

## WAVES OF PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE CARIBBEAN— VALERIE GITERSON-PANTOPHLET AND CORA CHRISTIAN

### Valerie Giterson-Pantophlet, Saint Martin

Valerie Giterson-Pantophlet is a policy planner of social and economic projects in the Department of Economics and Tourism on the Caribbean island of Saint Martin. This year will mark her twenty-ninth in government service. Over the years she has served as a member of the Island Council as well as a member of the Executive Council, and has received recognition and awards for her efforts to promote education, culture and economic development.

She also plays an active role in SGI-Sint Maarten-Saint Martin (Dutch sector/French sector) as the women's area leader, together with her husband, Humphrey Giterson, the men's area leader, who is also a major in the police force on the Dutch side of the island. After hearing SGI leader Daisaku Ikeda speak in Miami in 1987, Ms. Giterson-Pantophlet felt a strong desire to devote her life to working for world peace, and she encouraged her husband to work alongside her. Together, they are doing their best to propagate Buddhism in the Caribbean and to hold positions of responsibility in society while raising their three children.

In February 1999, the Department of Culture and Education invited a representative of SGI to attend a meeting of religious leaders addressing the problem of youth and aggressive behavior. Ms. Giterson-Pantophlet was proud to represent the SGI.

Ms. Giterson-Pantophlet encountered Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism through a set of unusual circumstances about twenty-five years ago. She recalls, "I went to the US Virgin Islands with the Dodgers baseball team. While there, I developed a skin reaction and went to see a doctor. As I was leaving, the doctor gave me a card with the words Nam-myohorenge-kyo and told me to recite them every morning. At that time I had no idea what those words meant and how they would later influence my life. Ten years later, in 1984, while attending my sister's graduation in the United States, I encountered a group of people who were reciting those very same words. I inquired about their meaning, and later I became an official member of the SGI."

At present there are approximately 300 members of SGI-Sint Maarten-Saint Martin, and most of the islands in the Caribbean now have at least one person who is practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

SGI-Sint Maarten-Saint Martin is beginning to play a major role in spreading waves of humanism throughout the Caribbean. With its multicultural makeup of seventy-two different nationalities in a thirty-seven-square-mile area, divided into French and Dutch sectors, the island is in Ms. Giterson-Pantophlet's words, "a Caribbean college of humanism."

She says, "We are going into the twenty-first century where we will be confronted with problems that are of global concern. We need courageous and levelheaded people who are able to make the right decisions. The way most of us perceive the process of democracy is that we are free to do as we please. The other side of it—responsibility—has been left out. It has never been instilled in us. For the next century we need people who no longer have political colors. Instead, they need a strong sense of responsibility to solve the many problems facing the whole world."

Under Ms. Giterson-Pantophlet's leadership, the SGI members in Saint Martin have been doing their best to take on responsible roles in the community. In the process, the SGI

organization has formed strong ties with the Philipsburg Jubilee Library and the University of St. Martin as well as other organizations striving to enhance peace, culture and education. SGI members have also been involved in projects carried out in conjunction with UNESCO and various NGOs.

### **Cora Christian, Saint Croix**

Dr. Cora Christian has been practicing medicine on the island of Saint Croix in the Virgin Islands since 1971, one year after she started practicing Buddhism in Philadelphia.

In addition to being employed as a family physician, she is medical director of HOVEN-SA, formerly Hess Oil of the Virgin Islands, the largest oil refinery in the western hemisphere, as well as medical director and principle clinical coordinator of the Virgin Islands Medical Institute. She also plays an active role in the SGI-USA as the vice territory chief of the Caribbean Headquarters.

Dr. Christian introduced Valerie Giterson-Pantophlet to the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism when she met her at the Dodgers' game Valerie attended on Saint Croix in 1974. She was the doctor who gave her the words Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Dr. Christian is delighted that Valerie has become such a strong, capable Buddhist leader. She says with pride, "I feel like a mother who is so happy to see her daughter have an even better life than she has. Valerie is a very special person. It was my good fortune to meet her that day and share Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with her."

A pioneer of Buddhism in the Caribbean, Dr. Christian is responsible for helping spread the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in Saint Thomas and Saint Croix as well as throughout the Caribbean islands. Four years ago, the SGI members on the Virgin Islands expanded their efforts beyond the Caribbean when they began sending periodicals to SGI members in Africa. Dr. Christian had the opportunity to visit and practice with the Kenyan SGI members in the 1980's when she was working with Flying Doctors, an organization that flies doctors to remote villages to treat patients. In 1989 she returned again to Africa to visit Kenya and Togo with her 75-year-old mother, her 81-year-old aunt and 81-year-old friend, her husband, her sister and two children, aged 4 to 6. While in Africa, they attended SGI meetings in Kenya and Togo. As a result, the members there formed a bond with the SGI members on Saint Croix that has strengthened over the years with exchanges of letters and correspondence.

Reflecting on her Buddhist practice, Dr. Christian says, "I believe I am a better person and a better physician since I understand more clearly that no matter what our differences, all people share the same feelings, struggles and triumphs. Buddhism allows me to have a sense of freedom and mission and to understand that no matter what, every action can benefit humanity as we overcome obstacles and challenge ourselves. I am constantly striving for self-improvement and the improvement of the society in which I live. I try to do my best."

To date, four hundred members have received the Gohonzon in the Virgin Islands. After practicing Buddhism, many members develop the fortune to travel abroad to further their education or to get a better job. When asked about the hopes and dreams of the members of Saint Croix, Dr. Christian responds without hesitation, "We truly have only one dream—world peace. We strongly feel, especially since we are a microcosm of the world with many different nationalities living in such close proximity, that we must succeed in creating peace and harmony here and now." □