

'97 Plan Set for Florida Center

**By DAVE McNEILL
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A gathering of pioneers this week kicks off the 1997 schedule of conferences at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. Twenty-six conferences in all have been slated for the year, which will provide nearly 4,000 people the chance to meet new friends and discuss Buddhism in depth at the south Florida facility.

New to the schedule will be six so-called general conferences, open to all members, and three conferences designed for chapter, headquarters and territory leaders. (For a complete schedule, please see box, p. 5.)

All the sessions will provide ample opportunity for intimate conversation, interaction with seniors in faith, Buddhist study, and even some sightseeing.

People who attended 1996 conferences seemed to agree that the close contact with national leaders was one of the most inspiring aspects of the four-day events. As General Director Zaitso has said: "What makes these conferences so successful? One reason must be that here there are no leaders or members. Here we are all just human beings. Here everyone learns something. There is no one with all the answers." Whether in a formal setting, talking over lunch, or relaxing by Toda Lake, the equality of all members is evident.

Equally inspiring, members report, is when they find that they're not alone. "Listening to experiences from other areas gave members the greatest kind of encouragement," Eugene Hirahara, the SGI-USA's Planning Department chief, said. "People discovered their common struggle." To ensure even more variety this year, participants at each session will come from joint territories on the West Coast, Midwest and East Coast.

The sometimes hectic schedule will be sure to be a challenge for the FNCC staff, but they are looking forward to welcoming all the members.

"I can't express how much I appreciate the members coming here and sharing their lives with me," Stephanie Kaplan, the assistant office manager, said. "I have learned from them how wonderful the organization is, how thoughtful our members are, and how concerned they are for their fellow members. I deeply appreciate being able to respond to their sincerity by helping in any way I can while they are at the FNCC. For me the most joyful experience has been meeting so many members from around the country and feeling a tremendous sense of pride in what we are all trying to do."

Each conference will last from Thursday to Sunday, with a package price of \$330 plus airfare. The cost includes ground transportation, lodging and all meals. Details will be sent to the joint territories via organizational memo at least two months before each conference. Members can contact their joint territory office for more information.

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