

## **BYAKUREN, SOKA GROUP AND GAJOKAI DEVELOPMENT IN OUR LIVES RESULTS FROM OUR EFFORTS FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS**

*We've all seen them — the young men parking cars in the pouring rain outside your local SGI-USA community center, the young woman helping you find two seats together in a crowded meeting room. Who are they? And what motivates them to do these seemingly thankless tasks? They are the Byakuren, the Soka Group and the Gajokai. They have all committed to ensuring that your Buddhist activities run smoothly, that you are comfortable, and that there are no accidents.*

*The payoff for these efforts can often be hard to see immediately, but is always undeniable. Here are three experiences that demonstrate the impact of these behind-the-scenes efforts. Actions for the sake of others produce deep, personal growth in our lives — growth that can propel us to succeed for years to come. SGI President Ikeda says:*

*We are all Bodhisattvas of the Earth charged with the mission of leading the suffering to true fulfillment. This philosophy — that our lives exist to help others — is the most fundamental energy source for nurturing a vigorous kindness. Kindness is a universal language. It links hearts in every society and culture around the globe. The spread of our kosen-rufu activities is cultivating a rich field for the growth and expansion of just such humanistic spiritual values.*

*If you are interested in participating in these groups, please speak with your local youth division leaders.*

### **WHY DO I APPRECIATE GAJOKAI? BY PAUL HOULE, SEATTLE**

For me, doing Gajokai activities has been the source of incredible fortune and benefit in my life. Years ago I heard an experience of a longtime member. Because of his efforts over the years in doing Gajokai activities, he had amassed a substantial bank of fortune in all aspects of his life, including a stable and rewarding job, his own home and a happy, healthy family. Most importantly, he developed an inner strength, which was something that couldn't be taken away. This experience always stuck with me. I wanted to create that kind of fortune in my life, that kind of strength. So I began to challenge myself to participate in the Gajokai.

At the time, I was a timid, soon-to-be college dropout with loads of personal worries always dogging me. "Why am I in college?" "What should I do with my life?" "Will I ever get a real girlfriend?" etcetera, etcetera. I had little organization and direction in my life other than my Buddhist practice. My main interest was leisure, and my sense of responsibility and commitment was summarized by my standard response to most requests: "Yeah, maybe."

Buddhist study and encouragement from my fellow Gajokai members enabled me to make a commitment to myself not to miss this chance to do Gajokai — to create fortune in my life. It was often a struggle, having to get up early or stay up late, chanting extra daimoku to gear up extra energy to travel a long distance to the community center just to support others, often for many seemingly thankless hours.

Yet I sensed it was the greatest training for my life — to challenge my every moment for the sake of others, to chant daimoku and maintain a high life-condition so that I could always be at the right place at the right time during my shift. And to read people's life-con-

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ditions with my own. What did they need? Where were they coming from? What was their struggle? How could I help make their brief time here more enjoyable and encouraging?

I refused to miss my chance to do a Gajokai shift. I could miss gongyo once in a while, but not Gajokai. If the SGI was the right place for me, and if President Toda's words "This organization is more important than my life" were true, I couldn't let him or myself down. So I determined to train myself to protect the movement for kosen-rufu, the will of the Daishonin.

After a few years, I began to see significant changes in my life, which I felt were directly connected to my Gajokai training. I was consistently promoted at work, given more responsibility, titles and pay. My attitude, optimism and perseverance — all polished through Gajokai — gained me access to business training and experiences that landed me a better job and continued to pay off in my daily life. I was able to develop my own family fortune, purchase a home and eventually finish my B.A. degree.

One benefit I recently realized was the almost immediate level of trust the top executives at my new company placed in me after less than nine months on the job. People who have two or three times my level of experience and education now frequently consult me.

Most importantly, I've been able to consistently and continuously reveal my own negative karma and persevere to change it. In the Goshu, the Daishonin writes, "This I will state; let the Gods forsake me, let all persecution assail me, still I will give my life for the sake of the Law." This quote has helped anchor my practice. Gajokai activities gave me a personal connection to the idea and I think the idea exemplifies the spirit of the Gajokai — the protectors of the castles of kosen-rufu. When things get tough, not only can I think about this quote and the Daishonin's spirit behind it, but I can also rely on my Gajokai training to give me the extra punch to push through whatever difficulty I'm facing. I've begun to find my own internal strength.

I deeply appreciate President Ikeda and all the members of SGI-USA for the opportunity to do Gajokai, protect the movement for kosen-rufu, and create eternal fortune in my life.

## **BECOMING A PRINCESS OF FORTUNE BY LAURA RECHT, NEW YORK**

When I first joined the Byakuren, I was anything but the model of the Byakuren spirit. In fact, I was struggling with very deep negativity in my life. I was trying to heal from a two-yearlong depression and from the recent breakup with my partner, who only the year before had moved to the States from London so that we could be together and get married. At that time, I was also in graduate school, which wasn't fulfilling the real dream that had brought me to New York 11 years ago — to become a filmmaker.

Even though I went to NYU and was one of 60 people in the art school chosen for a special cultural and academic scholarship program, I had little confidence. After graduation, I lost all hope of ever being a filmmaker, and while my friends moved on to jobs at television and film companies around the city, I didn't even try to find work because I didn't feel capable enough.

As I mentioned, when I became a Byakuren member I was struggling! I didn't feel at all like the other girls in the group, who seemed positive, self-assured, and strong. Still, with the support of my three great Byakuren leaders, I felt myself begin to grow. I tried with all my might on each shift to really act as SGI President Ikeda would.

The Byakuren leader, Beatrice Lopez, always used to encourage me, saying, "Laura,

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please chant to have President Ikeda's heart." I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but I tried it, and determined to do as much behind the scenes as I possibly could. When I cleaned the bathrooms, I cleaned with the determination that I was scrubbing every bit of negativity from my life. I tried also to greet each and every individual member as they came in and left, no matter how hectic things were, or how many people were crowding around.

This was my first experience with practicing Buddhism with the spirit of President Ikeda. I'd practiced Buddhism for two years before, but not with this same determination to love and care for the members. My heart began to open, and for the first time, I began to respect and view President Ikeda as my mentor. I realized how deep his caring is for the members, how very hard he works, the beauty of his words, and the overwhelming breadth of his vision. I began to realize that being a Byakuren at the culture center wasn't enough; the challenge was to become a Byakuren in life as well.

In the fall of 1998, I was asked to take responsibility for the New York Byakuren's New Hostess program, which is the training program for potential Byakuren members. It seemed like such a large job to me; once again I felt my negativity rise and my lack of confidence surface. I couldn't imagine myself filling the shoes of the Byakuren leaders.

In fact, I even went into hiding for a while. Once again I received encouragement to try with all my might, not run from my depression, and take a step forward. My life for many months was consumed with nothing but Hostess activities, but I was proud of our young women, and eager to see them become Byakuren members.

After the Hostess program was over, I got my first benefit. I started working at the local public television station, WNET/Thirteen. I loved it! Even though I was "only" an intern, I wanted to be the best, brightest, most "Byakuren" intern they ever had. I found out quickly that the skills I had learned in Byakuren training directly applied to everything I did at the station and on shoots. In fact, one of my first jobs was to serve water to our weekly guest hosts! No other intern took this "little" job as seriously as I did.

I chanted to be in rhythm with the host and the crew, to prevent accidents, and always to add a positive Buddhist energy to the set. Soon I was highly trusted by the professional camera crew and the producers, and I was the only intern whom they requested to work with time and time again.

Going that extra mile, regardless of whether or not anyone notices, is a key point to Byakuren, and one I used at WNET. Within mere weeks of being on the job, one of the producers asked me if I would like to produce a half-hour documentary on a local dance school downtown that couldn't afford to hire a WNET crew. I immediately agreed.

Not only was the dance school in the area of my district, giving me the opportunity to participate in the SGI's Year of the Community, it was also a very humanistic school that believed in treating dancers with utmost respect and preventing injuries at all cost. I loved the school and the staff. We quickly grew into a warm family, working together on the project.

But, as Nichiren Daishonin teaches us, obstacles will always arise on the road to winning. The day before shooting was set to begin, my cameraman backed out of the project. I was devastated, worrying, "How am I going to have this beautiful documentary, if no one is there to work the camera?" I chanted and chanted.

At the last minute, a wonderful cameraman volunteered to shoot the first day, and he recommended a friend for the next day.

By the time the third day rolled around, I felt utterly confident to shoot the piece

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myself. At one of the last days of the shoot, I was working the camera, lights and sound all by myself. How did I suddenly have the confidence to do it? It was the Byakuren — stand alone — spirit for sure.

The deadline for my film approached. Because WNET liked the footage I shot, they decided to film an entire week of host locations at the dance school, using someone from my documentary as the host. This was an honor, but it also meant I absolutely had to have the film edited in five days. No one thought I could do it, and the producer put another show in the schedule just in case I didn't make it.

When I was at the dance school the next day, I remember chanting in my head, saying: "OK, Gohonzon, I need that comet to fly across the sky. I need something to change."

A couple of minutes later, a young woman walked up to me and volunteered to edit my piece free of charge! She was a PBS editor who also danced at the school. Together, we spent five grueling days and nights at the editing machine. Grueling yes, but also the most fun I can remember having. She did a beautiful job, and the film is everything I chanted for. It aired April 23.

Byakuren continues to help me change my negative nature, and believe me, it's still there. I constantly have to recommit to the process, not allowing myself to get lazy or complacent or to complain.

As I embark on my second film project, I hold in my heart President Ikeda's message to Byakuren to be shining Princesses of Fortune that, like flowers, bring the fresh scent of beauty, calm and wisdom to every situation. Thanks, Byakuren!

### **JOY OF SOKA GROUP BY NOBU KAWASAKI, EUGENE, ORE.**

I have been participating in the Soka Group in Eugene for more than a year. Eugene Chapter is very big and includes about one-third of the state of Oregon. Our small community center is located in a business complex between an Asian store and electric repair shop.

When I came to Oregon about three years ago, I did not see any Soka Group or Byakuren members at activities. In November 1997, a former youth division chapter leader asked me to organize the Soka Group because the store next to the community center had complained about our members parking their cars in front of their store.

My first effort was to create a Soka Group manual that was specific for our chapter. I obtained a 20-year-old manual from the chapter leader, but it was useless. I spent a lot of time thinking and chanting about the role of Soka Group. I asked my region Soka Group leader for his advice. He told me that the success of the Soka Group would be totally dependent upon how much I devoted myself to protecting the members. Shortly thereafter, I completed the manual for the Eugene Chapter Soka Group. I then asked several YMD members to become Soka Group members.

Now, two or three Soka Group members are always present to help to set up the stage, welcome people, find parking places and prevent accidents at each Kosen-rufu Gongyo meeting. I've almost memorized what kind of car each member drives.

Recently some members told me that they really look forward to seeing the Soka Group welcome members with their fresh, smiling faces. I was really glad to hear that because I've learned that our behavior as Soka Group can make the members feel either very comfortable or uncomfortable, depending on how much each of us devotes himself to protecting the members and our attitude toward supporting behind the scenes.

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SGI President Ikeda has said, “Those who support members from behind the scenes are the greatest.” I’ve really learned a lot of things in challenging oka Group activities, especially how important it is to take care of others. Through my Soka Group activities, I have been able to chant more for the members’ happiness and challenge myself to overcome my weakness and laziness to expand my capability for protecting others. I would proudly like to continue Soka Group activities and supporting the members!

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