

Midwest Students Share Their Concerns
BY KAREN KIMURA & VERONICA EVANS
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In a coffeehouse in the Printers' Row district, a unique group of students gathered to exchange experiences. SGI-USA college students from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Wisconsin offered support to each other and welcomed Valerie Thomas, SGI-USA student division chief, at the inaugural activity of a weekend designed to build the foundation of the Chicago student division.

Representing vastly different majors, the students opened their hearts and asked poignant questions about practicing away from home and how to tap into the valuable support of the SGI. Even though the students' experience with the SGI varied from being relatively new members to being born into families practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, they shared the common challenges of balancing collegiate activities with their Buddhist activities and of introducing others to this Buddhism.

Ms. Thomas encouraged the group by pointing out the essential connection between their studies and their future. Sometimes feeling "away" from the influence of SGI members, friends and family can be difficult, she said. But she encouraged the students to focus on their studies so they would have no regrets later in life. It was helpful for students to hear that others have a difficult time finding inspiration when they are alone.

At a meeting at the Chicago Culture Center, Ms. Thomas and the students had a dialogue on the theme "Imagine a World If There Were World Peace." The students broke into groups to share their personal views of world peace and brainstormed how their fields of study could contribute to a peaceful society.

In addition, the students met in their respective fields. From the ensuing discussions, three goals for the Chicago student division were agreed upon: 1) to increase the membership to 200; 2) to participate more in the Study Department; 3) to "courageously fight against all injustices while embracing a fundamental respect for all humanity."

The topic of discussion that seemed to resonate most with everyone was overcoming problems. Ms. Thomas mentioned that if students can overcome their problems while they are young, their adult lives will be great.

She asked them not to look outside themselves for happiness, but to solidify their lives. Since this involves changing karma, the change may not be readily apparent when they are young, she added. But time will show the proof of their efforts.

To enjoy the many cultural opportunities available in Chicago, the students from five states also visited the world-famous Art Institute of Chicago. At the end of the weekend, the students determined to keep in touch — even if only by postcard. "The student division is starting to do all I hoped it would be doing here," said one student. "We're getting involved with not only faith, practice and study, but also global concerns like world peace and the environment."

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