

“MY FORTUNE IS YOUR FORTUNE” BY SIOBHAN BOLAND, SAN FRANCISCO

I was fifteen when I first heard about Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo. My mother approached me, asking if I would ever be interested in attending. SUA did not appear to be the place that would support my goal at the time for a degree in cinema. My mother, determined that I would attend, simply smiled, said OK and continued to chant for me over the next several years.

My education has been interesting to say the least, spent entirely in the San Francisco Unified School District. Though often frustrating, attending over-crowded, under-funded, bottom of the barrel public schools taught me a lot more about the real world than one might think. It made me very passionate about education in general and ingrained in me a deep appreciation for the ideals of Soka education.

By the beginning of my junior year in high school, my career goals had broadened and I became interested in attending a school whose ideals were still fresh and unsullied. I decided that I wanted to be a member of the first graduating class of Soka University of America.

I am honored to say that I am now officially a member of the first class of SUA, AV. However, the road to getting there was more difficult than I expected.

In the last few weeks before I received acceptance from the university, my life was in the world of Hell. I had become consumed by fear, doubt and fundamental darkness. I agonized over the painful prospect of leaving my home and all the friends I had made on the San Francisco State University Swim Team, afraid I would lose those friendships forever. I no longer wished to attend Soka University. This would not have been a problem, had I not been accepted to the university. But I had been, and so my struggle began.

In addition to my internal struggles, my father, though willing to support me financially, was concerned that SUA was a brand new, unaccredited university. Because of this, I constantly worried about the cost of attendance despite my prayers and my mother's that I would attend SUA on a full scholarship, having zero debt upon graduation.

I also feared that SUA would not be able to support my dream of becoming a competitive swimmer. I worried since there were so few students, the opportunities to train and compete would not be available, despite the fact that SUA has an Olympic-sized swimming pool and Southern California is well known for producing very talented swimmers.

My university and swimming life in the previous months had become very exhausting and my Buddhist practice suffered greatly. When the season ended, I returned as always to the basics of consistent faith, practice and study, increasing the amount I chanted and throwing myself into the San Francisco Area March 16 Buddhist activity. In retrospect, although it was a painful struggle and I faced a great deal of fear, it was a fairly simple problem. I realized that I lacked confidence in my determinations, in the founder Daisaku Ikeda's vision, in Soka University and in the Gohonzon.

However, confidence was something I knew I could tap within my life through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting for success was the key, as always. So over spring break, I treated myself to three hours of chanting every day and planned a visit to the SUA campus to bolster my confidence. Well, it worked! By the end of April, I could say without hesitation that I was going to Soka University of America.

During that trip I met with the university's vice president, Eric Hauber. While I was still somewhat undecided, Eric conveyed that, although he would love for me to come to SUA, he

was completely supportive of my decision whatever it would be. He did not try to pressure me or sell Soka University in any way. His trust in me was exactly what I needed to trust in myself. To be honest, Eric didn't need to sell the university, because when I got there the university sold itself. As we approached the site and I saw the dome of Founders Hall, I became overwhelmed with emotion. As we toured the campus, I felt as if I never wanted to leave.

I continued to practice vigorously and the following week received my financial aid offer. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I received an academic scholarship that covered my entire tuition and my books for the year. The only loan I would assume was for housing, which incidentally was non-interest bearing and could be paid off in installments during the school year. The cost of housing for a year at SUA is comparable to what my father was willing to pay for a semester of housing at SFSU.

On May 3, 2001, I attended the dedication events for Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo. The ceremony included an Acjachemen Nation American Indian song and blessing, an African music and drumming performance, a choir of fifth-grade boys and girls, and much more.

Most touching and memorable was a speech delivered by Dr. Lawrence Carter Sr. of Morehouse College (see page 11). His connection to President Ikeda and enthusiasm about Soka education were so genuine and heartfelt. His spirit filled the room, permeating the hearts of everyone there, I'm sure.

And as if that weren't enough to confirm that I had made the right decision, immediately after the ceremony the hundreds of people in attendance were led to a fountain in front of the university where a choir sang "Ode to Joy" as a flock of doves was released! The grandeur of that moment impressed upon me forever that I was certainly attending the most prestigious university in the world.

At a reception later in the day, I met SUA's athletic director, Keith Shackelford. He outlined the school's possibilities for a swim team, as well as training options with two or three of the best clubs in the country, which were within a half hour of the SUA campus.

Also at that reception, I had the opportunity to meet and bond with my fellow classmates. I feel these friendships are pure and kind and unassuming. I can't wait for school to start!

Thank you to the SGI-USA members of my district, who have been supportive. I'd like to thank everyone who encouraged me to stay, to go, and to challenge myself in this struggle. Because your words were from the heart, they were exactly what I needed to hear. I would especially like to thank a certain pioneer member of the SGI-USA, Saiko Lewis, who refused to accept my decision to turn down a Soka education, and waged a struggle for me as though it were her own.

Most of all I want to thank my mother, Kimberlie Royse, who chanted for eight years for me to attend SUA. Mom, my fortune is your fortune and this dream would not have been possible if you had not supported me with your prayers and actions. I owe you everything and your prayers are a force to be reckoned with. I couldn't be happier than I am right now. Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the SGI organization, which I hope to repay by the contributions I make while attending Soka University, and later in society.