

**SONDY NIETHAMMER, LONG BEACH, CALIF.
I Am a Winner**

Eighteen years ago, before I discovered the SGI and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I could never have imagined what human revolution meant, let alone dreamed that I could ever change my self-destructive nature into one of absolute happiness.

Growing up near Evansville, Ind., I was sixth in a family of seven children. My earliest memories are of my family yelling and screaming at one another. I know now that my parents did their best, but they were completely overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising all of us. I received little nurturing, discipline or guidance. I was intimidated by my brothers and sisters because they learned much faster than I did. On top of that, the kids in school made fun of me, making me feel like I was stupid. As a result, I didn't even want to try. And I blamed my parents for everything.

At age 12, I was hanging out in my front yard one summer day when three guys from the high school drove by in their new convertible. They stopped and asked me if I'd like to go for a ride. I made a decision that would bring the end of my innocence and would have a tremendous and severe impact on the rest of my youth. I got in the car!

The boys took me to their parents' home, locked me in the bedroom and gang-raped me. I was traumatized and scared, and I escaped as soon as I could. I was more afraid of having to tell my parents what had happened than I was that the boys might attack me again, so I ran to an abandoned church. I was there for days before my older brother found me.

I felt so ashamed and worthless that I didn't tell anyone what had happened. (I would be 30 before I would feel safe enough to deal with the emotional damage I had suffered.)

Three months after the attack, I began hemorrhaging. I don't remember much about it, but a surgical procedure was performed at the local hospital. Since that time I have been unable to have a child. That was the physical side of the rape.

But it brought out an emotional side I was unprepared for. I was starved for attention and love from someone — anyone — and I didn't get it at home.

More emotional abuse occurred daily. When I entered high school I had to face one of the boys who had raped me each day in my classes. He laughed and told his friends what he had done.

I survived by burying my pain deep inside and becoming a wild, class-cutting party girl. My grades hit bottom, and drugs made a sweeping entrance into my life. I became popular by dealing drugs for the kids at school.

Things went from bad to worse, and as soon as I turned 18 I left home and took off for Columbus, Ohio, to attend modeling school. I found work at hair show conventions, where drugs were easier to find than ever. The hair stylists had their hair products in one bag and drugs in the other. I stayed high constantly. I wouldn't allow myself to feel any emotions. I just wanted to stay numb and pretend I was someone else. I had no self-respect, no dignity, no confidence.

One night I met a girl who danced at Larry Flynt's Hustler Club in Columbus. This started two years of prostitution and performing in orgies with Larry and Althea Flynt and countless members of the publishing industry. On several occasions I was beaten black and blue, and I even contracted gonorrhea.

It was an endless cycle of drugs, prostitution, partying and money. I was earning thousands of dollars a week and blowing it all on my \$500-a-day cocaine habit. I was sinking deeper and deeper into nonexistence, and soon there was no reality in my life. I had become a marathon runner — running from my problems. Finally, I ran all the way to Los

Title: SONDY NIETHAMMER, LONG BEACH, CA: I am a winner
Subject: World Tribune 08/15/97 n.3152 p.6 WT970815p06
Author: SONDY NIETHAMMER
Keywords: Beach Experiences Long Niethammer Practice Prostitution SONDY WINNER

Angeles for another shot at modeling. Instead, I hooked up with a madam and a cocaine dealer, continuing my routine of prostitution and partying all night, then sleeping all day.

A girl I knew from modeling gigs invited me to a party in North Hollywood. Little did I know that inside was an SGI meeting. I sat in the dining room, high on cocaine, snickering while I heard Nam-myoho-renge-kyo being chanted in the living room.

I'll never forget the initial impact of meeting Cleve Ford, the gentleman who was leading the meeting. I sensed his electricity, warmth and compassion. He explained to me briefly why they were chanting and said that my life could become better — it could be anything I dreamt it could be. I had the power inside to change any type of suffering and truly become happy, he said. If I wished, he'd show me how to chant for a better, fuller life.

I felt a spark of hope. A simple conversation with a stranger may seem minor, but in my life's travels, no one had ever spoken to me unless they wanted drugs or my body. I could sense that this man genuinely cared for my life when I didn't.

During the next two years, Cleve and eight other members continued to chant for my protection and happiness, even while watching from the sidelines as I continued my old lifestyle. The amazing thing, though, is that they never gave up on me. Cleve remarked at one time, "I'm not coming after your body, I'm coming after your life!" Those words touched me deeply and I began to cry; all he wanted was for me to have some sort of expectation to change and become happy.

Meanwhile, the circle of my old life was diminishing. The madam was arrested. The cocaine dealer was killed by the Mafia. Others were dying. Most of the people I had run with were either in jail or dead. I desperately wanted to change, but I was afraid to let go of drugs, not wanting to face what I might find deep inside. I thought, I can't possibly change; partying is all I know.

Then one night I overdosed on cocaine. I survived, but, boy, was that my wake-up call. I had no choice but to chant. There was no turning back.

The night before I received the Gohonzon, Cleve and those eight other members prepared a dinner party for me, including a video of the 1975 Hawaii culture festival. That night I chanted to join the young women's division Drill Dance and dance for world peace.

I was determined to change my life, no matter what it took. I consciously disassociated myself from my old friends, from the damage and the pain. On Sept. 16, 1979, I received the Gohonzon. That was the beginning of a slow, 18-year uphill climb of cleansing, healing, discipline, growth and happiness.

The first thing I did was create a dream/goal list, and I consistently chanted morning and evening along with gongyo. Without partying, I discovered I was sleeping at night, then rising at 5:00 a.m. and chanting for two hours before going to my new 40-hour-a-week job as a receptionist.

This period was my education — as I immersed myself in SGI activities, including Drill Dance and district discussion meetings, I was learning about the power of my life.

Gradually, something in me was awakening to the chanting. It was as if my heart had been buried under layers of darkness. At times it was painful to keep going — I begrudged my life and hated how I grew up. I was filled with self-doubt. However, as I continued to chant, day by month by year, my life began to expand and shine, and I felt a deep, strong identity.

I spent every moment I could sharing and teaching others what I knew about this Buddhism that had changed my life. I sought guidance frequently from senior leaders. But one area, one significant weakness, was my study of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. And it was partly because my reading ability was poor.

On several occasions, my young women's division leader, Portlyn Benson, encouraged

me to participate in study meetings. I forced myself to get up in front of the members and struggle to read the *World Tribune*. To this day I am so thankful that I found the courage, because it helped strengthen my reading skills. It really was like school.

One of the things I studied over and over was an excerpt from the Gosho “Reply to Kyo’o”: “Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is like the roar of the lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?” I thought of that as I chanted.

Studying has given me the confidence to overcome any doubts that arise when I’ve experienced hardship or suffering in the areas of money, career, family, health and so forth. Chanting at the crucial moment has helped me tap unlimited ability and brought out limitless hope and inner strength to surmount every obstacle.

After 10 years of practice, I returned to Indiana to help care for my oldest sister before she died. She would chant from time to time, and prolonged her life by a year. My parents acknowledged the change in me and totally supported my practice.

During that year, before I returned to Los Angeles, I was appointed a young women’s division chapter leader. A handful of members and I would drive the eight hours one way, even through the snow, to attend meetings in Chicago. I gained immense appreciation and respect for the members and for this practice.

Each day I polish my mirror by chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to bring out my courage, wisdom and confidence so I can help others change their destinies. Today I have a career in human resources, with the rewarding opportunity to help others find work and succeed in their chosen professions. Barbara Reed Workman, an author I met last year, is working with me to write my life story. I sincerely hope my experiences will give hope to other young women and help them reach their dreams in life.

I’ve found peace regarding my early life and the pain I endured. My parents and I now understand each other as we grow closer day by day, weeding out the hurt in our lives and replacing it with love. My dad, who is suffering from cancer, has found new hope from my life, and we are working together to renew his strength so he and my mother can celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on Dec. 5, 2001.

One of my deepest desires before my parents die is to create family unity and harmony with my brothers and sisters. They do not speak, and instead throw blame, jealousy, greed, stupidity and anger at one another — it hangs like a dark cloud over them. It also affects their children. I’m the only one who has open communication with all of them. I envied them when I was young, thinking they were smarter and stronger and on top of the world. But I know I have gained strength through Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, and I want to help them find peace as well.

I thank SGI President Ikeda for being my mentor. My life has come full circle in this human revolution by taking on responsibilities and helping members practice, which has filled me with a purpose and a mission. Without the SGI and all the leaders who stuck by my side with their warm encouragement, I surely would not be here today. I am honored and proud to be an 18-year member of the SGI.

Through it all I have endured. I am not only a survivor in life, I am a winner!

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