

EXPERIENCE—FELIX ORTIZ, NORTH HOLLYWOOD, CALIF. THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE

With the support of many friends, and an unshakable conviction, Felix Ortiz defeats a life-threatening illness.

After the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan, I traveled to Japan with a team of 69 Americans to build 300 units of emergency housing. This was also where I met and fell in love with my wife, Hideko. After I returned to California, she was able to join me and we were married in June 1995. She introduced me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and three years later, in 1998, I became a member of SGI-USA.

A month after I joined, we opened a Japanese restaurant in the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles. It started out well, but later the area began to decline, and along with other restaurants around us, our business began to slide. We worked long hours to keep the business going but to no avail. We were committed to a five-year lease but every day that we stayed open created additional bills we couldn't pay. We didn't want to go back on our lease commitment and yet our debt was continually increasing. After chanting for the best course of action, we decided to close the restaurant rather than continuing to run up additional debts.

Soon after closing the restaurant, creditors and the building owner started demanding that we reopen, pay the note and past due rent or face lawsuits. We were sued for breach of contract and back rents. The combined debts totaled \$68,000.

There was such tremendous pressure, I worried that we would lose everything. I was so upset I told my wife to go back to Japan and leave me to deal with this alone. She didn't go. Instead, we chanted together and studied SGI President Ikeda's guidance and the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, specifically, "Happiness in this World."

In August, our lawyer advised us to file for bankruptcy, and we did. We wanted to keep our home, our belongings and a plot of land we owned, but the attorney said the creditors would probably want to take everything. Again, we continued to chant and study.

On the day we appeared in court, we were amazed that none of our creditors or the building owner's agent appeared. The judge initially ruled that we didn't qualify for Chapter 7 bankruptcy because my income was too high. (By this time, I was working as a deputy inspector.) Our lawyer then pointed out that income is not a factor in a Chapter 7. The judge agreed and no additional hearing was scheduled.

Two months later, again continuing our daimoku campaign, we received a Notice of Discharge from the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. We were able to keep everything that we first thought we were going to lose. We had completely changed things around. Yet, as this financial upheaval was ending, another challenge was developing.

I discovered that I had a large tumor on my left testicle. I sought out medical help, had surgery and the tumor was removed. Shortly thereafter, I had a CT scan that showed positive signs of a rare testicular cancer, seminoma. The doctor said that the cells of the tumor had traveled upwards, very close to my kidney, and would have to be treated with chemotherapy.

I couldn't believe that I had cancer. The doctor explained that I would have up to six months of chemotherapy, which also meant that I would not be able to work for six

months. I was becoming increasingly concerned because I knew that we could not live without my income for that length of time, and I didn't know what would happen to my wife if I did not survive.

But at the same time, because of everything I had learned from being in the SGI and our challenge with the restaurant business, I was ready to challenge the situation and can honestly say that even though the situation was unnerving, I had complete confidence that I would overcome the illness. I can remember leaving the doctor's office with a smile on my face.

My wife took it very hard. Every time she would look at me, she would start to cry. Every night she would cry herself to sleep. Even though she had 17 years of practice, she was suffering.

We shared our struggle with the members of our district and we all began to move into action. Our district leader arranged for other leaders to speak with my wife and me. I shared my goals (no radiation, no further treatments) and at every chanting session, the members would chant for me. Other members came over to our house and chanted with us.

I started chemotherapy in December. I lost all my hair and my fingernails turned dark. There was daily nausea and I lost my appetite. But I continued chanting and tried to keep my life-condition high. In January, the doctor told me that my CT scan showed no evidence of cancer in my vital organs, but it did show a five-centimeter growth (about the size of a tennis ball) near my kidney. I resolved to chant even harder.

Gradually, my blood tests began to show improvement. The doctors even eliminated one bag of medicine per day, which meant less time at the doctor's office. Not once did I ever feel sad, depressed or sorry for myself. My wife became stronger and began saying, "We have already won."

After the third treatment, the doctor told me: "This is your last treatment. Your blood test is already showing good results. We need to take another CT scan. If there is anything left, we will take care of it with radiation." I returned to work full time a little over two months after I started treatment. We had survived without suffering any severe financial problems.

In March, we received the news that there was no trace of the tennis ball size growth. It was gone. The doctor also said that I no longer needed radiation. It would do me more harm than good.

I cannot tell you the joy I feel for having overcome this tremendous obstacle. And again, I could not have done it without the prayers, support and friendship of fellow members.

I am still a relatively new member, and since I joined the SGI-USA, my wife and I have experienced one setback after another. But we've never given in. This is one of my biggest benefits.

My hope is to share this practice, not only with cancer victims, but with others suffering from different health conditions.

I want to work for kosen-rufu, enjoy life and get ready for the next challenge.