

PERSPECTIVE: In the Real World
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Detroit

The city of Detroit has been branded for the past 30 years as one of the nation's worst examples of urban decline. Yet today it is emerging as an example of a community pulling itself up by its bootstraps, as its visionary leaders reach out to business and industrial leaders, as well as to citizens.

Three years ago, while Detroit was striving to make itself into a world-class city, the Clinton administration announced the creation of nationwide Empowerment Zones. Detroit, along with many other cities, applied for Empowerment Zone status, which would grant it "a combination of tax incentives and block grants to implement 10-year, community-wide strategic plans to promote overall revitalization" (according to a booklet by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). In December 1994, Detroit, along with five other cities, was granted Empowerment Zone status.

The mayor of Detroit, Dennis Archer, and his staff, most of whom are African American, have been reaching out to the mostly Caucasian business leaders in the area and truly bridging the chasmic racial divide that has plagued the city for years. These business leaders — including executives with the Big Three motor companies and real estate investors — have been responding in spades by investing billions of dollars in inner-city businesses, many of which are minority owned.

Twenty-nine companies have announced plans to spend more than \$2 billion to open, expand or relocate their businesses in Detroit. The city has become the greatest success of all the Empowerment Zone cities and has been held up by the White House as a shining example of urban renewal.

The upshot of this is that the Motor City is leading the way, nationwide, in bringing industry back to the inner city. More business ultimately means more jobs, better schools and housing, and safer streets for Detroiters. These improved amenities will help the city's citizens achieve greater self-esteem and a sense of caring about their community.

This past April 14–16, the third annual White House Community Empowerment Conference was held in downtown Detroit, with Vice President Al Gore attending.

As a freelance journalist, I pulled strings, chanted a great deal and overcame some interesting obstacles to attend the conference. Along with meeting local leaders, federal officials and nationwide representatives, I was privileged to hear Al Gore address the conference. I was reminded of SGI President Ikeda's many remarks about the compassion of leaders, about the importance of a bottom-up organization, about the essential value of dialogue and unity. But most of all, hearing Gore's speech I realized that success in the real world frequently mirrors the principles that President Ikeda espouses.

Here are some of Gore's remarks:

"Hope has always empowered Detroit. With hope for better things, communities are rising again from the ashes."

"This [Empowerment Zone] program is designed to be bottom up, not top down."

"For success, we need to listen to local people."

"It's very important to construct dialogue between the cities and the surrounding communities."

"It's important to move beyond racial barriers, to concentrate on what we have in common, rather than on what divides us."

"We are one. We are a national community. We have to connect to one another."

"Cities and regions, wherever they are in the country, are all connected to one another."

Gore inspired me and reminded me that the world is yearning for hope, compassion, empowerment by the people, human dignity and the unity of people of all races. All of these are qualities that President Ikeda and SGI-USA General Director Fred Zaitzu have been promoting. As Mr. Zaitzu wrote in the January *Living Buddhism*, "One further step we can take [to promote diversity] is to pray for people around us to live together in mutual understanding and respect, and that sincere dialogue will be followed by sincere actions."

The longer I practice Buddhism, the more I realize that my Buddhist practice and my life in the real world are inseparable. Just as Detroit is reaching out to its local citizens, training and empowering them to create a new, revitalized city, I am striving to achieve mutual understanding and respect in the real world, as well as in the SGI.

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