

Team Players: The Pesante Family

The following dialogue among the Pesante family members covers their more than two decades of practice in the SGI. Fred is originally from New York, of Puerto Rican descent. Helen is Native American, originally from Texas. Living Buddhism correspondent Maggie Bryan visited them last month in their North Hollywood, Calif., home.

Fred Pesante: It was June 6, 1971. I was 21, my wife, Helen, was 19, and our son, 15 months old, when we started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I had heard a lot about the practice through five co-workers who were members, but I was not at all interested. The company had just hired a new employee, and when I met him I instantly disliked him. He was so arrogant, obnoxious and condescending that I requested not to work with him. Three months later, through an error of scheduling, I had to work with him again. Much to my surprise, he was different. He was so nice, humble and just seemed like a great person. I saw an actual transformation in him. I then learned that he had become a Buddhist two-and-a-half months prior, so when he asked me to attend a meeting that evening, I said yes. As we were leaving, I received a call from my wife who needed to be picked up along with our son. My co-worker spoke with her, and against my wishes invited her to the meeting.

Helen Pesante: When we arrived at the meeting, they were chanting. I immediately felt a soothing vibration. I was constantly searching for my spirituality and had been to several religious meetings, but never felt the comfort I felt this time. During the meeting they asked if anyone had any questions. I raised my hand and asked, "How can I get a Gohonzon!?" Fred was not amused.

Fred: I was shocked when Helen said this, and immediately turned to her and said, "No way." I was cynical and the kind of person who wanted to know exactly how everything worked before I would attempt to try it. I was not ready to commit. Then a young woman asked me if I loved my wife and if I wanted to see her happy. I said, "Yes." She asked Helen if it would make her happy to try this practice and, of course, she said, "Yes." So I had no choice but to follow through, and sign the application for membership.

Helen: At the time we started practicing, we were dirt poor. We were on welfare and could not even make ends meet.

Fred: We lived in a dump and I worried constantly about the welfare of my family.

Helen: We were young so we did not have any sense of goals or future dreams. Our childhoods had not left us with much to hope for.

Fred: We were immediately swept into the rhythm of that time, attending meetings two to four times a week. The meetings would be followed by trips to Santa Monica for either a study session on Buddhism, guidance from our seniors or for Helen (who immediately joined a dance group in the organization) to attend her dance rehearsals.

Helen: In just one month of our practice (July), we were in Seattle where the

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organization held a convention; I participated by dancing in performances. In August, we had our Buddhist wedding. By September, we had moved into a nice apartment in the San Fernando Valley and had stopped hanging with our partying, “druggie” friends and started hanging with our new SGI friends. We had a completely new lifestyle.

Fred: All of these positive changes occurred within the first five months of our practice. In addition, I started college, and Helen was going to nursing school while also pursuing a dance career.

Helen: We had so much actual proof that sharing this Buddhism with others became a natural process for us. We didn’t coerce anyone. We just told them our story.

Fred: Within that short time, we had ten new members whom we were teaching about the practice. We continued practicing and in 1974, I joined the Army. By September of 1974, we were in Massachusetts, where we practiced in a rural town. In December of 1975, our daughter, Athena, was born. We held responsibilities unofficially as district leaders for about a year, during which time we, together with our women’s division district leader, regrouped approximately twenty members in our area. I was then transferred to El Paso, Texas, where once again, we immediately connected with the SGI.

Helen: Our children were able to do a lot of Buddhist activities at a young age because in smaller cities, there is a larger need for member participation. Even we as adults would go back and forth between youth and men’s and women’s division activities.

Fred: I left the military after six years of duty, and we left Texas to come back to L.A. in 1982. By that time, our son was 12 and an active young men’s division member. Our daughter, although she was only 6, had done young women’s division activities. And as brother and sister, they were so united.

The Children

Kaiyoti and Athena Pesante, with Kenya Runyan, who was adopted into the Pesante family in 1988.

Athena: When I was younger, I used to hang out with my brother and his friends, and it never seemed to bother them. I always felt accepted. Maybe that’s because in this family, everyone’s friends become part of the family.

Kenya: I can attest to that! I remember the first time I came to a meeting at the Pesante’s. There was a warm feeling, nothing like I had felt before. I knew I wanted to come back.

Kaiyoti: Our house was always a district house. We learned to interact with our parents in a way that was different from the usual parent/child relationship. Our family was more like a team.

Athena: When we moved to Los Angeles, I was 6 years old. We began to have numerous meetings at our home and I loved it. I thought, “We’re having all these parties! This is wonderful!”, but then I began to understand that this is our

practice. It's our way of living.

Kaiyoti: When we moved back to L.A., we immediately started going to meetings at the community center. It wasn't a new thing for us because it had always been part of our lives to go to meetings. And we were not forced to practice. We were taught that Buddhism was our way of life. When we were babies, my mom used to chant and do morning gongyo while she rocked us to sleep. I can remember her doing that with my sister until she was about 2 or 3 and I know she did the same thing with me.

Athena: I remember learning gongyo, and I can't really say at what age, but I just remember that it was always there in my life. Buddhism was part of our upbringing, and I'm grateful for that. I have noticed that some families don't teach their children Buddhism from the moment they begin to practice or from the moment the child is born, which is unfortunate because it can be very beneficial to a child.

Kenya: It sometimes seems as if the parents are practicing without the children, unaware that the children are not learning how to practice.

Kaiyoti: If you take your children to meetings and drop them off in the playroom for ten years and then decide that it's time for them to learn how to practice, they're not going to be receptive to doing gongyo or listening to a Goshu lecture.

If you truly view Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism as a way of life, how could you not want your children to have an even firmer grasp of the practice? You're teaching them the best way to live their lives.

Athena: I know that without realizing it, I was learning the strictness of the practice. It came naturally to me because it wasn't a separate thing or a once-in-a-while thing. It was an everyday thing just like morning and evening gongyo.

Kaiyoti: I was always involved doing traffic control outside meeting locations or emceeding a meeting or giving the explanation of the practice. Our parents would just volunteer us and they knew we wouldn't mind because we were always brought up to view these things as making a contribution or doing our part.

Athena: My home was always different from most of my friends, and it shocked me when I came to that realization as a little girl. Prior to that, I assumed all families lived the way we did as Buddhists, even if they weren't a Buddhist family. But the majority of my friends have come from a single-parent household, and I had never seen a family bond as close as the one we had in our home. So I began to think we were the odd ones, but when all of my friends embraced my family and enjoyed spending time with my parents, I knew we were okay.

Kaiyoti: I noticed my friends didn't have the open relationship with their parents as we did with ours. My friends would come over and say things like: "Wow, I could never joke around like that with my dad or mom. Your parents are so cool!"

Athena: I think we can relate with our parents because we know them so well. They were very young when they started this family, and we were all able to

grow together.

Kaiyoti: We've heard all our parents' stories—their childhoods, their struggles. Sometimes at meetings when they gave experiences or after meetings during guidance sessions with members.

Athena: We've also seen them mature right before our eyes. My mom was always wild and crazy. You know, life of the party.

Kenya: She's still the life of the party!

Athena: Yes, but I can remember when she used to give people a piece of her mind right on the spot with no holds barred, and now she takes the time to think about the right time, manner and place to handle the situation.

Kaiyoti: We've learned so much from our parents' practice. When we lived in the Holly wood foothills, my room was right next to the kitchen where they would go to give guidance. Even if members had similar struggles, my mom would speak with each one in a way that was specifically appropriate for them.

Athena: I enjoyed going on home visits with my parents. It was always fun to be in different homes all over L.A. My father was always so positive and encouraging with the members. He still loves visiting them at their homes and is very committed to doing so. He can come off of a twelve-hour work shift at 7 a.m. and go directly to one of his member's house for morning gongyo at 7:30 or 8:00. That alone is encouraging!

Kaiyoti: In the past my dad didn't have to do that many home visits because everyone seemed to be at our home for guidance. I saw him grow to understand the importance of life-to-life, one-on-one dialogue. When he realized this point, he just naturally applied it to his district, his family and his co-workers. Anyone can call and talk to him about what they're going through in their life and get his 100 percent attention every time.

Kenya: He's that way with us too. They're both good parents. Even when all of us were going through our rebellious periods they were supportive and patient with us. We were allowed to talk openly and honestly. We were treated with total respect.

Kaiyoti: It's not like it was perfect. There were times when some authoritarianism would occur between my dad and me, but I've seen him change to where he catches himself. If his anger gets the best of him he'll stop and say: "You know what? This is wrong. Never mind." Or he'll come back and say: "We're not supposed to interact like that as father and son or as human beings, for that matter. We need to chant first so we can do this the right way." That approach is something I've seen manifest only within the last ten years.

Athena: Watching our parents is like guidance. My guidance came indirectly. I don't remember ever going to get guidance. It just came to me.

Kaiyoti: Most of my best guidance came from watching and hearing, not just my parents, but also watching all the members around me grow, and show actual proof in their lives. We've seen this all our lives. Even when my parents argued with each other, watching them work through it and fight together to make it work was encouraging to me.

Athena: I have also learned a lot by spending time with members. I've had the

opportunity to know people from all walks of life. Most of the members in our district were in their 20s and 30s. I developed a bond with many of them and looked up to some of them. They were part of our family.

Kaiyoti: Our district was definitely an extended family.

Athena: My parents have the biggest heart in the world.

Ever since I was a little girl, it seemed as though anyone who needed a place to stay was always welcome in our home. Days would turn into weeks, and weeks into months.

Kaiyoti: That's how we got our sister Kenya.

Kenya

Fred: As children grow, they gravitate toward comfort. I feel that through our practice we developed a comfort that became a magnet for many young people. Especially our children's friends.

Helen: Kenya, who became our foster daughter, started out as one of Athena's friends.

Fred: Her mother came to a couple of meetings and then lost interest.

Helen: She actually received the Gohonzon because Kenya, who was only 13, wanted to practice and begged her to get it for her.

Fred: Kenya's mother had a drug addiction problem, so when she stopped coming to meetings Kenya would walk four blocks to our house to attend the activities. She started going to Fife and Drum Corps practices with Athena and would spend the weekend at our house so that they could go together. She occasionally spent the night during the week as well. Then one weekend when she was spending the night, her mother was evicted from her apartment.

Kenya: I remember my mother asked me to ask the Pesantes if I could stay with them. I couldn't ask them. Even though my mother was physically and mentally abusive at times, she was still my mom. It was all I knew. In the past my mom had left me with others for six months and even a year. But I was frightened this time. I kept feeling that this would be the last time and she wouldn't come back for me. I didn't ask the Pesantes, so my mom called them herself.

Helen: At this point it didn't matter since she was always at our house anyway. She had already become part of the family.

Fred: Three months went by before we heard from Kenya's mother.

Kenya: I was having a very hard time during this period. I had a hard time trusting others and would wonder why these people had taken me in. What made them be nice to me? And even though my mom had her problems, I missed her. I would walk by our old apartment on my way home from school looking for her.

Fred: Kenya's mom came back and took her for two weeks and brought her back, saying that the environment they were in was not safe for Kenya.

Helen: This time six months went by. The girls went to the same school so it was no problem, but we wanted Kenya to have a stable home. So, after having a

family dialogue, we let Kenya know that if she chose to she could stay with us until she graduated from high school. She worked so hard at school and we felt that we couldn't deny her the opportunity to win.

Kenya: I realized that my life was changing. I started looking at life in a different way. I found myself chanting about the new person that was developing. It was happening so fast and because of my past, I couldn't tell if anything was normal. Chanting made me feel calm and focused.

Helen: I'm glad she decided to stay.

Fred: She's been with us ever since. Well, she left to go to college when she received a scholarship to U.C. Santa Cruz. She graduated from U.C.S.C. in June of 1996, and in June of 1997, she and her fiance returned home for their wedding. Her husband, Daniel, practices, also; he was born into it. We've known him since he was 3 years old.

Athena: We originally met Daniel's family in Texas where our families practiced together, and reunited in Los Angeles in 1984. Daniel was like a cousin. It's interesting that now he's my brother-in-law.

Helen: Athena and Kenya planned the entire wedding through long-distance phone calls and it turned out beautifully. They were presented with many challenges, but would constantly chant to overcome the obstacles. It was amazing to see their young women's division training show itself at every crucial moment.

Fred: Both Kenya and Daniel often call for encouragement.

Being an SGI Family

Fred: Many people, including family members, are continuously making comments to me about how wonderful my wife and kids are, or how lucky I am to have such great children and a sparkling wife. I get overwhelmed by this because when Helen and I started practicing, we just wanted to be happy. We didn't know then that happiness is a cause, not an effect. We've made a great deal of causes in order to manifest this reality.

Helen: Before we started practicing, we did not plan our lives. We were so young and had no role models. When I was a child, the dysfunction in our family came from my mother being a victim of domestic violence. The support given afterwards from her family was done out of obligation. It involved much slander toward my mother and her four children. My sister and I were also physically abused, and we had to constantly fight off advances from most of our uncles. This had left me with a general mistrust of people and the inability to feel I would ever win in life.

After I met Fred, I didn't know if I would ever be able to trust and open up to him as he deserved. I was able to overcome this and many other issues of my life with the practice.

Fred: I'm the youngest of seven brothers and one sister. My mother was married twice and had five children from her past marriages prior to my father. She had three more sons by my father; but by the time I was 6 months old, my

parents were separated.

I grew up with my father, two brothers and a stepmother. I had no lessons or insight about family bonding or unity. The only thing I truly felt then was that my father loved me, but he was also a victim of circumstances, and offered only what he knew. I grew up not knowing what I wanted and not knowing what to do.

I learned a great deal about myself and others after I became an SGI member and practiced Buddhism. My schooling about life and my involvement in it began the first day I began my practice.

Helen: Our life just naturally shifted onto a positive path. The SGI became our family and some of the leaders became parents and/or role models.

Fred: I joined the military for six years and traveled with my family. Whenever I was relocated to another military base, Helen would write ahead of time to the nearest SGI organization and let them know we were coming and offered our support, wherever it was needed.

Helen: I realized early on how our lives had grown and improved based on our connection to the organization and our efforts toward kosen-rufu.

Kaiyoti: Whenever we moved, the discomfort of transition of being in a new place and having to meet new people and make new friends was lessened by participating in the organization. Within a week of moving, we would attend a couple of meetings and I would immediately have new best friends. Our parents would go out of their way to connect with members who had kids my age. Our whole family would have a great bond of friendship with another family. I think without even thinking about it, our parents always ended up making causes toward maintaining tight family unity.

Athena: Our parents are very different. My mother may appear to be very lenient and my dad very strict, but both of them are lenient and strict in different ways, so it evens out perfectly. One thing for sure is that they have always been honest with us and have always made time to talk to us or answer our questions.

Kaiyoti: I remember being 6 years old and asking my mom where babies come from. She said why don't we have this conversation tomorrow. At that time she worked at Planned Parenthood, so the next day she brought home books and all kinds of teaching tools to explain it to me.

Fred: She forced me to do some reading. It was embarrassing to me to have to use honest terminology with my 6-year-old son.

Kaiyoti: But it's because of their being so honest with us at such an early age that we knew we could always go to them with any question. They would never deny us an answer.

Helen: The quality of unity of our family comes from our practice because, although we have the same problems or issues as any other family, we deal with them in a Buddhist way. We all know about human revolution. We know we have to chant, get guidance and self-reflect to always create a win-win situation for all parties involved

Athena: It's because all of us practice that we are actually able to keep that same focus.

Kenya: Yes, because if we start to fight, or if a problem occurs between us, we don't give up and say, "Forget it," or "I'm the right one."

Athena: Well, maybe not in the beginning. But, after we realize that we're in one of the lower life-conditions, we know it's our responsibility to snap out of it.

Kaiyoti: Sometimes it takes more than a day or so, depending on the problem. But it is always resolved because all of the parties involved want to resolve it. And we know we have to go back to our practice to get there.

Fred: I didn't think about where I would be after more than twenty-six years of practice. When we started, our families did not look favorably at our practice, but all that has turned around. Just as we are close with one another, we also have become close with our parents and siblings.

Helen: We don't see our families as often as we would like to, but when we do we have mutual affection and respect for each other.

Athena: We do that with our SGI extended family, too. I actually have a lot of big brothers and sisters and tons of uncles and aunties. Our family consists of hundreds of people!

Kenya: Once you walk through the door, you're instantly part of the family, whether you know it or not. You just start feeling it eventually. It's a warm feeling.

Fred: Embracing people was not a natural process for me. Through my Buddhist practice, my capacity for compassion expanded. I learned to appreciate people's differences when I realized that fundamentally we are all the same.

Helen: Both Fred and I have been R.N.s for many years. Our profession requires we give much empathy to others. Through Buddhism we have gained the ability to maintain unconditional empathy not just toward clients but also to our families, friends and SGI members.

Fred: We are very appreciative that our children have grown up in this practice, and for the family values instilled in them through Buddhist principles. Life has presented me with various obstacles that I've had to challenge and have overcome throughout my years of practicing Buddhism.

In order for me to continue to grow spiritually, I will forever be reflecting on my actions. I've had to lift myself up spiritually to keep myself from being defeated. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the only way I know how to raise my life-condition and rise to each challenge.

My faith in Buddhism comes from seeing the positive results in my life and in my family, and also knowing that I care about humanity, about helping others to practice so they may empower themselves. As a practitioner of Buddhism as opposed to a believer in Buddhism, my life must exemplify what living Buddhism is. □