

EXPERIENCE—JONI HERMAN, HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIF. THE ART OF A MENTOR

Joni Herman finds mentoring at-risk kids brings new meaning to her art.

I was born in Venice, Calif., but my parents moved to Europe to study painting when I was 6 months old. I had a unique upbringing in Italy because I spent my childhood until age 12 in the studios of the most prominent Florentine artists of the day. My mother was one of five protégés of Pietro Annigoni—a true maestro of portraiture—whose clients included Queen Elizabeth, Pope Paul and John F. Kennedy.

In lieu of television, I spent most days painting under the mentoring of my parents. At an early age, I learned the value of having a maestro or mentor in life.

Though I appreciated the culturally rich experience my parents afforded me, life was not easy. Due to my parents' dedication to mastering their art, our family was poor. I literally grew up on the streets of Florence, Italy, eating scraps from people's plates and sitting at the curb with my mother and her paintings in the hopes of selling a painting, often relying on people's generosity to buy food.

When we moved back to the United States, my mother, who feared that life as a painter was too financially unstable, influenced me to develop a more practical profession. So I became a secretary to earn a living.

At 19, I began to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism within the SGI-USA. I had lived through a drug overdose and was hospitalized for four months in Europe. My practice of Buddhism was the reason I was able to live a normal life and overcome what doctors told me was irreversible damage to my nervous system.

Early on in my practice in 1985, I had an opportunity to attend an exchange meeting with SGI President Ikeda that was life changing. Even though I had a second chance at life, I felt an overwhelming sense of futility and despair. My life was so difficult and there didn't seem to be a reason to fight so hard just to exist. When I encountered Daisaku Ikeda, I felt I had met a human being that was living passionately for the happiness of other people. I knew I had found a new mentor—not just a mentor in the art of painting, but a mentor of life itself.

As I continued to chant, I developed tremendous drive and energy, which helped me resurrect my dream of being an artist. I challenged the intimidation I felt in the face of my parents' incredible talent and the fear of not being able to survive financially.

It took many years, but I managed to commit to following my heart and pursue a career as a fine artist. In 1995, at 32, I developed a very successful faux finishing and mural business with 30 full-time employees. I worked extensively in the homes and offices of celebrities such as Milton Berle, Rod Stewart, Kenny G. and Steven Spielberg.

I found myself focusing more and more on making money, while the vision I had of being a great human being like President Ikeda started to diminish. I realize now that I tried to fill the void in my life where so much shame and feelings of worthlessness existed from growing up in poverty. The more I pursued this path, the stronger my pangs of need became and the less satisfied I was with my accomplishments. It all started to feel pointless. Here I was 10 years later, so successful, yet with the same lack of worth for my life.

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I worked seven days a week and all my energy was spent managing employees. I never painted. I wasn't an artist any more, and no longer had a vision for my life's work or my purpose as a human being. I finally realized I was miserable.

That's when an employee I was sponsoring for a green card faked an injury and filed a lawsuit against me. It cost me a lot of money to defend myself, and I ended up filing for bankruptcy. At the same time, my boyfriend left me, I lost my house, my vehicle, and all hope.

Depression consumed me for nearly a year.

Though I continued to participate in SGI-USA activities, I remained on the fringe of the organization. During this time, many people tried to encourage me but my attitude was "I heard that before" and "This practice works for everybody else but me." But the days I spent studying the writings of Nichiren Daishonin paid off because this gave me the wisdom to recognize my negativity. I decided the only way I knew how to change my life was through total commitment to my Buddhist practice.

Since I hadn't taken responsibility in the SGI-USA for a few years, I chanted with what sincerity I could muster to contribute wholeheartedly within the organization. I began volunteering with the stage crew in the art department for an upcoming youth festival in Los Angeles in 1999.

During this time, I determined to find something meaningful to create with my life since I knew how transient everything was. A new sense of purpose emerged as I read the following guidance from President Ikeda: "Leo Tolstoy asserts: 'An immortal soul requires a task as immortal as itself. And just such a task is assigned to it: endless striving after perfection of self and the world.' How true this is! The struggle to develop ourselves and make the world a better place is what makes our lives immortal. There are those who have no solid philosophy to guide them in life, and they have no interest in seeking one. ... Ballsagun entreats: 'A person who does not work for others is as if in the grave. Don't be a dead person! As long as you have strength, work for others!'" (*World Tribune*, Sept. 24, 1999, p. 4).

I realized I had lost my sense of mission over the years. The spirit described above is what I had witnessed in President Ikeda when I first met him, and it is what gave me hope to go on living. I wanted to follow his example.

In January 2000, I attended a meeting in Japan with President Ikeda. At this meeting, he said, "In the realm of human beings, there is nothing as beautiful or as strong as the bond between mentor and disciple." Seeing him again reminded me of our first meeting. It helped me challenge the lack of value I felt in my life; I felt I could try again. After the meeting, I wrote him a letter expressing my promise to fulfill his guidance to support the youth.

Shortly after returning from my trip, I started chanting to work with youth in trouble. I shared my desire with many friends and clients until I met a client who was a counselor for at-risk youth. I began a volunteer art program one day a week at the Santiago Creek Day School, a probationary school where students age 13 to 18 are often sent when expelled from regular school.

There are approximately 40 students of all grade levels in each class. The first day of class I chanted so intensely I thought I would burst. I wanted to provide an opportunity for these at-risk youth to use art to express their deepest pain and disappointments and was terrified I wouldn't be effective.

The first day we were going to start a mural, a 3-month project. The kids looked tough

and intentionally disregarded me. At the end of the day, I told the teacher how I had chanted and how terrified I was of what I had taken on. She laughed affectionately and patted me on the back.

Every day I prayed from the bottom of my heart for the happiness of each student and faculty. I prayed to benefit even one student through my efforts. Though I had no teaching experience, I was determined to reach their humanity and get beyond their mistrust.

The following week, I noticed a new boy with a shaved head sitting by himself. He looked depressed and gave off a “don’t come near me” vibe. José had an exceptional artistic ability. When I asked him if he painted at home he said he didn’t have materials. So I brought him paint, brushes and a pad to take home the following week. When I gave him the art supplies, José immediately transformed, smiling from ear to ear. I could now see the beautiful innocence in his heart.

As I got to know Jose, I learned that he had missed a full year of school because he went to work to help support his family of nine kids. The Santiago Creek Day School was José’s last chance to graduate from high school.

A few months later, I got involved in another SGI-USA culture festival in Orange County. I invited José and another boy, Alberto, from class to come help out. I put them in charge of designing and laying out all three 12-foot x 20-foot stage backdrops. Each weekend and some evenings for two months, José and Alberto came to our community center to paint. Respecting their Catholic beliefs, I explained to them about our Buddhist practice and said that I didn’t expect them to chant. I only wanted them to have the experience of working on the stages.

They were so enthusiastic. Each week, Alberto would wait for 45 minutes outside to make sure he didn’t miss getting picked up to go to the community center. After the third week, José asked me about chanting and has been chanting ever since. I prayed each day for both of their happiness.

The three stages turned out beautifully and of professional quality. I had invited a friend of mine to attend the festival who owns the finest animation school in Los Angeles. He was so taken by José’s story and the beautiful stages that he gave José a full scholarship to his school.

Since José started practicing his inner life has completely transformed. He has developed so much hope and confidence, which is evident in his huge beaming smile. José will begin his second semester of studying character design soon. His mother was so overwhelmed with the actual proof of his chanting that she also began chanting and so did his 15-year-old sister, Alicia. I am soon to become godmother to José’s 5-year-old sister. I feel like I am part of their family. They are so wealthy with love.

I was so touched when recently José said, “I always wanted to be a famous artist, but now I also want to be a mentor like President Ikeda.”

Working with these young people at the Santiago Creek Day School for the past year has become the substance and meaning that repalced my sense of futility. We are currently creating a series of six 8-foot x 16-foot murals of underwater sea life to be permanently installed around the pool at the Newport Beach YMCA, along with a plaque of all of their names. My vision is that these students will begin to transform the way they view themselves in relationship to society. I believe any hostility they may feel toward society is really only a frustration of their not knowing how to be a part of it—a feeling I’ve had to challenge and overcome myself. I want them to be recognized for their efforts and feel proud of contributing from their hearts.

The feedback I've received about my art program has been very positive. Cyndie Borkoman, the teacher in charge of the school, told her supervisors that the artist who comes once a week has been chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo for us and it is transforming our school. She calls me their school's angel. Also, on Feb. 13 I was presented with the 2001 Spirit of Volunteerism Award on behalf of the Orange County Department of Education for my efforts. Though I'm busy with work, I'm committed to continuing to work with youth. In fact, my new determination is to open an art school for at-risk kids.

In addition, my mural business is now growing to the same success I had before, only I don't have employees. There is such a demand for my work that I'm booked for several months. And I'm doing what I love, which is painting.