

## HONORING OUR PIONEERS—MIKE KIKUMURA, LOS ANGELES FROM A STORMY BEGINNING TO A GOLDEN LIFE WITH NO REGRETS

**After surviving a very turbulent youth, Mike Kikumura is proud of the life he has led and the lessons he has learned from his Buddhist practice.**

*This experience originally appeared in the April 6 Japanese edition of the World Tribune.*

I was born a second-generation Japanese-American, or *Nisei*, in 1927. Soon after, the Great Depression began, and my parents, who had one son and 10 daughters, went through many hardships. Born the only son, my parents expected me to become the head of the family when I grew up. But at 1-and-a-half years old, I suffered from meningitis, which resulted in a slowing down of my mental development. This was a great disappointment to my parents.

When I was 13 years old, World War II broke out. My entire family was sent to an internment camp in Arkansas. I spent four years of my adolescence in an environment filled with anger and resentment. It didn't take long before I gave up any hope of pursuing my education. At that time, there was rampant racial discrimination against Japanese-Americans, which I experienced first hand.

As a young man, I left our home in Lodi, Calif. Shortly thereafter, I was drafted and sent to the frontlines of the Korean War. On the day of my departure, I boarded a transport plane that would carry many young soldiers overseas. I looked out the window of the plane and saw my father standing at the edge of the airfield looking up at me. I had not told my family that I was going to the front, but my father found out. We could not talk to each other, but we communicated with our eyes through the window.

Immediately after I left for Korea, my father died in an accident. That day at the airport was the last time I saw him. As was characteristic of men who were born in the Meiji Era, my father was as stubborn as a mule. I believe that in my father's eyes, I was not a good son while he was alive. Now that I have come to know Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and its philosophy of the three existences of life, the bond between my father and I is embedded in my heart. I am so grateful for this philosophy.

After my return from Korea, I started to work as an auto mechanic. I asked my remaining family, my mother and sisters, to come and live with me in Los Angeles. I then married my wife, Takako, who was a Soka Gakkai member.

Once I began to practice Buddhism, I found that all the bitterness, poverty and hardship that I had experienced before I started practicing had become my treasures. Without those days of hardship, I might not have been able to share other people's sufferings or to encourage them.

In 1960, SGI President Ikeda visited Los Angeles for the first time. It was the turning point of my life. Until I met President Ikeda, I had been against this practice. Meeting him changed my attitude. I joined the SGI and began to participate in activities in high spirits, hitting it off with other members, determined to build the foundation of American kosen-rufu.

The following year, the Soka Gakkai in Japan dispatched Hiroshi Hojo and other leaders to the United States. An expansion of the organization was proposed, and I was a candidate

to be a leader in one of the newly formed districts. To say I was shocked would be an understatement.

At that time, all the meetings, guidance and study were conducted in Japanese. Although I was born a *Nisei*, I could not speak, read or write Japanese. I was able to chant, but I could not read the sutra book. So at every meeting I was just sitting there, stuck in my shell.

I was determined to turn down the appointment before the official announcement. At the leaders meeting, I went straight to Mr. Hojo and said to him in broken Japanese, “I know nothing, I am no good.” In a cold sweat, I tried to express myself by gestures.

Mr. Hojo listened to me attentively and said: “OK, so you know nothing about the practice, Mr. Kikumura. But a leader who knows a little about the practice is more likely to cause problems by teaching the members something that has nothing to do with faith. The fact that you know nothing unnecessary makes you most suitable to be the district leader, because you have no choice but to teach your members the most important basics of the practice. You’ll be able to tell them, ‘The power of daimoku is so great!’ You can ask them, ‘Why don’t you go straight to the Gohonzon?’”

At a loss for words, I accepted the appointment as the first male district leader in Los Angeles. I learned Japanese and how to do gongyo by listening to others. When I led gongyo, I held a Japanese sutra book in my hands for the sake of appearance. On occasion, someone would say, “You are holding the sutra book upside down!” Those times are now my cherished memories.

Looking back, I believe that a prime point for me was in the encouragement I received from Mr. Hojo. The purpose of all our activities, including various meetings, home visits and individual guidance, is to make every member aware of the great power of daimoku and to rouse in him or her a pure heart toward the Gohonzon.

Each meeting I have had with President Ikeda has become my cherished memory, my treasure. He expected that I would become a go-between for the Japan–United States kosen-rufu movement. In my heart, I feel that he has trained me with a mercy greater than that of my parents. I have also witnessed his creation of a “Soka World” together with my respected seniors and members—a world that is built upon the true mentor–disciple relationship.

I am now a member of the Golden Stage Group (SGI-USA members who are age 60 and over), visiting dear old members, one by one. I am determined to create in our community the warm, humanistic world that President Ikeda has shown us and expand it. In this way, I want to repay my debt of gratitude to him.

And I want to share with the youth the following prime point: Never leave the SGI—this is the key to your happiness! This is the conclusion shared by the pioneers of the SGI-USA who struggled through the turbulent, uncharted early days of the organization, throwing everything else aside.

I am determined to put the finishing touches on my “third stage of life,” to make my life one in which I can proudly say: “I helped to make history. I have won in my life. I have no regrets at all.”