

Young Men Empower Themselves
By DAVID BOGOSLAW, New York Correspondent
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In a weekend that went from celebrating the young men's division's past — poking fun at its more extreme aspects — to creating new trust and camaraderie, 180 young men from across the United States gathered and planted seeds for relationships that they can nurture in the future. They also learned that the mentor–disciple relationship is key to unleashing their potential. The conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center commemorated the 46th anniversary of the establishment of the division on July 11, 1951, where 180 young men gathered with the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda.

“I wanted young men to feel a sense of empowerment,” said SGI-USA YMD Chief James Herrmann. “And I feel we accomplished that by bringing so many diverse people together. Young men who are struggling alone in their districts got together to encourage one another, share their dreams and see that others have the same struggles.”

That was the experience of Francesco Miniati, who began to practice in his native Italy eight years ago and is now getting his Ph.D. in astrophysics at the University of Minnesota. “Recently I experienced some difficulties in doing activities, mostly having to do with my ego and arrogance,” he confessed. “In Florida, I realized that there is something incredible that connects people who strive to protect and advance kosen-rufu.”

“I didn't talk to a lot of people, but the people I had a chance to meet made a big impression on me,” he elaborated. “I felt that I established this deep connection with people. And these people I will meet again as we fulfill our missions in society.... We really have to support one another.” The emotion-packed dedication of a tree in memory of Sergio Jacala of New York, who died in May, highlighted the importance of cherishing comrades as the young men strive together for the people's happiness.

Study presentations throughout the weekend illuminated the mentor–disciple relationship from many angles, including those of combating evil in the priesthood and in society, self-reliance, and the future of propagation activities in this country. For many, the weekend was an unprecedented chance to gain greater understanding of SGI President Ikeda's life and vision for the future.

“I picked up the idea of modeling myself after President Ikeda's spirit and saw he's so deeply compassionate,” 16-year-old Jason Evans of Norfolk, Va., the youngest person there, said. “I got a lot of fresh ideas that I want to try to implement in my area.”

The conference seemed to have conveyed its message that to understand the mentor–disciple relationship means to have the same commitment as President Ikeda to protect the organization and each individual from authoritarianism and injustice. As Francesco put it: “I see what President Ikeda is doing with the temple issue, showing us how to fight evil. I feel I have to try harder to take the kind of actions he is. One day I will be facing my own particular situation and I will be on my own and will have to show how strong I am.”

Newly appointed Soka Group Chief Dave Eisenberg referred to the weekend as the “line in the sand that separates what the SGI-USA has been from how we will be as an organization in the future.”

As an example, Mr. Eisenberg shared his vision for the Soka Group, where the national committee will serve more as a “clearinghouse for information” instead of only to provide direction.

That way, Soka Group members around the country can benefit from one another's accumulated experience and wisdom.

Sensitivity to diversity is another area of growth for the young men's organization. One

of the presentations elicited some discomfort by not being inclusive enough in discussing sex and gender issues. One young man reminded participants that there are many gay young men who will never get married or have children and that the YMD organization needs to be more respectful of diverse lifestyles.

“This conference was not built on hype,” Mr. Herrmann said, summing up the weekend, “but on very concrete ideas and personal exchange.”

“I hope this experience will be engraved in the young men’s lives as opposed to being only temporary. As young men, we need to focus on a new, fresh motivation,” he said.

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