

Pioneers Stay Young at Heart
By Terry Ellis, Bureau Chief
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If you ask her age, Betty Akers of Port Hueneme, Calif., says she's getting younger all the time. At 65, her goal is to reach 101 — and she plans to dedicate the coming years to sharing the joy and appreciation she gains from her practice of Buddhism.

The day after she returned from the Pioneers Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, she visited another pioneer member in the hospital, and she has kept moving ever since. “The guidelines [General Director] Zaitzu gave the last day of the conference especially for the pioneers were so great!” she says. “They so much hit my heart that I knew I had to take action right away.”

She rattles off the five guidelines in Japanese and English, her voice charged with the kind of enthusiasm sports fans reserve for statistics on their favorite team: Think of the other person's happiness. Take care of youth. Stay close to SGI President Ikeda's heart. Advance — don't think about the past. Be optimistic.

“One by one, he told us, try to accomplish these. Really, this is so important,” says Mrs. Akers. “I want to advance, no matter what. I don't want to lose this feeling of challenge.”

That same realization was echoed by other pioneers who attended this first conference of the year at the FNCC. Twenty-five or 35 years of practicing Buddhism and 60 or 70 years of life, and they remain undaunted. They are “the living history of kosen-rufu,” as SGI-USA Women's Division Chief Wendy Clark describes them. “Their whole lives were spent with Buddhism and the spirit of the SGI.” And now their general director was challenging them to live long and healthy lives and to continue the difficult and sometimes unappreciated work of raising people for the future.

“It's a natural tendency as we get older to have more memories than thoughts about the future,” Mrs. Clark says. “The spirit of this weekend was to remind ourselves that Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism looks toward the present and the future.”

Some, like Wallace Payne of Aurora, Colo., actually were drawn to Buddhism because of its focus on the future. “I've always been the type not to dwell on the past,” he says. “I've always looked to the future.”

It is an attitude he developed early in life as he watched his mother, Gladys, in her day-to-day struggle to live and raise him. He was only 18 months old in 1927 when she left New York and moved the two of them to Colorado where they were to live during the Depression.

“I'm sure that was the greatest impact on me,” he says. She lived to the age of 72, which he now has reached. As far as determinations for the future: “I want to stay alive and be healthy,” he says. “If I can be of help to anybody, I would like to do that.”

That's exactly what was on Tina Phillips' mind when she got home from Florida to Las Vegas. She celebrated her 70th birthday, invited her exercise teacher at the local senior center to the upcoming women's division general meeting, and talked to her Omni District leader about starting up a women's mini-study group in her area.

“I'm going to make study my top priority,” Mrs. Phillips says. “I'd already decided this before I went to Florida, but since I came back, I'm even more determined. As Mr. Zaitzu said, when you study, you feel connected to President Ikeda. You cannot be swayed and you maintain hope.” That is exactly what she needs to maintain high spirits at the senior center where, she says, people her age are full of complaints.

When Mr. Zaitzu spoke about focusing on the present and the future, Mrs. Phillips wondered if he had read her mind. “I felt like he was talking to me!” she says. “Four years

ago, when I moved from Los Angeles, I found myself saying, ‘We did it like this in L.A.’ Without realizing it, I was reverting to the past. Also, my daughter is the district chief, so I’ve asked myself how I can be a mom and support her. My answer is not to go to the past. As Mr. Zaitu said, I’m going to really think one day ahead or one year ahead, but never to the past.”

Kimiko Nishida, 64, of San Francisco, laughs as she thinks about the guideline not to talk about “before.” “We need to support the youth division behind the curtain,” she says. “Now we have lots of young people. I want to enjoy this practice together with them. Now the age is different, the time is different. But one thing never changes — the basics are the same. Never leave the Gohonzon, get happiness, get benefit.”

After 34 years of practice, she’s glad she kept going, sometimes through tears. That spirit is something she would like to share.

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