

## **EXPERIENCE—DEBBIE GONZALEZ, NEW YORK CITY A RENEWED DETERMINATION FOR PEACE**

**After her experience on Sept. 11, Debbie Gonzalez has determined to work even harder for peace.**

Before I started practicing Buddhism, I was an angry young woman. One day, riding the train to school, a woman invited me to a meeting. At the time, I was 19 years old and a real rock 'n' roller. People were afraid of me. Looking back, I realize I hid behind this angry image, because, in reality, I was afraid of getting close to people. That was 24 years ago and I can say confidently that, through chanting, I have changed my destructive anger into anger for justice. And the events I experienced on Sept. 11 renewed my dedication to creating peace on this planet.

I have been an educator for the past 17 years and a guidance counselor for the past six years in one of the most troubled high schools in Brooklyn, N.Y. When I started the job, the students were the most troubled I had ever seen. Worse, the administration and staff were negative and malicious. Every day there were gang-related incidents, major fights and many students dropping out. It seemed to me that the administration was afraid of the students, allowing them to continue their negative behavior. I decided I needed to take charge of my environment and began chanting three hours a day to change this situation. I dedicated my life to daimoku.

At the same time, I was in the middle of a very difficult situation at home. I had asked my husband to leave because his negative behavior was having a traumatic effect on my son. He refused, and my home life became as negative as my work life.

But the real turning point came when the students' parents started to complain about me. They felt I was being too strict. My supervisor approached me with the complaints and I soon realized I was at risk of losing my job.

I went home and chanted an entire weekend. On Monday, I approached my supervisor and told him about my Buddhist practice. I also told him if he let me work in my own way, I would deliver him a 100 percent graduation rate for the students I was counseling. He agreed to give me the chance, and I continued to chant three hours a day.

Everything began to change from there. The students began responding to me and made progress. My husband and I got an amicable divorce, and my financial and emotional life became better than I had ever dreamed. Most importantly, 100 percent of my students graduated.

I also brought the Victory Over Violence campaign to my school, and gang-related fights and violence have decreased significantly. I introduced many of the staff and students at this school to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and many have started practicing. It was also a great honor for me to receive the Jackie Robinson Award for Outstanding Mentor and Educator for the year 2001. Most importantly to me, though, is my 12-year-old son, who has an incredible life-condition. He is proof of my human revolution and his happiness is my greatest pride.

On Sept. 11, I was speaking to a class of ninth-grade students. Suddenly, the principal came and told me to put the blinds down. I did not know what she was talking about, so I went over to the window. It was then that I saw the World Trade Center tower burning and

the second plane hit. We had no idea what had happened. A few minutes later, an announcement was made that both towers were on fire.

At that point, it seemed all the daimoku I had chanted welled up in my life. I really felt all my training from my SGI youth activities come to the surface. I began helping people, supporting everyone, moving into action quickly. All the years of struggling behind-the-scenes for festivals and activities seemed to have trained me for this moment.

As students realized their parents and relatives were in the trade center, they became hysterical. One girl began to shake and scream, and soon could not breathe. I was so scared because she wasn't breathing. I called for help but waiting felt endless, so I began chanting inside. After help arrived, I went to call her mother at work to see if she was safe. Everyone in the school office was staring out the window in awe and listening to the radio. Then the first tower fell.

At this point, students were crying and panic-stricken. Again, I felt years of daimoku come to my aid, and I walked from classroom to classroom gathering students whose parents were working in lower Manhattan. I did my best to calm them. The whole time I was thinking about my son and hoping that someone was taking care of him at his school.

Parents started arriving to pick up their children. Some of them were covered in white soot from head to toe. Many were crying. I tried to comfort as many as I could and show them their children were safe. One by one, they took their children home.

As I stood outside the school, I met a physician covered in white ash. He was coming from Ground Zero to pick up his children. He told me through tears the horror of seeing bodies, pieces of bodies and personal objects lying all over. I started shaking and crying, and resolved at that moment to eradicate this kind of evil from the planet. Making that determination, I felt a force rise up within me. I had to keep fighting to encourage people. A former student of mine who had begun practicing Buddhism joined me, and we stayed the entire day encouraging students and parents one by one.

Later, I discovered my own son had witnessed the entire event from his classroom window. He cried as he told me he had seen thousands of people die at one time. I will never forget his tears or the tears and pain of my students. They are embedded in my life forever. More than 20 students in my school lost mothers, fathers, grandmothers, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends.

Reflecting on the events, the SGI's struggle with the evil actions of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood against kosen-rufu, who have been distorting the Daishonin's teachings, came to my mind. I realized I have to eliminate my own fundamental darkness and become the kind of person who always encourages others; the kind of person who encourages people to stand up for justice. As a society, we all have to change the poison in our lives that causes such violence. We all have to take action for peace. This is a crucial moment. We are the ones to create peace. There can be no doubt about it.

From this experience, I have determined to continue pursuing my dream of responding to SGI President Ikeda's call and starting a high school that trains students to be global citizens. I am determined that every one of my students will become a pillar of peace.