

**DEREK OWENS: PROMISES TO WORK TOWARD A RENAISSANCE IN HIS
NEIGHBORHOOD
BY ROBIN MEADER, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Derek Owens, age thirty-three, has just returned to Washington, D.C., on the train from a business trip in New York. He suggests we meet in the athletic club of the newest hotel in the city, Club L.A. in the Ritz-Carlton. The club's employees seem to know him, and they go to great lengths to seat us in a quiet corner so we can talk about Derek's life as a businessman and a Buddhist.

"I actually got into the work of being a businessman by mistake; I know nothing's by mistake, but it wasn't planned," he laughs. After he had been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with the SGI for five years, in his last year of high school he received the Soka Sports Award from SGI President Ikeda. He also became the top-rated tennis player in the Washington Metropolitan Region and earned a scholarship to Hampton University, where he studied economics.

"In the middle of my junior year I decided to transfer to Pennsylvania State University. Penn State wouldn't take me in the middle of the year, so I came to Howard University, where my high school tennis coach had come before me. At Howard I noticed there were no eateries on Georgia Avenue, just a McDonald's. I had had a great time down at Hampton in a nice upscale little eatery, so I came up with the idea of opening a café. We approached the University and they said go ahead, go for it. So the next day we were getting ready to open a business."

It is characteristic of Derek Owens to follow his idea through to its fullest conclusion. Other things grew from the one idea: he now has three businesses — Club 2:K:9, University Citi Caterers, and the nonprofit Positive Partners. The idea grew from his affection for his community, was fed by his confidence that he could make a wonderful product, and survived near-devastation by powerful forces. His dream is to expand his business to embrace more of the historic Howard University neighborhood.

In 1923, Jean Toomer penned *Cane*, commonly considered the first text of the Harlem Renaissance, right in this neighborhood. Derek Owens' dream is to extend the renaissance of life, based on Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, to the city block and beyond, to the length of historic U Street, and then to the city itself.

Following a trajectory toward a larger and larger destiny seems natural to a young man who wants to be a good friend to all his employees. He competed so fiercely in tennis when he was twelve years old that he learned how to excel and made tennis his ticket to college by winning tennis scholarships. It seems natural that Derek Owens would go into work that brings him into contact with many other people. It is work that allows him to compete and excel in Washington, D.C., home to many demanding palates and plenty of superior restaurants.

The example of his mother, Brenda Harwood, in business and in faith motivates Derek. His mother told *Living Buddhism* that from a young age — four or five years old — Derek watched her fight for her life by praying before the Gohonzon to beat a dangerous heart ailment. When he was twelve and came to her asking how he could perform better in his tennis matches, she just said, "You know what to do," and pointed in the direction of the family altar. "When he was a baby, he used to fall asleep with his head on my lap while I chanted hour after hour in front of the Gohonzon," she explained.

Just as the practice of Buddhism "rubbed off" on Derek from his mother's practice, so the social ease he feels around people who are active in their communities "rubbed off" on him from Curtis Owens, his father. Derek had success modeled for him by his parents, so he had a

strong start in life. When his parents divorced — a situation that could have affected his self-esteem — he hit a low point. But the young men of the SGI showed him examples of success in their own lives, and told him how to make his own dreams come true. The young men taught him how to say out loud what he wanted to accomplish: “Put your goals on the line!” they said. “When you say it out loud and in front of others, you have to do it, you have to follow through.”

When he was twelve, Derek listened to an older young man relate the story of using his faith and practice to gain the wisdom to earn his first million dollars. Bruce Berger’s story continues to inspire Derek Owens, although Bruce never knew until recently the great impact his life story had on the boy. In turn, Derek Owens keeps moving ahead toward larger and larger goals because he hopes others are inspired by his example to do more than they thought they could. “You’d be surprised who’s watching you,” he notes sagely. Howard University invites him back regularly to lecture to current students about success in business, and he believes he may be inspiring others with his own success.

Mr. Owens continues to be motivated by his own dreams. His café grew to include a catering business, and then a nightclub. “Entertainment is so important,” he says, “because it brings people together.” While he de-emphasizes the entertainment component of his business when he is downtown at the bank, at the Chamber of Commerce Political Action Committee or Board meetings, it’s the entertainment that opens doors for him and his dreams for the neighborhood.

In turn, the energy he put into developing his block that changed from a drug-dealing enclave to a resurgent entertainment section of this city opens people up to Buddhism in a natural way. People will say, he projects, that this block, lined with flowers instead of dumpsters, got its start at rejuvenation because of 2:K:9 nightclub, the club with alcohol-free teen nights and daytime Gospel specials. And the owner of that club, you know, he’s a Buddhist. It will be as natural for people to observe that about him as it is for people to say it about Tina Turner after reading her book or viewing her movie and feeling encouraged.

The biggest obstacle Derek’s business has faced so far has been the breaking of their original lease by Howard University Hotel several years ago. Although the then-Georgia Café did not win its suit against Howard University, and the café finally settled for a six-month extension on the early removal date and payment of court costs by Howard, Derek used the protracted battle — in which he even used the tactic of picketing the [University] president’s house, along with fellow students, to emphasize his point that the café was a vital component of the University community — to win in business by learning several important life lessons.

The difficult time strengthened his desire to show actual proof of the power of his Buddhist practice through changing “poison into medicine.” His business went from a storefront café leasing the ground floor of a hotel to Capitol Hill, where he was well situated to begin making business contracts with political events, such as high tea at the Clinton White House. He then moved back to the Howard University neighborhood among his friends and former clientele, where he purchased and renovated an entire building.

Derek learned also from his contest with Howard University how to keep the friendships he’d formed there: by chanting he kept the relationships between the café and the University on a strong personal level, never regarding the dispute as anything more than a decision made at some other level. As a result of Derek’s protecting his relationships with the very institution that was oblivious to the fact that its closing of a hotel was hurting his business, the University has been eager to collaborate with Positive Partners, Derek’s nascent nonprofit organization, on a scholarship project.

Derek sees his business aiding and assisting in bringing the community together. Mentioned above is the scholarship program through Positive Partners that will benefit one to four students each year. Club 2:K:9 is planning to teach a culinary arts program out of its building for the community wherein people would pay tuition on a sliding scale and learn valuable, employable skills. In addition, 2:K:9 holds free dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas for neighbors in need, and is catering some local police PST meetings without charge. Derek Owens desires that the organizations he heads be an example in the community of neighborly businesses.

Though Derek enjoys his life as a businessman, it's not all rosy. There are constant frustrations in the business. With 100–150 employees, Derek and his partners have encountered pilfering, the turnover of employees and problems of safety in the neighborhood. As a Buddhist, Derek deals with these daily challenges by daily chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — welling up the wisdom to manage his affairs in the best way. As a result, the business has a good core of people to run it. Derek plans to give the staff additional training. He also tries to give them personal attention.

As busy as he is, Derek Owens finds it's easy to get into a rut. He has so many daily concerns of business: real estate development, promotions, operations, the board, the nonprofit branch, and the catering and club businesses themselves — if he were a micro-manager, he could not survive. But Derek Owens is a visionary. He likes to imagine, to dream, to see a big picture. His mother, Brenda, and his wife, Linda Dorsey Owens, like to do the daily work. They take personal pride in doing their parts well, Brenda managing the bar and Linda heading up the catering. Derek will do anything — if a key employee can't come to work he will tend bar, he will set up a catering job. But his passion is planning and growing his business. And to do it well, in all its aspects, he has to “concentrate on making this happen now.”

Right now he is determined every hour of the day to get \$1 million in contracts. He makes specific goals. Each morning his prayers focus on the month, the week, the day that he wants to accomplish something. And he keeps those goals in mind himself, as well as being reminded of them by those he has — as he was taught by the SGI young men years ago — spoken them out loud to.

“It's impossible to do anything of any magnitude by oneself. It's important for one person to be the visionary, but without my mother and wife and step-father, without Anne Wright to manage the door and José Noyola as head chef, and without all the other employees, there would be no Club 2:K:9.”

Eleven years ago José Noyola took a filthy boat to the United States from Guatemala, intending to go to Chicago but ending up by happenstance knocking on the back door of the Georgia Café, and started working there washing dishes. Now some people consider José Noyola the best chef in Washington, D.C.

Derek marvels at his meeting up with José often, and every now and then reminds José of the great fortune that brought the two young men together.

“How can that happen?” Derek wonders aloud. “We kind of grew up together. José says he's in it for the long run.” Derek wants to be able to offer José something that is worth that kind of commitment. “I can't let José down. One of the things that really motivates me when I think maybe I can't do this is José's commitment. That ignites the fire within me.” Derek promised to succeed in this business. He promised José he would succeed, too. Now when he has doubts, or wakes up asking himself why he is working so hard, he remembers his promise, when he was twenty and José was nineteen, and “a huge part of me does it for José.”

Derek's message to young people who wish for success is straightforward: “[Success] is not

complicated. Recently I visited France and met friends of a friend, all young people, and I was surprised to observe that they had no hope for their lives. I would say to them or anyone: ‘Dare to dream, and then put your dream on the line.’ As the SGI young men encouraged me when I was a teenager playing in the Brass Band, ‘Say your dreams out loud.’ When you say something with conviction, you have to follow through. When I vigorously express my goals in front of other people, I’m challenging myself to succeed and those who hear me will also remind me.

“I feel that my mission in life is to give hope to others, to let people expand their dreams, because people who don’t even know they had done so have helped me expand my dreams. I thought Bruce knew, these last twenty years, that his experience that day helped me with my business — helped me focus and determine, but he didn’t even know until I mentioned it to him last week. My mission is to help people — I don’t even need to know about it. So if I can give one, two or three people encouragement and determination, that’s great. Of course if it can be millions then that would be even greater. But I think if you can give one person that drive, it’s worth it because it changes that person’s whole life when you give him or her a little hope, a little determination. A little determination can make someone go out and do something that they never thought they could do.

“Throughout my life, I frequently recited my favorite passage from Nichiren’s writing, ‘The Opening of the Eyes’: ‘Foolish people are likely to forget the promises they have made when a crucial moment comes.’” Derek Owens’ promise was, “I’m not going to give up.”

Derek wants his 2:K:9 special events center to be different from similar facilities in D.C., each of which tends to cater to only one group of people. “I wanted a place where all ethnic groups would feel comfortable and safe.” He assembled a diverse marketing team and works together with it to create an environment that reflects the spirit of kosen-rufu. “I have named Saturday night Global Saturdays: on any Saturday night, you will find people from as many as ten different cultures dancing and having a great time.”

With the goal not only to have a successful special events center, but also to be a model in the community, Derek Owens spends much of his time developing 8th and U Streets, N.W., where his building is located. He and his family are determined to create peace right where they are: “It is my prayer that our building and 8th Street will exhibit my determination to make a difference. My determination is to have President Ikeda attend a major SGI activity at our facility. I hope he will be proud that he gave me an SGI Soka Award.”

In *The Human Revolution*, Daisaku Ikeda writes: “A nation can be changed by the determination of a single individual.” Derek Owens has determined to change a community neighborhood and a city through sincere prayer. “I know for sure there will be many more obstacles to confront, but I’m ready. In a recent *World Tribune*, President Ikeda said: ‘Kosen-rufu is an eternal struggle. To fight and fight on, right through the end, with the lion-hearted spirit of the Daishonin — this is the hallmark of a truly great life.’ I know that I will achieve my goals and that great things are destined for my business and my neighborhood, the U Street Corridor.”

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