

Become Courageous Leaders of the New Century!

By Ian Ehrenreich, Palo Alto, Calif.

During the weekend of Aug. 17–20, more than 175 determined students gathered at the Florida Nature and Culture Center to prepare for their missions for peace in the 21st century. Also in attendance to support this conference were several SGI-USA leaders: General Director Danny Nagashima, student division leaders Wendy DeSouza and Daisaku Leslie, Vice Student Division Leader Boston Snowden, Youth Division Senior Advisor Ed Feasel, Youth Division Leader James Herrmann and Young Women’s Division Leader R e n u J i a n d a n i . The conference proved to be a very powerful experience for everyone involved, symbolizing the emergence of bodhisattvas from around the nation.

Conference participants arrived in Florida from their respective areas on Thursday afternoon. Even though most people had traveled great distances to attend, only ebullient smiles could be seen on the faces of even the most tired individuals. On Thursday evening the group convened for its first gongyo in the Friendship Auditorium, chanting with tremendous energy and unity.

On Friday, four seminar sessions were held, focusing on the mentor–disciple relationship, student life and Soka Spirit. In the first session, Danny Nagashima gave a heartfelt and moving talk on mentor–disciple, sharing a touching account of how his relationship with SGI President Ikeda helped him to develop into a capable person.

General Director Nagashima also focused on debunking a common misperception of the mentor as a boss. He emphasized that the mentor–disciple relationship should be based upon a shared vision, with the mentor selflessly dedicating himself for people and challenging the disciple to take responsibility and action toward the goal of kosen

rufu. The multitude of profound insights that came out of this session paved the way for a conference filled with realizations.

The student life session featured many experiences by students about difficulties they faced in their daily lives. Strengthening faith, roommate obstacles and issues with self-perception were some of the topics in this session. This session was quite encouraging, as each student’s experience culminated in a major life victory. Students left

enced obstacles. Terrific skits focusing on the three obstacles and four devils and fundamental darkness helped to strengthen everyone’s understanding of Buddhist principles. The creativity implemented in the Soka Spirit presentations was amazing; one very memorable skit even mimicked the television show *The View!*

On Saturday, after a discussion of Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo with Ed Feasel, a campus clubs and shakubuku (propagation of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism) session was held. Students from various parts of the country shared their valiant experiences of accomplishing shakubuku through their own human revolution and actions. Others discussed the steps to start a campus club and the difficulties associated with such actions.

This session was very provoking, inspiring thoughts of a new era of propagation in America based upon faith courage and personal development.

The rest of Saturday was filled with opportunities for individuals to relax and get to know one another. Enjoyable sightseeing tours to the Everglades, South Beach and the Sawgrass Mills Mall took place. The evening concluded with a talent show that continued until early the next morning. The talent, artistry and thoughtfulness shared by those who gave performances were amazing. After the talent show, many students stayed up all night chanting until sunrise.

The 2000 Student Division Conference was a truly significant occasion. All of the youth present showed their dedication to a new era of peace based upon friendship and respect. With strong faith in the Gohonzon, many left the FNCC sensing their mission to seek out President Ikeda’s heart with an open mind and a courageous heart, and to advance the kosen-rufu movement through propagation. ♪



Student Division Conference 2000



Student division members enjoyed various conference sessions & sightseeing.

mined to be courageous lions, working toward their dreams undaunted by fears and obstacles.

The two Soka Spirit sessions held on Friday afternoon and evening focused on a wide array of topics like kosen-rufu, fundamental darkness and the temple issue. The first session began with a video asking students what they thought Soka Spirit means. The answers varied greatly, ranging from “Standing up for justice” to “Accomplishing my dreams” to “The mentor–disciple relationship.” The bold, strong and broad hearts of the student division members was evidenced by these responses.

Experiences shared during the Soka Spirit sessions were incredible, illustrating the courage and seeking spirit of many students who have experi-

this session determined

Impressions from the Student Division Conference



Melissa SyJyer
Lives in San Francisco

Graduate of UC Santa Barbara
Majored in Sociology with a focus in Spanish

My goal in coming to this conference was to have complete truth in my relationship with my boyfriend, even if the realization was painful. Right before I had to write my experience that I gave at the conference, I had the desire to chant in front of the lake with the moon overhead at the FNCC. My roommate and I chanted out there, and needing a focal point, we chose a tree at the opposite end of the lake. I began chanting about communication and taking responsibility.

At one point, the water became perfectly still, and I noticed that there was no difference between the tree and its reflection in the water. I was reminded of guidance I received from Wendy DeSouza. She told me very strictly that in a relationship, you first have to be the person that you want to be with. So what I learned was that no matter what it pertains to in my life, that it first begins with me developing my character. In coming here, I had set a goal and chanted about it — I truly feel that I have been completely victorious. ♪



Alison Middleton
Lives in Clinton, Md.

Graduate of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore
Majored in Hotel/Restaurant Management

I really enjoyed what Danny Nagashima said about fusing your life with the Gohonzon, and how he said that the mentor-disciple relationship is lateral, not vertical. Before coming

to the FNCC, I had no real concept of just how deep the relationship is with President Ikeda. I've never had the desire to connect with him before, and didn't realize until this conference how important it is to connect with him. I also learned that the mentor-disciple relationship means to be of the same mind as our true mentor, Nichiren Daishonin. And I really liked what Danny said about how even if we don't feel we have any mentors in our lives, that the Gohonzon can be our mentor.

In my personal guidance session with Renu Jiandani, she told me how much I needed to believe in myself. We all have responsibilities to stand up against what is wrong in order to change the world, and each of us has the power to do this. I always knew I had this power, but didn't really use it. I am determined to do so when I get back. ♪

Attends South Western College
Majoring in Ethnomusicology

Bernard Ellorin
Lives in San Diego



When the East Bay members said how we shouldn't just call members to tell them about meetings, but also to say hello because they might be suffering and need to talk, it really affected me. My brother just passed away, and a few days before he died, he approached me while I was taking a nap and asked me to chant with him. For some reason, I said no, and I'm still really struggling with this. But now I understand the importance of reaching out to people in need.

I also related to what Danny Nagashima said — that the mentor puts his whole life into showing the disciple what's good, what's true. I play Filipino music for a dance company, and I realized that my mission is to educate people about Filipino culture through my music. I feel that Filipinos in the U.S. don't really recognize their own culture. I want to educate people about Filipino culture and help to bring this kind of research into the mainstream. ♪

Andrew Utada
Lafayette Hills, Pa.

Attends Harvard University
Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering



I went to the FNCC with the idea that I really needed a jump-start in my practice before starting graduate school in the fall, and because as a student division member, I really wanted to know what was going on. However, when I reflect back on my mindset, I do not feel that I had the seeking mind to make any kind of breakthrough. I went there very passively expecting just to absorb some spirit, and in fact felt quite intimidated by how amazing my fellow student division members are. In general, I found myself arrogantly comparing myself to other people.

Despite my arrogant nature working to stop me from learning anything from the conference, I had the help of 175 students members sharing their personal struggles, sufferings and subsequent victories through this practice to soften my hard head. While listening to many people's experiences, I began to notice how easy it is to look at someone and assume that they are not suffering simply because it does not show on his or her face.

Through experiencing firsthand how everyone supported and encouraged everyone else during the experiences and the talent show "that-would-not-die," I began to feel in the depths of my heart that the way we must respond to President Ikeda is to take care of one another.

Lastly, I am overjoyed at being a part of the SGI family and I am so grateful to the FNCC staff, our national leaders and the student division for making this a breakthrough experience for me and many other student division members. ♪



Suquru Abe
Lives in Phoenix

Attends Arizona State University
Majoring in Human Communication

In Japan, the student division is, for the most part, separate from the youth division and the rest of the organization. But here, students are part of the youth division, support their districts, have to study for school, all in addition to being involved in the student division. So we're busier, and it seems like such a challenge to fulfill our mission. But what I saw at the FNCC is each student seeking something, and it's so encouraging. I just want to learn as much as possible while I'm here and become totally happy before President Ikeda comes to America. ♪

Attends Cal State University, L.A.
Majoring in Nursing

E-Chern Mark
Lives in Los Angeles



Truthfully, when I got off the plane, I didn't feel anything. I began doubting whether I'd get the "spirit" of the FNCC. Mystically, through the experiences that were given the next day, one by one all of the questions I had were answered. I was also humbled by the fact that many of us were struggling, and realized that through our Buddhist practice, we would all make it through. Now I feel as if my seeking spirit has deepened.

Another experience that impacted my life was when a young man from Virginia approached me and two of my friends. He thanked us with tears in his eyes for a song we had sung together with the chorus at the SGI-USA Youth Culture Festival in Los Angeles last year. He told us that the song had totally changed his perspective on life, and said, "I owe my life to you." From now on, I'm determined to develop a more open mind and to be less fearful in general, and I know that my daimoku will be the fuel for this. ♪

YOUTH *Study* SEPTEMBER 2000

FRIENDSHIP -

The Force to Change Our Lives

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda recently participated in a dialogue with Senior Youth Division Advisor Ed Feasel and SGI-USA High School Division Leaders Nobuko Kobayashi and Steve Mortan. In their discussion, President Ikeda states:

Friendship is the most beautiful of human bonds. It is a relationship that transcends gain and loss. It is not something superficial, nor is it merely to feel sympathy or pity for another person. It is a relationship where, no matter what happens to the other person, you still care about him or her from the bottom of your heart. Friendship is a precious, irreplaceable human treasure. I hope that you will forge such friendships with one person after another. It may seem like a small thing, but war and violence can be banished from the earth when a network of such friendships enfolds the world. (Feb. 25 *World Tribune*, p. 4)

The following is a discussion on friendship among three SGI-USA youth division study committee members: George Ross from the San Francisco Bay area, Adam Gamble who lives in Cape Cod, Mass., and John Smith from the New Orleans area (John is not quoted in this installment). This discussion will be concluded in next month's Seize the Day youth study page.

George Ross:

Friendship. Many times in my life, it has been my friends who have either gotten me into trouble or saved me from despair, encouraging me to go on. Buddhism teaches that friendship plays a very important role in our practice. Good friends can keep us on track while "bad" friends can lead us toward a life of unhappiness.

I began practicing when I was 17 years old and like many teenagers today, I was not interested in religion. I was only interested in living for myself. Drugs, alcohol, recklessness — you name it, I was doing it. However, my young men's leader, Andy Asboe, was persistent in encouraging me. There were many times I thought something was wrong with this guy to be so concerned with my business. I was suspicious of everything and everyone. I was very rude to him, to say the least.

Soon, my practice waned and I lost control of my life. It was some three-and-a-half years later that I would make contact with the SGI organization again, and all I could think about was my young men's leader who I once thought was so weird. When I was younger, it never occurred to me that he could actually respect me for my potential. But as I began to become serious about improving my life, I looked back on his efforts with appreciation.

Now that I am older and am responsible for other youth members, I try to remember the strength and commitment of Andy, my young men's leader and friend, and how much he made a difference in my life. He is a role model of friendship for me.

Adam Gamble:

Friendship in the SGI is so amazing, George! Although we live on different coasts, it turns out that we both were influenced by the same young men's leader early in our practice!

When I was a new member, it was a struggle for me to connect with the SGI. I lived about an hour-and-a-half drive from the nearest SGI center, and

the nearest youth division members to me were more than an hour's drive from my home. It could have been very easy for me to drift away from Buddhism at that time.

But after my wife and I received the Gohonzon, Andy and his co-leader Mayumi McWilliams drove nearly two hours to our house, just to chant with us. It was so amazing to think that we were so important to them.

Most importantly, however, was that they visited us in a very natural, earnest way. In fact, we didn't even realize that Andy and Mayumi were "SGI leaders." They were just our friends. They drove through all sorts of weather and traffic, with such big smiles on their faces. Furthermore, they never preached to us. They just showed up with their beads in hand! They chanted with us, shared their daily struggles and victories with us, and listened to ours.

I deeply appreciate SGI President Ikeda's observation that "friendship is the most beautiful of human bonds." I really do aspire to develop the kind of life that Andy and Mayumi showed us, the kind that not only has room for true friends, but also actively seeks them out. This is the kind of friendship that can change people's lives.

George Ross:

I, too, am trying to create a foundation in my life that makes room for other people's friendship.

I remember something that Ed Feasel once shared with me. I was newly appointed as a leader and I had so many ideas for the activity, but I was having difficulty working with the other members. I wondered how I could succeed in my position as a youth leader. Ed said that one time he had a similar struggle and that the more he fought to get his point across, the more resistance he encountered. He realized that before he could expect support from others, he should support them. Ed was encouraging me to be the first one to support other people,

to be the first to support their dreams. This is the Buddhist principle that when we support others, we in turn are supported. I instantly understood that he was describing the basic practice for oneself and others.


What I learned was that in order to work with others, the important thing is to recognize our common goal. To me, this means realizing that my goal as a youth leader is to enable each person that I take responsibility for to accomplish his or her goals and dreams. ♪



for discussion

QUESTIONS

- 1) What role has friendship played in your Buddhist practice?
- 2) Have there been any leaders who have made an important difference in your life? What did they do that made a difference to you?
- 3) How do you try to be a friend to others? Is there any relationship between understanding Buddhism and being a good friend to others?



(Impressions continued from page B)



Kuniko Kodama
Lives in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Attends Cabrillo College
Majoring in ESL and General Ed.

Before the conference, I just looked at what I didn't do in my life, how I had failed and I felt so disappointed in myself. But through my human revolution and my struggles in America, I am able to feel closer to President Ikeda's struggles. I deeply appreciate how much he wants to be here with us in America, and I sincerely want to do kosen-rufu here. Now, I'm constantly asking myself, "What can I do as President Ikeda's disciple?"

I feel so much happiness, because now I hear President Ikeda's voice saying, "I would never want you to be unhappy." I realized that being his disciple means being happy. I feel that he wants to be with each one of us and to talk with and get to know each one of us. Now, instead of suffering from my skin problem, I'm beginning to admire it, to be proud of it. ♪

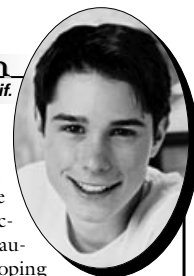


Griff McDaniel
Lives in Palo Alto, Calif.

Attends Foothill College
Majoring in Economics

I was surprised that not everyone knew about or fully understood the importance of Soka Spirit. Before the Soka Spirit session, I think all most of us had heard was "Oooh...the temple is bad." But I felt that the session really informed people well, and I was impressed with how easily everyone picked it up. Also, something that Tammy, a young woman from New Jersey, said really impacted me. In her experience, she used the example of the priesthood tearing down the Grand Main Temple (Sho-Hondo) and said, "Look what they have to do to stop us!"

But actually, it wasn't through the lectures but the experiences that I learned the most about the spirit of the student division. I appreciated the fact that no one was telling us how to do student division activities, but rather it was through the experiences that we learned how to create our own way of doing activities. I felt this kind of fresh energy throughout the conference, even from the very beginning. ♪



Attends Emerson College
Majoring in Media Studies with a concentration in Film *Lives in Palo Alto, Calif.*

Andrew van den Houten

Going to the FNCC and meeting so many wonderful, young and intelligent Buddhists (who know how to have fun!), I have become motivated to work much more vigorously at my studies. I am now even considering the possibility of furthering my education after college. The physical and emotional struggles that my peers have endured, while practicing Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism, shows me that in order to be a beautiful person, one truly does need to face all kinds of obstacles. Developing compassion and understanding for all students, and young people, is now a goal that I will strive for on a daily basis. Baring your life to people you don't know isn't easy. Thank you again for all the incredible experiences. ♪



Flora McGill
Lives in Seattle

Attends Cornish College of the Arts
Majoring in Music

I feel so proud to be part of the student division, because it is a very significant time to be a student. As student division, I feel that President Ikeda is talking to us as a group of individuals, unified in spirit, who are taking responsibility for the future.

We're consciously deciding to train ourselves — becoming a student is that decision. This is the seed of our human revolution. We're choosing to grow, to take risks and to have the courage to challenge ourselves where we are right now. Courage is the key to everything — it's the prime point. If we don't have courage, then we won't be able to handle the pressures that will arise when we make the determination to become happy. To know yourself, your goals, your fears, your strengths and weaknesses, and how to reach out to people — that requires courage. When we use our faith to muster up the courage for our lives, to me, that is faith itself. ♪



Jason Evans
Lives in Norfolk, Va.

Attends Old Dominion University
Majoring in Graphic Arts

The student division conference was certainly an emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth on the grand stage of the future. I was touched to the core of my life by the compassion and courage that each individual expressed. They are truly in accordance with SGI President Ikeda's compassion as he expressed it to us through his many messages and gifts. I deeply sensed the immense confidence that he has for us in each of his actions. Every one of these individuals will be known throughout history as champions of kosen-rufu and leaders of the world. President Ikeda is counting on us. Let's show him through our victories that we will become pioneers of the future! ♪

Attends Iowa State University
Majoring in Economics

Kwang-siq Lee
Lives in Ames, Iowa

I learned one lesson from this conference. It was that I should be courageous anytime and anywhere. I was an emcee in the session, "Personalizing the Soka Spirit," and I was a participant in two presentations of that session. I had two options: The first was to be passive; to do my part only in my seat. The second was to be active; to go to the center of my audience and to do my part as if I communicated with them. When watching American members' fluent presentations before mine, I thought: "I came to the United States just one year ago. Can I really be successful in the center of my audience?" But I could win over that thought and successfully do my job in the middle of my audience. I am sure that this experience will be one turning point in my practice and life. ♪

MATERIAL REQUEST

HOW?

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