

EXPERIENCE—DAVID BOGOSLAW, BROOKLYN, N. Y. TIME TO BECOME COMMUNITY BUILDERS

David Bogoslaw and his fellow SGI-USA members in Brooklyn reach out to their Muslim neighbors and help rebuild their community's confidence.

The going has been tough; I would be lying if I pretended otherwise. My initial determination to make sure our chapter members hadn't lost hope in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks gave way to a creeping despair: despair at how we as human beings, who at the dawn of a new century had intended to redress the carnage of the last, had arrived at such a juncture, and despair at the immensity of the task before us as global citizens committed to realizing a peaceful world.

At the same time, it has become clear that we, as SGI-USA members, have been prepared for the task ahead by studying SGI President Ikeda's guidance and by striving to translate our Buddhist practice into a growing awareness of social issues and the forging of alliances with like-minded people of other religious faiths. The Victory Over Violence project and our many interfaith activities are just two of the steps we have taken in this direction.

The events of recent weeks have galvanized the SGI-USA members in downtown Brooklyn to put the lessons we have learned into action—much more quickly than any of us would have thought.

I live and practice in a neighborhood in downtown Brooklyn that includes one of the largest and most vibrant Arabic communities in New York. In the days following the Sept. 11 tragedy, we started hearing of attacks against people who looked like they were from the Middle East, of Arab women shuttered in their homes for fear of walking the streets wearing the *hejab* (women's head covering) and children being harassed at school. The members of the SGI-USA's Brooklyn Waterfront Chapter understood what we needed to do.

The Sunday after the collapse of the towers, a group of us met to discuss how to create dialogue with our Muslim neighbors, to express our solidarity with them and work together to forge stronger community bonds. We are calling this the Community Builders Group. Among those we invited was a Syrian shopkeeper, Abdul, from around the corner and a community activist from an organization called People Protection Project, which began reaching out to Muslim communities throughout Brooklyn six months ago to diffuse hostility arising from the renewed tensions in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

We showed the video "Gandhi, King, Ikeda—Community Builders," explained a little about the SGI and asked our guests to introduce themselves.

One man shared his experience of reaching out to Arabs and Muslims prior to and after the terrorist attacks, explaining how he and his colleagues had been rebuffed by communities with which they had not already formed relationships. That was to be expected—nobody wants to feel they need protection from outside their own community.

One evening after work, I went out to follow up with people I had met at a peace march and vigil at the Brooklyn Heights Promenade. At Abdul's store, I met a restaurant owner who stressed he had lived in Brooklyn for more than 40 years, was as American as I, and had children who were born here. Moreover, he said there was no proof that the terrorist attacks were carried out or masterminded by people of Arab descent. I kept to myself the

thought that he was in denial; I was there to open a pathway to meaningful dialogue, not to cut it off before it had even begun through a pointless confrontation.

Further dialogue helped us clarify that Sept. 11 has forced us to act on what we have been talking about and trying for months to do: to become an integral presence in our neighborhood, trusted and valued members of the community.

We decided to broaden our gaze and work toward commemorating Nov. 18, Soka Gakkai founding day, with a community teach-in aimed at dispelling ignorance not only of Islam, but of Buddhism and other religions, too, along with educating people about Victory Over Violence.

As important as our commitment to helping protect people vulnerable to discriminatory attacks—and, in the months ahead, encroachments on their civil liberties—is the need to share our Buddhist perspective on how to break the cycle of violence and cultivate mutual respect and understanding. It is an effort that extends to all the varied factions of our community, not only the Muslims.

We realized that the sense of empowerment we achieve by practicing for ourselves and others, through studying and putting our tenacious prayers into action, is something we could use to assuage the fears and insecurities of those around us.

In his speech on education for global citizens at Columbia University in 1996, President Ikeda noted the agreement between first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Maki-guchi's vision of rooting the education of children in the particulars of their local geography, society and economy, and "philosopher John Dewey's observation that those who have not had the kinds of experiences that deepen understanding of neighborhood and neighbors will be unable to maintain regard for people of distant lands" (*My Dear Friends in America*, p. 438).

One of our members, who is currently studying peace education at Columbia University's Teachers College, underscored the need for SGI members to work toward a more pluralistic vision of world peace, one that recognizes and celebrates notions that all belief systems and cultures hold in common. This requires that we remind ourselves of the inherent dignity of all human beings and open our lives to learn from others, even as we continue to strive for our own personal change. To do that, I must be confident that my behavior as a human being will serve as a compelling example to inspire people. Buddhism teaches us that this human behavior is, after all, the significance of our emergence as Bodhisattvas of the Earth.