

## **SUA Program Teaches Student About Herself Margaret Johnson, Honolulu**

**Margaret Johnson gained not only an education but a fresh direction in life while completing Soka University of America's master's degree program.**

I was born to a Japanese mother and an American father. I always felt confident about my identity as Japanese and American, as well as being Buddhist. However, I did not understand the significance of my practice of Buddhism.

Before graduating from high school, I was told by my career counselor that my chances of getting into college were slim. I wanted to prove her wrong. I was accepted at the University of Hawaii in the fall of 1989, but I took studying very lightly in my first two years. During this time, I was not participating much in SGI activities — I used schoolwork as an excuse.

After two years at UH, my GPA fell extremely low, and I was placed on academic probation. I realized that I was in college for all the wrong reasons. I wasn't there because I wanted to be there. So I dropped out for a year and a half.

While I was out of school, I realized that I had no sense of purpose in life. Gradually, I got back into the flow of SGI activities and was working full time. I eventually realized how badly I wanted to go back to school to learn. This time I wanted to go back to school for myself, not to prove something to others.

With this conviction, I returned to UH. During my last two years, as busy as I was, writing paper after paper and my senior thesis, I also enjoyed being completely engaged in SGI activities and making lots of youth division friends. These years at UH were meaningful and exciting. I graduated in 1995 with a bachelor's in English.

I knew that the future was going to be awesome — I envisioned, upon graduating, the perfect job with great pay.

In the meantime, I applied for the JET [Japan Exchange Teaching] program where I would have taught at a high school in Japan without any teaching background. I thought that I would have no problem getting into this program because not only did I meet the qualifications, I also speak Japanese! I figured I had the job already, so I didn't worry about it. I didn't chant about it at all. Life was flowing fine.

When I had not heard anything after a couple of months, I called the Japanese consulate to see what was going on. My application had been denied. I was absolutely crushed. I did not know what I was going to do with my life from there on. I went home and couldn't even tell my mother because I was so ashamed. All my life I had gotten everything I wanted. I had never been declined for anything at all.

When I told my mother that my application had been denied, I was totally crying. She said: "See! I told you to chant about it, but you said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah!' That's what happens when you get bigheaded." Then she said, "But, in Buddhism, everything happens for a reason."

I had two choices — to take this as a defeat and wallow in sadness, or take this situation as a challenge and win.

There was nothing I could do but chant to figure out what I was going to do. While I was chanting, I made a decision. I applied to the graduate school at Soka University of America in Calabasas. I was accepted into the program in Second and Foreign Language Education with a concentration in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

I've gotten to know myself better than ever. One thing that I learned at SUA is how to

create value in everything I do. Whether the situation be negative or positive, I can always figure out how the experience is valuable. At SUA I did so much human revolution with my environment and especially within myself. I was able to create very strong, golden bonds with my classmates, the staff and the faculty there. I can say without hesitation that my time at SUA — a year and a half — was the best ever in my life.

Being at SUA, not only did I get a clear direction in life, I also totally changed my life around. My last semester, I finally received my first 4.0 GPA and also got a job teaching English at Soka University in Japan for the next three years beginning this April.

All of this was not accomplished on my own. My classmates and I really struggled. First of all, the curriculum is very rigorous and intense. Second, the campus is out in a canyon where the buses don't run, and most of us didn't have cars. When in need of help, the staff and faculty were more than willing to help us out. Many people within the organization also supported and helped us.

A year and a half is very short. Within this short time, I learned more than just teaching English as a second language. I learned about friendship, patience, determination and perseverance. Most of all, I learned the meaning of creating value in my life. I learned to do things wholeheartedly: study 100 percent, play 100 percent, cry 100 percent, laugh 100 percent, struggle 100 percent, live 100 percent — this was my motto while I was at SUA.

My direction for life is clearer now, and I know what I want to accomplish. I still have a long way to go in accomplishing my dreams and goals, yet the future is really exciting.

It has been a long journey to get to where I am right now. I have deep appreciation for my parents, friends and leaders who never lost hope for me and have always encouraged and supported me.

An excerpt from the graduation message sent by the university's founder, Daisaku Ikeda, inspires me to keep going forward. He quotes from Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister: "The higher one goes the more laborious becomes the journey and the summit recedes into the clouds. Yet the climbing is worth the effort and has its own joy and satisfaction. Perhaps it is the struggle that gives value to life, not so much the ultimate result."

The founder then says: "So long as you struggle to advance, you will develop your strengths and abilities, even if you do not reach the peak immediately. It is exactly this training that releases your vitality and strength to take on the challenge of further ascent."

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