

In Rhythm with Reggae Sunsplash
By Sonia Johnson
Los Angeles

I grew up in Jamaica in a family that always took care of me. Whenever a decision had to be made, they made it for me. Life was as smooth as a breeze. When I married, I continued along the same path. My husband, Tony Johnson, made all the decisions. I just went along with whatever he wanted to do.

In 1978, my husband established a music festival in Jamaica called Reggae Sunsplash, which attracted people from all over the world. This was his lifelong dream.

This festival featured local artists and gave them the opportunity to showcase their music. There were so many talented artists in Jamaica at that time, the most renowned being the late Bob Marley. But many had very limited exposure beyond Jamaica and the pockets of West Indian communities scattered throughout the United States, Great Britain and Europe.

Reggae Sunsplash changed all of that.

Although I totally supported his business venture, I wasn't involved in its day-to-day operations. When Reggae Sunsplash got big enough to begin touring the United States, Tony formally established the business and set up an office, which was run by our eldest daughter, Renee. My responsibility was to take care of our other three children, Danielle, Nikki and T.J.

We moved to Los Angeles in 1984. Not too long after, I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and received the Gohonzon on June 27, 1984.

Tony worked very hard to make Reggae Sunsplash a success until the stress of the business took its toll. My husband died suddenly on May 26, 1997.

In addition to being devastated and grief-stricken, I had no idea what I was going to do with the business, which had become the sole means of support for our family. The key people in the organization, including Tony's long-time production manager, turned their backs on me and decided that his death signaled a good time to start their own business to compete with Reggae Sunsplash. To top it all, Renee and her husband moved back to Jamaica, taking all the pertinent business information about Reggae Sunsplash with them.

There seemed to be no end to my sorrow. I didn't know where to start to do anything, and I was frightened. It seemed as if I had no one in the music industry to turn to, and no one I knew whom I could trust. Every person that I reached out to for assistance seemed to have their own agendas.

At that time, one of my leaders, Linda Johnson, vice women's division secretariat, encouraged me to trust the Gohonzon. She said the biggest battle I was facing was the battle to win over myself; I needed to believe in me and break through my limitations. If I did that, she said, I would have total victory.

Then she reminded me of something John Wayne once said: "Courage is feeling the fear and saddling up anyway."

This March, I invited a member whose experience I had read in the World Tribune to speak to at my Sofia Group meeting. A lot of my members had been encouraged by Jeri Love's experience of overcoming 26 years of depression.

I was especially moved by the quote from SGI Vice Women's Division Leader Yumiko Hachiya that Jeri referred to in her experience. After she spoke at my meeting, she gave all of the Sofia Group members a copy of the quote: "I hope that you will muster strong faith and challenge the many hardships that lie ahead of you. No matter how impossible the reality may appear, you should never concede defeat. Never conclude that you've reached a

dead-end. You must not allow your resolute faith and conviction to falter. The means to change hardship into happiness lies in our heart, in our single-minded determination.”

After the Sofia meeting, I talked to Jeri and Linda about my situation with Reggae Sunsplash. Linda encouraged me to be strict with myself and launch a chanting campaign. Jeri volunteered to come over to my house to chant with me, saying we could begin the next morning at 6:30 a.m.

We began chanting for an hour and then reciting the sutra. As soon as the campaign began, my obstacles began to increase. Within two weeks, we increased our chanting to one-and-a-half hours every morning. Then there were even more obstacles. A week later, we started getting together at 6:00 a.m. and chanting two hours in the morning, six days a week.

My determination was to have the Reggae Sunsplash concert in May. I had less than three months to confirm a venue, book a line-up, advertise and sell out the house. In the music industry, this time-frame is considered impossible. Tony always began planning his concerts no less than four and often six months in advance. The fact that I was also a novice producer and a woman in a male-dominated business magnified that impossibility times 10.

The more we chanted, the more that negative and evil people came out of the woodwork. Linda explained to me that this was the answer to my prayers. The Gohonzon was clearly showing me the people I couldn't trust.

As we continued our chanting campaign, I also started approaching musical artists about joining the Reggae Sunsplash lineup. They kept giving me the run-around, hanging me up for weeks. And when I presented the proposed lineup to the venues where I wanted to hold the concert, they said it wasn't strong enough to sell tickets.

About six weeks into my chanting campaign, everything came crashing down around me. My agent, who was supposed to help sell the show to promoters, was not supportive. My staff began encouraging me to throw in the towel and move on to something else. My daughters Danielle and Nikki believed that the Gohonzon was telling me to give up, because nothing positive was happening even though I was chanting a lot.

They were also worried that the stress of trying to make this concert happen was going to affect my health. One of my daughters told me she had already lost her father, and she didn't want to lose me, too.

At the end of our staff meeting, everyone was discouraged. One of my staff asked what was I going to do now. I looked at him and said: “I am going to chant. This show is going to happen. Just watch me.”

After my staff meeting, I tried to reach Linda at work to get more encouragement, but I got her voicemail instead. With guidance from SGI President Ikeda in the World Tribune and Living Buddhism from which to draw encouragement, I made the determination that afternoon that I had to show actual proof of the power of the Mystic Law to both my staff and my family. Although my son, T.J., was practicing Buddhism, my daughters had become disillusioned and lost their faith after the death of their father. I knew it was time to turn this situation around.

As I chanted later that day, I realized that it had always been my karma to wait for someone else to make decisions or take responsibility. If Reggae Sunsplash was going to happen, if there were going to be a victory, Tony's dream had to become my dream. And I had to take 100 percent responsibility to make it happen.

I thought about a quote from President Ikeda that I had read earlier that week: “It takes courage to become happy — courage to remain true to one's convictions; courage not to be defeated by one's weaknesses and negativity; courage to take swift action to help those

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who are suffering. It is through such daily efforts that your true beauty as a human being shines forth.”

While chanting, I demanded that the Buddhist deities help me. Within 45 minutes, I started getting calls from musical artists confirming their participation in the show. I finally had a lineup. I was beginning to see the results of all my chanting!

The Greek Theatre here in Los Angeles had been one of Tony’s favorite places, and it had hosted the opening of Reggae Sunsplash for more than 10 years. With less than five weeks to promote the concert and sell tickets, I approached the Greek about having the concert there Memorial Day weekend, and they agreed. I decided that it would be a tribute to Tony and his efforts to promote world peace through music.

Then there were more obstacles. Three weeks before the show at the Greek, my production manager and I had a disagreement. He walked out. I knew absolutely nothing about technical production and had to chant my way through this obstacle. While chanting, I remembered an assistant production manager who had been a big help to Tony during his last show in Japan. I called the guy in Dallas, and he was available. He went to work immediately, contacting the Greek and the artists to make the necessary arrangements.

The production manager who quit also was responsible for the food and crafts fair, which was being held in the parking lot adjacent to the Greek. There were a lot of loose ends still to be tied up, and I needed more help. I called a fellow member, Jarmil Maupin, and he took care of everything. He even brought other SGI members with him to work the day of the event.

After a week of cool, rainy weather, the sun broke through on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend — and so did I. The concert was a total success!

It was a near-capacity crowd — close to 6,000 people from every ethnic group and nationality one could possibly imagine. They waved their hands and swayed their bodies in rhythm with the reggae music.

Throughout the concert, I felt Tony’s spirit there with me. It was a true tribute to his life’s work, and I knew he was pleased.

The greatest benefit of this experience was not just the successful concert, but the profound changes I experienced in my life — my human revolution — in order to win. I had to chant for the wisdom to make the right decisions for my life as well for the courage to use that wisdom. There were many times when I received the wisdom but didn’t have the courage to act.

I also learned a lot about what it means to have faith. Although I couldn’t immediately see my prayers being manifested, I had to continue to believe that things were definitely unfolding. I couldn’t back down.

Also, as a result of this campaign, my daughters’ faith in this practice was renewed, and my children and I are closer than ever.

In closing, I have to express my deepest appreciation to President Ikeda, whose guidance always provided me the key to deepening my faith. I also have to thank my family, who believed in me and totally supported my efforts. I have to thank all the members who fought alongside me — especially Linda Johnson and Jeri Love, who gave me support and encouragement and were always willing to chant with me, no matter what else was going on in their lives.

My next goal is to launch an international tour of Reggae Sunsplash, going to both Japan and Australia by the end of this year. I also plan to do a U.S. tour.

I know that with Nam-myoho-renge-kyo I will break through once again!

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