

## EXPERIENCE—MAIKO NAKANO, HOUSTON SUA, CALABASAS: A HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

**Maiko Nakano says of her experience at Soka University of America, Calabasas, ‘I have made wonderful friends from different parts of the world who share a commitment to humanistic education.’**

The first time I visited the Soka University of America, Calabasas campus I was 11 years old, in 1986, one year after arriving in the United States from Japan. At that time, the SUA campus was just purchased and volunteers were asked to come and help clean up the campus. I was one of those volunteers.

I recall being astonished by the vast natural surroundings of the campus—the mountains, the grass, which extends for acres, the trees that have stood for so many years, the clear blue skies above, the graceful swans swimming across the lake and the small wildlife scurrying about. Everything seemed to be in harmony. I had no idea what to expect from the curriculum that would be offered or when the school would open. I remember, however, thinking to myself what a great thing it would be if I could study here one day.

Soon after my visit to SUA, my family and I moved to Houston. I heard about the developments of SUA occasionally from my mother, but I stopped thinking about my dream of attending SUA; it seemed so far away from me.

When SGI President Ikeda came to the United States in 1992, I attended one of the meetings in Los Angeles. Since that trip, I decided that I wanted to attend college in Los Angeles. I started studying seriously and chanted 30 minutes a day. Although my family could not afford to send me to an out-of-state college, I received university grants and financial aid. After high school, I entered the University of Southern California and decided to major in international relations and East Asian languages and cultures, specializing in Japanese studies.

Being away from home for the first time, I felt a freedom at USC that I had never felt before. All of my friends lived within walking distance, there were plenty of opportunities to go out to parties, alcohol and drugs were always around, and no one was there to tell me what to do. I was free to do whatever I wanted. I often felt lonely, so my friends and social life became very important in my life.

Soon I stopped doing gongyo and stopped participating in SGI activities, cutting myself off completely from the SGI-USA organization. My grades plunged, and I became disinterested in school. I also became very negative, angry and felt as though nothing satisfied me. Those were the darkest days of my life. Although on the outside I seemed content, on the inside I was miserable and empty—something was missing.

In the summer of 1997, while back at home in Houston for the break, I was asked to be one of the interpreters for the SGI Japanese exchange group members that were coming to Dallas. I hesitated at first, but my mother went ahead and volunteered me. For the following two months, the other interpreters and I studied and read phrases from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and members’ experiences in both Japanese and English.

Attending the meeting in Dallas and interpreting for the members, I felt something very warm and cheerful from them. Their sincerity, life-conditions and faith touched my life. I realized what was missing in my life—faith and my connection to the SGI.

Furthermore, this experience enabled me to realize the importance of language. Language is what connects people and it is what we need to communicate with people from different parts of the world. Although my mother always encouraged and pushed me to study Japanese, I never really understood the significance of being bilingual. Now, I began to feel that speaking another language is something really substantial. I became aware of the role that language plays in the global arena. Language is a bridge linking different cultures.

When I returned from Dallas, I read an experience of an SUA, Calabasas graduate in the *World Tribune*. My mother had told me about the master's program in second and foreign language education, with a concentration in TESOL [teaching English to speakers of other languages], being offered there, but I never listened. However, the *World Tribune* experience encouraged and reminded me of my forgotten childhood dream of attending SUA.

When I returned to school, everything was the same, but I made a determination to change myself. I stopped using drugs and focusing so much on my social life. I began to devote myself to studying and started thinking about what I wanted to do in the future after graduating. I was fascinated by my major but did not know what to do with it. I considered several options but I was confused and frustrated. Meanwhile, my mother insisted that I check out the master's program offered at SUA, Calabasas. I was not interested in becoming an English teacher at first, but I contacted SUA and made an appointment to meet with the dean of the graduate school, Dr. Tomoko Takahashi.

After meeting and talking to Dr. Takahashi, my views changed. I was once again reminded of the importance of language and about the role of language education. I decided to apply for admission right away. When I received the acceptance letter, I was thrilled.

At SUA, I challenged myself both academically and spiritually. The program is rigorous and consisted of classes that focus on linguistics theories and language education methodologies. The class sizes are small and foster close relationships and open dialogue among teachers and students. Since my study habits were shaky, the academic challenge was demanding because I studied subjects that were new to me. My classmates and teachers at SUA, however, were always there to encourage and support me whenever I needed help.

I also faced challenges of accepting who I am as well as not limiting my potential. I learned to respect others for who they are and about the meaning of true friendship and sincerely caring for others through my classmates who came from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, I strengthened my faith and practice. I started reciting gongyo, attending SGI activities, reading President Ikeda's guidance and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo whenever I felt low.

My experience at SUA has contributed to my personal growth and taught me about the depths of value-creation and humanistic education. I now feel content and no longer feel empty inside. The life I experienced with this practice while I was at SUA and how I feel is so different from how I was during college without my Buddhist practice. I do not regret the past. I realized I have to change myself in order to change my environment. Furthermore, I have made wonderful friends from different parts of the world who share a commitment to humanistic education. I am fully aware of the need for nurturing global citizens through education. In sum, what I gained and learned from SUA is something that I will never experience elsewhere and will cherish forever.

I will begin teaching English at Soka Women's College in Tokyo this April. I am determined to become an educator who embraces and cultivates diversity, humanism, critical thinking and capable global citizens.