

**EXPERIENCE—GIANLUCA D'IPOLITO, MIAMI
MEDICAL RESEARCHER MAKES HIS MARK
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‘By following SGI President Ikeda, reading the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I developed the confidence in my life to attain happiness,’ says Gianluca D’ipolito.

Mention the University of Miami and probably the first thing that comes to mind is its sports prowess. But it is also an intellectual powerhouse. Its medical school is one of the top teaching hospitals in the country, known for research in diabetes, spinal rehabilitation and other fields. One important program is the study of aging. That is where Gianluca D’ipolito, an SGI-USA member, has made his mark in medical research.

“Gianluca arrived here five years ago to pursue a post-doctoral program in bone formation and osteoporosis,” explained Dr. Paul Schiller, assistant professor of medicine, University of Miami and principal investigator for the Veteran’s Administration Hospital. “On his own, he developed a human model for bone development. Before, all models came from animals. Gianluca was instrumental in finding sources for these cells from human vertebrae of organ donors and donors in diabetes research. This model is recognized in medical learning around the world. Researchers come from everywhere to learn to use this model.”

High praise from his supervisor, yet Gianluca explains how he came to this position in his own humble, quiet way: “When I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in 1982 at age 19 in Florence, Italy, I was miserable. I was shy and got along poorly with others. My life was closed. I was also two years behind in high school. One of my early benefits was to aggressively work on completing my education. In Italy, examinations are conducted orally. I started to seek out my teachers to take the exams that would enable me to finish school, instead of waiting for them to come to me.”

At the same time, Gianluca became involved in taking responsibility in the SGI Buddhist community in an area close to Florence. “I traveled every weekend to that area to encourage and support members,” he says. “The membership there grew to nearly a thousand, who are still active today.”

This intense involvement became the springboard for Gianluca’s life. He explains: “Everything I learned from my Buddhist practice told me to challenge myself. My biggest weakness was school, so I decided to go to the university and study biology, a field in which I was always interested. I also took a part time job, not to support myself since I was living at home, but just to have a little spending money. But working became an excuse for not studying hard.

“While I was going through the motions of challenging my life, I felt something was missing. My foundation was weak. I was attending classes, but not advancing. In Italy, attending school was a breeze, financially. But after attending the university for five years without showing any progress, I started to feel empty.

“Actually, I liked biology and I liked to study. Fundamentally, however, I lacked confidence. I thought I was incapable of completing my degree. Through my strong practice, I could encourage others, but I had no confidence in myself, in my innate

Buddhahood. I could not make myself show actual proof. I felt like a hypocrite.

“To break this deadlock, I went to receive guidance from the general director of the SGI-Italy, Mr. Kaneda. I don’t recall him ever being as strict with anyone as he was with me. In the back of my mind, my reason to go to see him was because I thought there was something wrong with my brain and that was why I could not finish school like everyone else. So I hoped when I went to see him, he would tell me, ‘Yeah, there is something wrong with your brain, you really are crazy.’ Instead, he told me: ‘If you are going to do something, then do it! If you are going to work, work. If you are going to study, then study. Because you are practicing Buddhism, however, the best thing for you to do is to do your best.’ It took just two or three minutes. When it was over, I was in anguish. I realized I had wasted a lot of time.

“I quit my job and started to study hard. Sometimes I would study 10 to 12 hours a day. Since my study skills were rusty, I had to work much harder at it. I became so serious, that all of my friends came over to study with me.”

As in high school, all university tests were oral. That put Gianluca on the spot. His answers had to ring with confidence and that, of course, challenged one of his biggest weaknesses. Also, because of his poor study habits he could only absorb the core material. Attaining any depth in the subject eluded him. When a professor asked a question that fell beyond his narrow focus, he choked.

“I had to take nearly every exam twice,” he says. “And when I re-tested, I had to take the make up the following month. I was always running to complete my studies.”

Every day he studied the passage from “Reply to Kyo’o”: “Kyo’o’s misfortune will change into fortune. Muster your faith, and pray to this Gohonzon. Then what is there that cannot be achieved?” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412).

“I read this passage over and over, while crying and chanting in front of the Gohonzon. But I never gave up.”

It was an uphill battle, but he finally managed to finish his Ph.D. degree in hematology within five years.

Once he finished his degree, the fortune from Gianluca’s efforts in study and Buddhist practice began to appear. For example, his doctoral thesis won a \$5,000 award for which it was supposed to be ineligible. It was created for medical doctors not biologists. The dean told him not to bother even applying for it since his field was excluded. However, at the last minute—half an hour before the deadline closed—school administrators told him to go for it. He presented everything on time.

“As I was submitting my dissertation, the secretary of the department was laughing,” he explains. “She told me I was the only one to submit a thesis for the award. I was a shoe-in.”

Fortune also intervened when he decided to pursue a post-graduate program to establish a specialty. Entry into one of the seven positions was determined by competitive exam. He took eighth place. “I wasn’t discouraged,” he says. “Based on my renewed confidence in completing my degree, I was sure something would change. Sure enough, one of the applicants did not accept the position. I was able to complete a four-year specialty in biochemistry.”

Upon graduating and attaining his specialty, Gianluca was preparing for his future. He recognized that jobs for biologists were few in Italy. However, his great dream was to go to America. Further pressing him to establish his career was his developing relationship with Silvana, his wife-to-be.

Help would come soon. “A good friend introduced me to a professor with contacts in the United States,” he remembers. “When I explained my situation to her, she showed me a five-month-old job announcement at the University of Miami Medical School. She didn’t know if it was still open but she would send my Curriculum Vitae.

“People with whom I have discussed my being hired by the University of Miami Medical School think I have a relative on the board of directors or some special genius. It is virtually impossible to get hired from outside the program.

“On the surface, getting this job, in my field, was as simple as having a background in hematology and in working with bone marrow transplantation. I work in the Endocrinology Department where there is no one else with that specialty. I was able to develop a project in which I could apply my expertise in hematology to endocrinology. While getting the job appeared effortless, in reality it was the result of hard work and determined practice that I was able to gain the fortune to land the position.

“The essential thing this 10-year journey taught me was consistency—I consistently pushed myself harder and chanted all the way through until I won. At the beginning, everything seemed impossible. I couldn’t talk to anyone; I had no confidence. Yet today, I am able to work in such a fulfilling profession; not because I am great, or especially intelligent. By following SGI President Ikeda, reading the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I developed the confidence in my life to attain happiness.”

These kinds of changes in Gianluca’s character have won him the endorsement of the school’s administration. “I have a great deal of respect for Gianluca. We are very close,” says Dr. Schiller. “His working persona is high-spirited. He has also demonstrated the ability to turn unfavorable conditions into favorable ones. An unusual trait in a research environment, he is open in sharing his findings. Most researchers are very protective of their work for reasons of job security. Research advancements are often the basis for publishing and winning patents. Gianluca has a higher vision, however. He has a more universal vision of helping humanity as opposed to personal gain.”