

EXPERIENCE—EVELYN RIVERA, PUERTO RICO EARLY HARDSHIPS GIVE WAY TO A HAPPY FAMILY

In her quest to build a family, Evelyn Rivera found strength and compassion.

Although I was born and raised in New York City, my parents instilled in me the Latin cultural values “get an education, get married and have children.” I’ve since fulfilled these wishes, but not in that order.

I grew up at a time when drugs and teenage pregnancy were very pervasive and, seeing how this could have negative consequences before finishing high school, I determined not to become a statistic. However, this determination was short-lived. At age 19, I became pregnant. Although my parents never hit me, my first thought was, “They’re going to kill me,” and being one of my grandmother’s favorites, I was certain she would keel over and die. I was afraid, angry and knew I was not ready to take on the responsibility for someone else’s life.

After discussing the situation with two close friends, I decided to terminate the pregnancy without my parents’ knowledge. I remember while in the hospital awaiting the procedure, I felt lonely and scared, but more than anything, angry. With this feeling came the thought, “If I get through this nightmare, I never want to have a child.” I did my best to put this painful experience behind me and went on with my life.

Three years later, as my parents had envisioned, I got married. Two years later, while working at OB/GYN units, my desire to start a family reappeared, and I made an appointment with a doctor. He told me that due to damage to my reproductive organs, I could not conceive. Yet, at the same time, he gave me hope that with infertility technology and other resources, I had a 75 percent chance of having this problem corrected. I submitted to the necessary procedures and had surgery to correct the problem. After a year, nothing happened and the feelings of disappointment, fear and anger immediately set in.

It was during this time that my brother, Jimmy, started telling me about his Buddhist practice and inviting me to meetings on Thursday nights. He was always doing strange things, and I thought this was just another one. I hung out with him and his Buddhist friends on any other week day, but avoided him like the plague on Thursdays.

As time passed I saw they were normal, very warm and friendly. There was something drawing me to the practice that I couldn’t deny. Finally, I went to my first meeting. I felt the friendliness of those who today are my “treasures of the heart.” I was told to chant for anything my heart desired. So I began to chant to have children.

Two years had passed since the surgery and with this new sense of hope and the Gohonzon, I submitted to a second operation. Only this time there was only a 50 percent chance of success. I remember during this hospital stay getting an encouraging call from a women’s leader whom I barely knew to say that she was chanting for my dream. People I didn’t even know were making my dreams their own. Within a year, I was told that the reconstructive surgery was again unsuccessful and this would be the last. I could not have children.

Again, I tried to put this painful experience behind me. The hurt and sense of failure were overwhelming and, being a new member, I started doubting the Gohonzon. But with

the support of many members, I continued my practice and received many material benefits, what I thought then was happiness.

About five years later, my marriage ended in mutual agreement. At this point, I began using my practice in a more profound way, to deal with the roots of my many sufferings, which seemed bigger than the universe. I began having slow gongyo sessions and mid-day group meetings at my apartment. I was invited on a trip to Chicago to see SGI President Ikeda where I heard the poem "To My Young American Friends," which made me realize, "I am young and should be creating value with my life."

A year earlier, my mother had been diagnosed with colon cancer and had major surgery. I prayed for her health and was encouraged to read Nichiren Daishonin's letter "On Prolonging Life" for courage. It helped me realize the precious treasure of life. I remember calling my mother and hearing her say, "I'm happy because you sound so happy." My mother received the Gohonzon in August 1986 in New York and passed away peacefully in March 1987 in her native Puerto Rico.

I had to use the strategy of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and put all my energy into overcoming this great loss and lonely feeling. During my many SGI activities, I also began to see how many of my personal relationships had no foundation. I realized I had to deepen my faith, not just for my sake, but in order to attract the right person. I chanted for someone that I could not only have a family with, but who would support me in my efforts for the SGI.

In preparation for a large SGI-USA gathering in Massachusetts, a young woman mentioned that there was a handsome young man she liked. Somehow another friend, who had been listening, suddenly appeared with this young man whom I remember always seeing at activities with two children. I always assumed he was supporting the women's division, but actually the kids were his infant son and young daughter. I was very clear that my life had to stay focused on doing my own human revolution, so upon introduction I was not attracted to him in the least.

As these activities proceeded, this very active young man always seemed to be in my environment and always needed a ride home or to work, which were all on my way home. These encounters allowed us to discuss our practice and I began to see him as a good friend. We were able to share our past relationships and many sufferings and agreed that we were practicing to change poison into medicine.

A year later, I became Mrs. Ian Willoughby and got a family all in one package. The adjustment of becoming an instant mother aroused fear and sometimes anger, arising from deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-esteem. Many times I chanted and cried in front of the Gohonzon, asking, "Why me?" Eventually, the answer was very clear: my mission was to raise these children for kosen-rufu. With this sense of purpose and compassion, I started seeing Ian's children as my children.

Today, I am a happily married woman and a proud mother of a very vigorous young woman, Angelina, and a determined young man, Alexander.

I owe a great deal to my brother and those who have supported me in my practice. I will continue to strengthen my practice, along with my best friend and wonderful husband, until the last moment of my life, always following President Ikeda's ceaseless encouragement.