

EXPERIENCE—MARION RUIZ, AMHERST, N.Y. FOR THE SAKE OF MY DAUGHTER

Marion Ruiz conquers every adversity to care for her daughter, Melissa, 21, who was born deaf and with multiple disabilities.

In 1979, when I was five months pregnant with my third daughter Melissa, I had a heart attack. Melissa's father left me, I lost my job, lost my home and moved from Syracuse to Buffalo, N.Y., with two beautiful daughters, Tammy, 13, and Sherry, 12, and a 2-year-old son, Brian. We moved in with my sister, Fran, who taught me about chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo.

One month after moving to Buffalo, Melissa was born four weeks premature and critically ill with a devastating virus. I was determined that my baby would live and overcome an impossible prognosis. The doctor had no hope that she would live and said if she did, she would be deaf, blind and a total "vegetable."

Melissa lived and kept developing against all odds. She walked at 4-and-a-half; started learning sign language at 5; and gradually learned how to dress, tie her shoes, write, draw and do simple math. All of these accomplishments were true victories. She overcame a heart condition, blindness at the age of 8, liver dysfunction and coordination problems. Her little life encouraged me so much.

This was a result of my dedicated practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism manifesting determinations and goals for her life, as well as my own. For 13 years, I challenged myself through faith, practice and study of Buddhism, with the support of the SGI-USA members in Buffalo. As a result, my determinations and dreams to have a happy family and remarry were slowly becoming a reality.

I married again and had two more sons.

In 1993, my second husband, Jim, had a job change that took us to Pennsylvania for one year and then to New Jersey.

On Halloween evening 1996, the phone rang. The director of residential services at the Trenton, N.J., State School for the Deaf, where my deaf and multi-disabled daughter, Melissa, was attending school delivered devastating news. Melissa was in the nurse's quarters being examined for injuries inflicted on her by her caregiver. Two children witnessed this woman slapping Melissa across the face, punching her head and slapping her hands.

This news made my heart stop. It all started making sense about why Melissa's behavior had changed so much since school started. This was the beginning of an intense two-and-a-half-year battle that had to be won!

This phone call challenged my life in the deepest ways. From that time forward, every day was spent processing information through the school, social workers and doctors. Evaluations were done in Philadelphia with a specialist for the deaf to determine what happened to Melissa and how she could be helped to recover.

My Buddhist practice was my stabilizer and strength. Every morning I prayed and made a list of what needed to be accomplished that day. I had to win one day at a time.

We tried to take legal action, but there was no recourse because Melissa was unable to defend herself in court, and both Melissa and the caregiver were deaf.

I believe in the strictness of cause and effect, however, and that this woman was in Melissa's life as an effect from a cause Melissa had made in a previous existence.

Throughout my life, I felt victimized by my circumstances, such as poverty, failed relationships, and a deep lack of confidence in myself. What happened to Melissa made me intolerant to being a victim any longer. I took responsibility for the situation and determined to change because I believe, as parents, our children live in the wake of our karma. I now realized that there are no victims in life.

Understanding life through a Buddhist perspective was my lifeline to sanity. The concept of karma gave me the strength to put my energies into creating value for Melissa, not revenge toward the woman who hurt her.

I chanted each day to have the strength and wisdom to care for her, love her and keep fighting the system. These words from "Reply to Kyo'o" became part of me: "Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412). I truly felt my prayer was like the roar of a lion.

As time passed, however, all avenues of help turned into dead ends. As I was quickly learning, New Jersey did not have humanitarian services for someone with needs as complex as Melissa's. She required strict routine structure, constant supervision and stimulation, and intense emotional help to express what she was feeling, cope and move forward. I was unable to provide for these needs because she needed constant supervision and I was caring for my young children, working and struggling with asthma.

The SGI-USA activities I attended encouraged me to never give up and were my opportunity to meet members, share Buddhism and receive guidance. I treasure the precious members and leaders in New Jersey, who encouraged me with their lives. It seemed when I was the most desperate, the phone would ring and someone would be reading to me from SGI President Ikeda's guidance or the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, or sharing an experience of how they won in their lives.

For the next six months, the events that occurred were like a bad dream. Melissa started acting out what happened to her and became unpredictable and violent. Seeing her act out this way was one of the most painful experiences because I deeply felt her frustration and her inability to express what this did to her. The pain I felt made me extremely determined to relieve Melissa of her suffering no matter what I had to do.

Melissa's condition worsened, and she became very sick. Tests revealed that she had Lyme disease, which affected her brain, causing Grand Mal seizures. She required emergency assistance and hospitalization for two weeks.

Two months later, Melissa was hospitalized again for one year due to her condition. In order to continue receiving care for her, I had to testify in court nearly every month that I was trying to place her in a school or program. The State of New Jersey set a mandatory deadline for Melissa to have a school or program placement that met her needs or she would become a ward of the State, and we would no longer have any say in her life.

Eventually, the social workers gave up, so it was totally up to me. I searched throughout New Jersey, New York state, New York City and Pennsylvania for a school, but to no avail.

In June 1998, I called Buffalo's St. Mary's School for the Deaf, and they agreed to take Melissa. It was our last chance. We packed our family up in three weeks and moved back to Buffalo.

When we arrived in Buffalo, the school refused to admit her due to the severity of her emotional state. They wanted to evaluate her more. I continued my fight for her to go to

school, get counseled and be accepted in a group home. I met with the director of group homes in the area and was told that it was impossible and could take between two to five years to get Melissa into a group home.

I chanted and demanded protection from the universe. Melissa received placement that helped stabilize and qualify her to get into St. Mary's School for the Deaf, as well as group home placement within six months.

All of my dreams were realized. Since Melissa's acceptance at SMSD, she has improved remarkably and will be graduating this June. She will begin working and earning a living for the first time in her life. Dr. Adams, the psychologist at the school, has been working with her. She has now learned how to express her feelings appropriately. She is happy, and a medical team here knew exactly how to treat her seizures. She does not have them anymore. Visiting with her is such a joy! She is beautiful and living and working to bring out her greatest potential.

This victory in Melissa's life was a true victory in my human revolution. In fighting and winning through this experience, I developed the absolute confidence that Nam-myohorenge-kyo is my life itself. Now, with every goal I set, I know I have the power to make it a reality through my prayer. As I begin my 21st year of practice this month, I feel the deepest appreciation for Nichiren Daishonin, SGI President Ikeda and all the SGI members who have supported me. Most of all, I feel tremendous appreciation for Melissa for giving me the opportunity to strengthen my faith.