

**NORTHEASTERN ZONE KICKOFF HELD  
WITH YOUTHFUL FLARE  
BY BOB TALIAFERRO  
NEW YORK BUREAU CHIEF**

Youthful energy, good cheer and jubilation greeted the 5,000 SGI-USA members and guests who attended the Northeastern Zone Kickoff on Jan. 28. A Brazilian samba band beat out a hearty, spirited welcome. A jazz band sparked enthusiasm and smiles. A Chinese lion dancer flourished his golden mane. Greeters, including SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima, cheered, shook the members' hands and embraced them as they entered the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan.

This festive occasion was the largest gathering since 1986 of members from throughout the zone, which encompasses New Jersey, New York and the New England states. Many members traveled up to eight hours by bus to participate in this joyful reunion, where they saw many old friends in faith for the first time in years. The auditorium was filled to overflowing, while some 700 members graciously agreed to enjoy the proceedings through video display in the lobby.

It felt as though SGI President Ikeda himself was there. Early in the meeting, there was a video presentation of the 52nd Headquarters Leaders Meeting, which included a stirring chorus of "Soka Song Of Joy" (to the tune of "Ode to Joy") and President Ikeda's guidance on the Century of Women and the second Seven Bells (see the Jan. 19 and Feb. 2 *World Tribune*).

James Herrmann, SGI-USA youth leader, shared his experience with introducing people to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, emphasizing the importance of making every effort and having patience. He reported that when he was in the Navy 16 years ago, having a place designated for Buddhist meetings on his base was unheard of and unacceptable.

Today, at that same base, weekly introduction meetings are being held and are strongly supported by the base commander. Mr. Herrmann was surprised and elated to find out that he had first introduced the Navy person behind these efforts, Chief Petty Officer Rene Geyser, to the practice 16 years ago.

Throughout the meeting, spirited youth division members performed, beginning with 75 Boys and Girls Group members fearlessly singing "Climb Every Mountain." The New Jersey Youth Band with dancers vigorously performed "Ichinen." And the New England youth division enthusiastically jammed on "Victory Over Violence."

One hundred members of the New York junior high and high school division dramatized the Lotus Sutra parable "The Gem in the Robe." The audience was on its feet during dance portions of the skit that included New York City-style breakdancing. Many of these performers were guests who had been invited to participate by their friends.

In his encouragement, Mr. Nagashima shared President Ikeda's recent guidance that "now is the time that the SGI-USA can grow, can develop, without limit. I am really counting on America. Never forget, America is the center of the worldwide propagation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism."

Mr. Nagashima emphasized that this process starts with "each of us expanding our lives, achieving our dreams and becoming happier and happier."

He shared that when he became general director about one year ago, he received guidance from President Ikeda to always treasure the members working on the frontlines. To reply, he decided to home visit as many members as possible. From the more than 1,000

visits he made last year, he said that he clearly saw the power of the Gohonzon. "Our members have tremendous conviction toward the Gohonzon," he said. "They have achieved many, many impossible things. They are the true heroes of our movement."

Mr. Nagashima closed by encouraging each district to determine to introduce one new member to the practice by May 3, 2001, as a positive step toward the beginning of this new era in kosen-rufu history. "Please remember that your victory in your own life is a victory for America," he concluded. "Let's enjoy our benefits. Let's become as happy as we can be."

With this spirit, the Northeastern Zone members are now beginning preparations for their Family Youth Festival, which will mark the 20th anniversary of President Ikeda's poem written in New York, "To My Young American Friends." The festival will be held July 14 at the Madison Square Garden Theater, with 10,000 members and guests from throughout the Northeast participating.