

## **Michael O. Ewing, Chicago**

### **The Wind Beneath Our Wings**

This is actually a story about my son, Masaaki, who was instrumental in changing the course of my life. The youngest of my five children, Masaaki was always a strong-willed child, which masked his warmth and compassion.

Growing up, he experienced everything from cuts and falls to a broken arm. He even ingested a lethal dose of cleaner when he was 1 year old. Given no chance of surviving, he did anyhow. The doctors said he would be brain damaged. Masaaki was observed by a specialist for a few years, but showed no signs of brain damage. He entered preschool and kindergarten under normal circumstances. In fact, he developed much faster than the other children.

Preschool was not a problem, and Masaaki adjusted well in kindergarten. However, first through eighth grades were pure hell. Masaaki was constantly involved in confrontations with other children and, at times, teachers. Visits to school for my wife, Valerie, were constant; her face became very familiar to teachers and administrators.

My job prevented me from getting involved in these school visits. Instead, I watched from the outside, wondering what should be the next step in solving these problems.

During these years, Masaaki went to every SGI-USA activity with my wife, and every now and then with me. He was kept busy during these activities by playing with toys and mostly by drawing and coloring. A member of the Junior Pioneers (now the Boys and Girls Group), he participated in each Columbus Day Parade in Chicago.

He chanted at meetings in a fashion that caused much attention — with great enthusiasm and passion, that is to say, very loud. He attempted to do gongyo as well. He made many causes during this time.

I saw his tremendous desire to win when I became a basketball coach for boys. Because Masaaki was too young for team competition, he had to watch while I coached his two older brothers. Whenever he got a chance to participate, he did so with passion. He did everything full-out, hating to lose.

But the times he did poorly or lost a game, he was unable to control his emotions. He would act out his deep disgust over not doing his best.

The one and only time he was on a team I coached, we won the championship. I didn't realize how much my coaching affected him, but I feel that in a way I abandoned him. I coached other boys, but he really needed his dad. In most cases, I was unable to deal with his emotional outbursts. I did all I could think of, but my efforts were not effective. Instead of reaching out, I think the man in me pushed him away.

Many days I chanted really hard to solve this problem. I was constantly seeking guidance about it, and invariably the focus turned out to be me. It was very difficult to look in the mirror to truly see myself, but this was what I was encouraged to do. No matter how much I wanted this obstacle to go away, it wouldn't. Not being discouraged, I chanted with high hopes that I could change.

During the eighth grade we finally became aware that Masaaki had a visual perception problem, which was played out in behavioral consequences. He received treatment and completed eighth grade without further problems. Despite his troubled elementary school experiences, Masaaki made the honor roll for the first time.

High school began with a parent-teacher conference and a two-day suspension. During the next three years, what influence I had on him was lost. He felt closer to his "boys" than his family. He began to show the visible results of tobacco, marijuana and alcohol use, and

his behavior became defiant and abusive. He appeared to want to be the man of the house. Needless to say, he began to feel that chanting was for the weak, so he stopped practicing.

Because of an accident that left me with a herniated disc and caused long absences from work, I eventually received a severance package and left my job. I was finally available to attend parent–teacher conferences. But things grew more and more difficult. I had no idea what to do.

Then it happened.

During an abusive exchange with Masaaki, my wife and I grabbed him by the collar. He took it as an act of aggression and reacted. There I was, a 47-year-old man trying to remember high school wrestling techniques to control his 16-year-old-son. That was the straw that was too many.

I called the police; he was handcuffed and taken to the station, not permitted to return home. And later he was taken in by my parents.

This was the time to take action. We started with a drug test that turned out positive, and out-patient treatment was prescribed for Masaaki. Counseling for the family was addressed as well. But it was not until Masaaki resumed a 10-minute-a-day goal of chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo that things began to get better.

February 1995 found Masaaki struggling with a severe virus that cleansed his system — detox at home, so to speak. His daimoku increased and he started to recite parts of gongyo for a few minutes before school. His attitude began to change.

But his newfound hope was suddenly dashed. Masaaki was involved in an incident that brought him before the Juvenile Court of Cook County. He was found delinquent, and before he could start serving his home confinement he exploded in court, tossing papers and other objects at the judge. This scene played out like an episode from *The Twilight Zone*.

That was when I really began to change. I chanted daily to see the benefit in all the craziness that was taking place. During the next five months, I immersed myself in the advancement of kosen-rufu — attending meetings, visiting members, encouraging anyone who needed it.

Most important, I began to reflect on my attitude that I had held for years about my son. I saw that he was giving me a chance to become a human being. The U.S.–Japan Youth Culture Festival was the grand opportunity for my entire family to get involved. We all worked hard and visited Masaaki in the detention center and hospital, never missing a visit.

Masaaki also began to practice more sincerely. He asked for a gongyo book and started doing morning and evening prayers. He eagerly read SGI President Ikeda's *Daily Guidance*, the *World Tribune* and *Seikyo Times* from cover to cover. He was very impressed with *The New Human Revolution*, especially the parts about Shakyamuni's life and the imprisonment of Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda.

Our family began to generate tremendous power, changing unbelievable situations into victories. My children began to have the same attitude I had — that Masaaki was a bodhisattva, not a troublemaker. We united, became closer and became more aware that when we practice the teachings as the Daishonin prescribes, we can change any poison to medicine.

When Masaaki's cousin called him, he ended up being encouraged by Masaaki! He immediately hung up the phone and composed a rap song, with help from his dad. The song's powerful story of drugs, violence and the relationship between father and son touched the hearts of all. It was performed at Chicago #2 Territory's February world peace gongyo meeting.

Masaaki is determined to continue his human revolution, his goal to graduate from high

school and go to college, just like other children. He appreciates this organization as much as I do. He no longer feels this practice is for the weak. He realizes that this practice is for the strong and courageous, and that to practice is a true honor.

Immediately after being downsized from my job, my wife and I formed a corporation, Galerie Ewing Limited. We operate from our first home, which has been renovated into an art gallery. The business supports my wife's lifelong artistic endeavors and fulfills my dreams of being an entrepreneur. Located in our community, it is our dream that it will contribute to the cultural development of the neighborhood.

During his battle with his visual perception problem, Masaaki kept a journal complete with pictures, which, to our surprise, was published by the Optometric Extension Program Foundation. The problem Masaaki faced is common to many children but is difficult to diagnose. Masaaki, for instance, had 20-20 vision. His book, *The Rage*, is a bright light for other families groping in the darkness. Used by doctors, parents and children, it is being translated into nine languages.

Even though Masaaki now views his parents as the wind beneath his wings, he in fact has been and will be the wind beneath our wings.

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