

**VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE 2001
THE NEXT STEP FOR VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE
BY DARIN NELLIS
SGI-USA YOUTH PEACE COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR**

Darin Nellis shares his ideas on ‘how to take our amazing Victory Over Violence campaign to a whole new level by focusing on the heart of the mentor.’

Victory Over Violence — a fresh breeze in our organization’s efforts to reach out into our communities to spread the humanistic values of Buddhism!

Starting in August 1999, the SGI-USA officially kicked off its Victory Over Violence campaign with 1,600 districts across the nation sponsoring VOV meetings spearheaded by the youth. Since then, thousands of members have taken the initiative to sponsor their own VOV activities including VOV workshops, concerts, youth summits and other VOV-centered events. It has been, without a doubt, the most successful youth-led social engagement campaign that we have ever undertaken in the SGI-USA and hopefully a model for many others in the future.

Despite our tremendous success, some feel that we have only scratched the surface of what we can accomplish through VOV. So what is the next step? This has been a subject of extensive dialogue between the SGI-USA Youth Peace Committee representatives and other members around the nation.

Victory Over Violence is deeply related to the mentor–disciple relationship.

Recently, I attended an SGI training course in Japan. During my stay a young man who was a reporter for the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai’s daily newspaper, contacted me. He heard that I was a leader in the United States for the YPC and asked me if I would do an interview about VOV, which has become very well known in the SGI around the world. Feeling confident about my work on the VOV campaign, I quickly agreed to meet him the next morning over breakfast. When we met the next morning, he clarified his interests for the interview and said what he really wanted was to do an interview on “Victory Over Violence and the Mentor–Disciple Relationship.” I was taken off guard by his statement and quickly lost whatever confidence I previously had. I never thought of the relationship between VOV and mentor–disciple in such a direct way.

I felt uncomfortable not having thought of this myself in the past. Despite my inability to give him a really good answer (I didn’t have one), I did my best to respond. In our dialogue, he shared his own passion for the mentor–disciple relationship. Whether he is writing an article or interviewing someone, he said, he makes sure that the mentor–disciple relationship comes first. I was deeply moved by his sincerity. He seemed to exude a strong sense of love and genuine affection toward his mentor, SGI President Ikeda, and talked about him as if he were his father.

Later, after chanting and reflecting on what the reporter had said, I had a powerful but simple realization. During the training course, I was trying to connect with President Ikeda’s life directly but never felt like I had captured what I was looking for. All the while, I had been surrounded by people that President Ikeda had encouraged consistently for many years and some whom he had personally raised. Some were SGI staff and others were members we visited while in Japan. I was genuinely inspired by their behavior. They all conveyed a very natural kindness and respect toward the other guests and me. I thought

maybe it was an act, or that they were really trying hard to look sincere and friendly. But after a few days and then after a week of closely watching them in action, I realized that their behavior didn't change. No matter how late they had to stay up to prepare for the details of the next day or how many times they had to wait for members who were late, their sincerity and warmheartedness remained the same.

I realized that this love that I had been treated with by the SGI staff and members in Japan was exactly what I was seeking from President Ikeda. This natural affection and respect for people was also what the reporter was speaking of when he shared with me that the mentor-disciple relationship was front and center at every moment for him. My realization helped me to understand how to take our amazing VOV campaign to a whole new level by focusing on the heart of the mentor.

Many people are asking themselves, 'What is the cause of youth violence?'

VOV was created by the SGI-USA youth to address violence in society and in particular the escalation of youth-on-youth violence in schools across America. The dramatic school shootings and other youth-on-youth violence widely publicized over the past five years have been a very tragic but necessary wake-up call to our nation. When I was in high school, just 13 years ago, a student carrying a gun on campus was unthinkable. Today, even our youngest school-aged children face the very real fear of random school shootings, of even getting shot themselves. And this is not to mention the peer pressure and schoolyard bullying children face today.

Even Japan, where crime and violence are much lower than America, has seen an alarming increase in youth violence. President Ikeda mentions in his latest education proposal (February *Living Buddhism*) that "in Japan, there has been a terrible series of school suicides and other tragedies resulting from bullying, and the crisis is escalating, while the worldwide problem of drug abuse is gradually spreading to Japan as well. In addition, there has been a succession of juvenile crimes in recent years: a series of murders by 14- and 15-year-olds, and, in just the last year, crimes that have shocked the Japanese public such as the motiveless hijacking of an expressway bus by a 17-year-old, killing one and causing severe trauma for all the other passengers, and a boy who brutally clubbed his mother to death with a baseball bat; crimes that would have been practically unthinkable in Japan just a few years ago."

Many people around the world are asking themselves, "What is the cause of this youth violence?" After the recent Santana High School shooting in Santee, Calif., where two students were killed and 13 injured, a front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read, "Santee Searches for Answers as Motive Remains a Mystery." In the article, the writer asks, "How did a boy with so many friends, described by teachers as a pleasure in class, an honors student three years running, grow so terribly angry?"

After the Columbine High School shooting, two high school principals quit their jobs and traveled across America to interview school-aged youth about the cause of this violence. After talking to hundreds of young people, they found that an overwhelming amount of them felt that the cause was not too much violence in movies, too many guns on the streets, violent video games or negative music. Instead, a large majority of the youth felt that no one was listening to their concerns and sufferings, and that their parents and other caretakers (including older youth) could do a lot more to listen and reach out to them.

In other words, by cherishing young people, no matter what faults they may have, adults and other caregivers can show young people through their own example how precious life is. This is also, I believe, what President Ikeda has been trying to teach us and what the mentor–disciple relationship is all about.

But reaching out to youth, especially those who are troubled or unwilling to listen can seem almost impossible at times. What is the most effective way to go about connecting with and raising young people? This will be the subject of the next article in this series. Also, stay tuned for other upcoming VOV articles brought to you by the SGI-USA YPC on mastering the art of dialogue, the VOV philosophy and reaching out beyond our familiar surroundings into the greater community.

One in a series