *Seize the Day*. Read on! ♪

SGI President Ikeda's Message to the FNCC Junior High/High School Conference

Open a Path of Overflowing Hope



I congratulate you, my beloved Junior High and High School Division members, on the opening of your conference, which promises to be cheerful like the warm Florida sunshine. And to you who are taking responsibility, I would like to express my appreciation for your passionate dedication toward raising successors despite your busy schedules. Thank you for all your efforts.

The Goshu states, "Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is like the roar of a lion" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412). No matter how fierce an animal may be, it flees when it hears a lion roar. In other words, no matter what obstacles you may confront, nothing can impede the path toward happiness when you chant daimoku.

You who possess the law of *myoho* are lion cubs. No matter what sickness you may encounter, no matter what environment you may find yourself in, lion cubs are lions themselves. You who possess infi-

nite hidden potential, if you base yourselves on faith and challenge the problems that lie before you beginning with your studies, while joyfully and powerfully chanting daimoku, you will without fail be able to open a path of overflowing hope toward your future, as you are.

My heart leaps for joy when I think of you boisterously dancing on the stage of the 21st century. I am sincerely praying for your good health, your joyful activities and your victory.

Please convey my warmest regards to all those who could not participate together with you today.

Daisaku Ikeda
July 13, 2000

IMPRESSIONS from the Junior High/High School Conference

Ivy Gabbert, 25

Atlanta

This conference was truly a learning experience for me. I learned not only about myself but also about the teenage members and our shared mission for kosen-rufu.

During the four days of the conference, I met new friends, each of whom had a deep impact in my life. I was unaware of it at the time, but by the last night of the conference, I realized that through each encounter, I was revealing something about myself. I learned that I was limiting myself in my personal life as well as within the organization. Being a leader is quite overwhelming at times—so much so that it is easy to forget why I was appointed with the responsibility in the first place. I found that my limitations were affecting the members that I am supposed to care for. Attending meetings was not a problem, but regularly calling members was. I hardly did it.

I noticed while looking around the Sunshine dining room over the span of four days that people talked and associated with the same people. While in discussion groups we were forced to meet new people, when left to ourselves, we tended to be with the people we felt most comfortable with. It's human nature. I learned that it is with the common mission of achieving kosen-rufu that we are all connected. I realized that we as SGI youth members need to chal-

lenge ourselves to be courageous, compassionate and appreciative.

Courage is to do what we believe is right, no matter what other people think.

Compassion is to feel others' suffering, even when we might not have experienced it ourselves.

Appreciation is for all that has been given to us by our parents and SGI President Ikeda, not only expressed in words of gratitude, but through our actions as well. ♪

but to me, the heart signifies and stores the most treasured memories. As Nichiren Daishonin states, "More valuable than the treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most important of all" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 851).

The past four days at the FNCC were the greatest experience and memories you could have given me. This conference was a starting point in my human revolution.

Though I saw many who encour-

I tried to report back to the leader who gave him guidance. But before I could finish the sentence, tears of joy and happiness for him overwhelmed me.

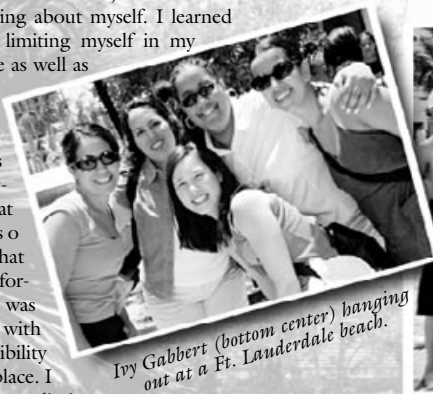
Assessing the victory that he won, I truly found a deeper understanding of the power of chanting. As Danny Nagashima said, "When you chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, no obstacle can stand between you and the Gohonzon." I could tell just how much he changed from the beginning to the conclusion of the conference. Knowing that the conference changed even one

person's life, I feel that I too, can be happy. Now I realize that, through the power of chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, nothing is impossible. I believe everyone grew in some way during this conference. I think that this conference was a new starting point in my life. I thank everyone for the wonderful memories, encouragement, friendship

and guidance. Just having the experience of coming to this conference has made me a better person. I hope — no, I know I will see you all again. Once again thank you all. Good luck on the years ahead and please, please keep this experience at the FNCC in the most treasured place, the heart.

We are the "hope of the world." It depends on us and the actions that we take now. I know that we will become the new hope of the world. ♪

(See page D for another Impression)



Ivy Gabbert (bottom center) hanging out at a Ft. Lauderdale beach.



Many participants praised the sightseeing as an opportunity to deepen friendships.

George Nagata, 16

Los Angeles

Today is July 16, 2000 — a sad yet a victorious day. For many, today is the day they start a new human revolution, embarking from a four-day FNCC hardcore training that we will utilize back at our districts, areas, regions or zones. We received training from the best of the best, and added memories to our most sacred treasure of all, the heart. To a lot of people, the heart may be just an anatomical part of the body,

tered hardships and struggles, one person sticks in my mind. He wanted to enjoy himself and learn at the FNCC, but faced struggles on Friday and went to a leader for guidance. Having been told to chant daimoku about the problem, he chanted vigorously for one hour the next day. Just as the sun rises and falls, he got an immediate response. Satisfied but not enjoying himself at the conference, he received the greatest gift of all...love. Watching him since day one of the conference, I noticed a change in him. I saw him grow. Today,

YOUTH *Study* SEPTEMBER 2000

Turning Tragedy into Fortune, Strength and Happiness

by Lydia Fort, New York, Youth Study Committee

Nothing, no matter what happens, can change your inherent worth. Please have courage. Please tell yourself that you are not going to let this ordeal defeat you — SGI President Ikeda (Feb. 25 *World Tribune*, p. 5).

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, somewhere in America, a woman is sexually assaulted every two minutes. The National Crime Victimization Survey states that between 1995 and 1996, more than 670,000 women were the victim of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

I was horrified to learn of this high rate of violence against women, but five years ago, I became one of those statistics. I was sexually assaulted. It was truly the most terrifying experience of my life. The trauma of being sexually victimized caused guilt, shame and intense rage to grip my life. I had intense crying fits and emotional outbursts that left me feeling exhausted and the emotional aftershocks of violence made it difficult to get through my daily routine. Without knowing it, I suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. I could not shake the memories of what had happened.

For many women, being sexually violated causes them to retreat from their friends and fellow members and shut down parts of their lives. Some may try to counteract the feelings of being disrespected by being “tough” or “strong.” However, I have learned the hard way that these approaches of trying to get through life after being the victim of sexual violence are not healthy. Privately, I had beaten myself up for my lack of strength and lamented over my “horrible” karma that caused this situation to happen to me. Also, my fear and anger lead me to shun all social interactions. But instead of desperately projecting a false mask of toughness, I needed to open my heart.

Fortunately, I was able to confide in a young women’s leader who offered to do morning gongyo with me once a week for the next six months. Through our gongyo sessions, I began to see that the crucial moment had arrived. This experience brought me face to face with my fundamental darkness. I battled with my devils in front of the Gohonzon. It was unbelievably painful, but I was determined to change this poison that had been buried deep in my life once and for all.

Study became the driving force for maintaining my daimoku campaign. In his writing “Reply to the Lay Nun Myoho,” Nichiren Daishonin writes, “But now you, born a woman in the evil world of the latter age, while being reviled, struck, and persecuted by the barbaric inhabitants of this island

country who are unaware of these things, have endured and are propagating the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha at Eagle Peak surely perceives that you surpass the nun [Mahaprajapati] as greatly as clouds do mud. The name of that nun, the Buddha Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, is no unrelated matter; it is now the name of the lay nun Myoho” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1106).

This was written to the lay nun Myoho and it describes the sincerity and dedication of Mahaprajapati, Shakyamuni’s aunt who was the first woman to enter the Buddhist order. At a time when women were taught that they could not reach enlightenment because of their gender, Mahaprajapati became a great Buddha because of her strong commitment to the Lotus Sutra. After reading this, I was determined to model her commitment to face adversity in my own life and prove that in spite of it all, I could manifest my Buddhahood nature.

Earlier this year, SGI President Ikeda held a discussion with the high school division leaders of SGI-USA in which he addressed sexual violence against women. I was very excited to read his encouragement. I was deeply touched by his compassion because I know so many other young women have suffered tremendously from sexual violence. I knew his words could be a beacon of light for other survivors because they reminded me of the anguish I had felt and communicated the very essence of what I needed to hear.

President Ikeda also quoted Nichiren Daishonin who said, “Chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo means to enter the palace of one’s own life” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 787). Every day we have an opportunity to enter “the palace of one’s life” through our practice of morning and evening gongyo and daimoku. This is a profound thing for a woman who may feel her very life has been defiled and all her joy of living and self-love has been taken away from her. By struggling to get up to chant every morning and by fighting to make my weekly gongyo session with my friend, I was able to solidify my perseverance to never give up. Our practice of this Buddhism gives us the opportunity to transform any experience, no matter how negative or discouraging, into a seed for growth. Through our efforts in faith, we connect to the power inherent in our own lives and thereby manifest the four virtues of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. All we have to do is find the courage, make a strong determination and continue on in the path of faith, and then all aspects of our lives will blossom like the beautiful lotus flower itself. ♪

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?

Postal Mail:

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Attn: Kim Herrmann
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Santa Monica, CA 90406-1427

Email:

seize@sgi-usa.org

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

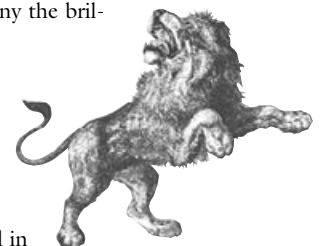
Discuss your reactions to this article.

Discuss how, in this essay, the study of Buddhism helped to develop a foundation of support in the darkest of moments.

Why is it important to have self-esteem? Have you had any struggles with your own sense of self-worth? How are you able to sustain a belief in your own inherent worth?

Discuss the importance for youth to grow and develop, and never deny the brilliance of their lives.

Have you participated in the Victory Over Violence activities? Can you discuss other ways in which Buddhism helps us to achieve a victory over the violence in our society and in our lives?



Trailblazers!



**By Maggie Eisenberg,
SGI-USA Vice Student
Division Leader**

To have a great mentor is an honor, but it took me a while to even want one at all.

When I was a high school sophomore, I lived my life from moment to moment, giving little forethought to anything except perhaps what I was wearing to school that day.

Early on, I had made a conscious decision not to care about school. There was turmoil in my family. I lived in a basic state of depression and was cynical and defensive. Teachers tried to connect with me and help me, but I pushed them away. I didn't want anyone's help and had an amazing ability to convince everyone I didn't care.

In my freshman year, I failed the first half of Spanish class and got kicked out for excess cutting. I was placed in a different Spanish class taught by a spitfire named Mrs. Victoire, who saw through me immediately, and let me know I wasn't about to mess with her. No other teacher had been so straightforward with me, and I wasn't ready for it.

So, I fought her. I acted aloof and sarcastic. One day I reduced her to a yelling match in the middle of class, humiliating her and turning the class against her.

Afterward, she told me how hurt she was. I still remember how terrible I felt, but I had dug my hole so deep that apologizing was out of the question. I was truly a bully, which is just another word for coward.

The following year, I walked into my honors English class, and was overjoyed to find, once again, Mrs. Victoire. She flashed me a devouring grin — "ready for me this time."

During the previous summer, I was taking care of junior high/high school members and, for the first time in my life, I was forced to be concerned with something other than my miserable self. For months we struggled to create something that would inspire our peers. While I gathered SGI President Ikeda's guidance, I began to open my heart a tiny bit and let his words sink in. Somewhere, buried inside me, was a desire to become the happy and powerful person he was trying to tell me to be.

My first paper from Mrs. Victoire's class came back with a big red D. I was ready to give up, but something inside had shifted. I semi-reluctantly went to Mrs. Victoire for help. She immediately took me under her wing, and worked me harder than I had worked in my entire school career. In a short time, I became the example to the rest of the class. Mrs. Victoire went from being my fiercest enemy to my fiercest ally. Of course she had never considered herself my enemy at all, but, until I opened my life, I could not learn anything from her. That experience was the visible beginning of my human revolution, but it had really started much earlier. I decided to open my heart to President Ikeda's heart and his encouragement, and instead of one amazing mentor, I found two. ♪

Brian's Experience

The Rewards of Sincerity

Brian Simms, Fresno, Calif.

During my time at Fresno High, I did not care about being there. I began ditching class. My mother would constantly ask about progress reports and report cards. I played the slick role; I made up all kinds of excuses and always lied to people who were trying to help me. Because of my mother's naïve nature, I took advantage of her. I told her I was being harassed by gangs and asked if I could transfer. Believe me, she did not want to do this, but she changed her mind and allowed me to transfer.

At McLane High School, I manipulated the situation again. I began cutting class again, worse than I had at Fresno High. I was going to my cousin's house and getting high, drinking all day, knowing I should be in school. But still I didn't care. My mother fooled me and came to the school. She was hurt because I lied and used her for my means. I was not proud. Then these words came from her mouth with anger: "No education? Get out!" Then I found this:

Those who live their lives to the fullest, unperturbed by the noisy clamor around them, are victors in life. Never give up. If you persevere in your efforts, someone will definitely support and protect you. Never lose hope. In the long run, being unable to go to school for two or three years is not such a big deal. Some people, for various reasons, even drop out of school. (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, p. 69)

SGI President Ikeda's guidance was great. It helped me see what my mother was trying to tell me. It gave me a reason to ease up

from getting high and drinking and going to parties.

A couple of days after my 18th birthday, I was spending the night at my cousin's house. I was asleep and woke up because of this sharp pain in my chest. At that moment, all I could think about was why didn't I get my life together. And I passed out. Later, I went to the doctor to find out what was wrong with me. They gave me a chest X-ray, but they couldn't find anything.

I was at a youth division meeting and I told my area leader, Keiko, what happened. She was very worried. That's when she started coming to my house, chanting and talking with me. She told me she believed in me when I had no hope. I was happy, and then I realized what my mission was. It was to achieve everything I wanted in life. So I focused on graduating. My goal is to finish school. I made a promise to my area leader, my mom and myself. I went to enroll at the adult school on March 1, 1999.

Since my enrollment in school, everything had been going great, except that my mom, who had been sick for a long time, was in a lot of pain. It became hard for her to take my cousin to school. So, I started to take him. I ended up dropping two of my morning classes to help my mom. I knew that since I did that I would have to take six classes. That meant I would be there morning and night, plus independent studies for the two classes I had dropped.

I needed money for the bus, plus the independent study, so I asked my family members and they all helped me. My grandfather gave me money for my bus pass until the end of the school term. I worked for my uncle to get the twenty dollars for my independent studies book. Now my graduation is in sight: I will receive my diploma on May 31, 2001, and everyone in SGI's Central Valley Area is invited! ♪

(Impressions continued from page B)

Brian Nakamura, 17

New Orleans

During the conference, it hit me that we're all teenagers from different places with different attitudes and personalities. With everyone there, we pretty much represented a typical, "everyday" teenage society. But unlike a normal teenage society, where there is often friction, everyone at the FNCC was friendly and courteous to one another. Everyone got along as if they were already friends before the conference. Seeing that, I know it's possible for all people to live peacefully together. ♪



Brian Nakamura (back) with fellow participant Julianne Marashian.