

**Young Women Strengthen Their Identity**  
**By CHARLISE LYLES, Dayton, Ohio, Correspondent**  
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Creativity, appreciation for diversity, gratitude for SGI, determination to study, and a deeper sense of true identity flowed from the SGI-USA Young Women's Division Leadership Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center.

"The Everglades is all sorts of textures — sawgrass, slimy green stuff on the water, bird feathers, dry tree bark — all coming from the same fertile ground," said Deborah Thayer of Virginia. "The YWD members are just like that — so many textures."

"We are a rainbow of beautiful voices," added Samirah Evans of Atlanta.

Even the hairdos spoke diversity: flowing red waves, Nubian locks, stringy dos, blunt cuts, braids, bobs — even a bald head with big bulb earrings.

Determination to study, resolve to challenge the temple issue and creativity also emerged from the four-day conference where 183 young women met under the theme "Strengthening Our True Identity."

The opening Goshō lecture on "On The Treasure Tower" laid the foundation for understanding exactly what true identity is. We have to recognize and treasure the Buddha nature of compassion and wisdom that exists within each of our lives, said SGI-USA Women's Division Chief Wendy Clark. "Please treasure yourself," she said. "Then, you can treasure the Buddha nature within others even more."

At the closing open-mike session, Paula Lambertson of Palm Beach Territory reflected on her effort to see the beauty of her true self. "In my corner of the universe, I really fight with myself to be happy and for my members to be happy. But whenever I feel little devils coming up, I forget about kosen-rufu," she said.

She then shared the following from SGI President Ikeda: "When we slander ourselves and think we're not growing and that we will never change, we are making the mistake of thinking that the negative part of us is our essence. This is not true. Our essence is Buddhahood.... Don't slander yourself."

"The Role of Young Women" panel discussion sought to fortify a sense of identity by focusing on second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda's eternal guidelines to young women:

- Make study of the Goshō and Nichiren Daishōnin's Buddhism your foundation.
- Forge your character.
- Practice Buddhism with selfless sincerity.
- Courageously fight evil and injustice.
- Develop a strong sense of mission.

With gutsy sincerity and honesty, women on the panel shared experiences in faith, such as overcoming eating disorders and accepting a father's imprisonment.

Study and the application of Buddhism helped Beth LaMure of Los Angeles, she said in her experience. "I don't think I would've lasted through times of suffering if I hadn't studied and studied," she said of her battle to overcome her deep rage, the byproduct of growing up in a dysfunctional family. "You don't change your karma sitting in front of the Gohonzon chanting," she said. "You have to change it when you are about to blow up" at someone.

"I didn't understand that study meant actually applying Buddhism to my life," she said. "Always maintain self-control. Keep a smiling countenance at home. Be courteous to

members.’ That sounded nice, a little Pollyanna. But when I started to apply it, I saw such a change in my environment.”

A nitty-gritty session on the temple issue clarified the SGI’s identity as the organization carrying out the true practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Actively refuting Nikken’s erroneous, distorted teachings is practicing Buddhism just as Nichiren Daishonin taught, said Theresa Hauber, vice women’s division secretariat chief. The Daishonin fought against the heretical sects of his time, which were rooted in the political power plays of a feudalistic society, she said, rather than the common person’s ability to attain happiness.

A clear explanation of the temple issue should be a natural part of introducing others to this Buddhism, she added, so that from the very start it is clearly distinguished from erroneous practices. “Make this issue your own,” she urged. “Be comfortable discussing it with members, non members and new members.”

She went on: “We as an organization need to look at how we are failing members who’re joining the temple. Use this issue to improve our organization. Because of this issue, we have an opportunity to take better care of our members and expand our capacity.”

The diversity of the group impressed many young women. Said Kathleen Morelock of San Francisco: “This is, hands down, the most diverse group of individuals I’ve ever seen doing one thing. I hope all of us can pledge that we can keep the kind of diversity that we see in this room — especially with the new neighborhood reorganization — because I think this is the hope of our organization and our country.”

Yet, said Aisha Henry, a YWD territory leader in Brooklyn, New York: “We are so much more alike than different. I’m returning home with a renewed determination to focus on those likenesses rather than those differences.”

Kim Gregory of New York enjoyed a quiet moment the morning of departure. “I took a walk to the top of the hill and saw this shape in the water,” she said. “Suddenly, it spread its wings and took off, and I thought: ‘Wow! What a symbol for this whole experience.’”

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