

EXPERIENCE — NANCY KENNEDY, RYE, NEW YORK MAKING THE LONG JOURNEY THROUGH LAW SCHOOL

Nancy Kennedy challenged her long journey to become a lawyer at 43, with ailing health and not even a bachelor's degree. 'The months, years, countless grueling exams and numerous obstacles passed by,' says Nancy. 'I would have "stopped on the 11th day" on that road to Kyoto long ago without the encouragement and support of SGI members!'

First I must express my deepest appreciation to the members who open their lives and share their experiences in the *World Tribune*. You have all encouraged me throughout the years and helped me move forward just one more day when all seemed to be collapsing around me!!

My experience has just proved what I refer to as the "20-year connection theory." Let me first tell you that I began this practice as a youth in 1967 in Hollywood, Calif. During that time I was a very vigorous member of the first Los Angeles Fife and Drum Corps. I am grateful for the strict and compassionate training from my seniors in faith — to this day it has carried me through the toughest of times! In 1971, however, I was sidelined by serious back surgery and eventually drifted away from members.

My SGI friends always stayed in touch though, and I began practicing again in 1978 while recovering from life-threatening abdominal surgery — and have never missed a day since then. I'll get back to the 20-year theory a little later.

At our district meeting last year, a member was trying to recall a quote from Nichiren Dai-shonin's writings to ask a question of a senior leader. This one I knew from memory and recited it for her. At one time in history, the city of Kyoto was the capital of Japan. The passage reads: "It takes twelve days to journey from Kamakura to Kyoto. If you travel for eleven but stop on the twelfth day, how can you admire the moon over the capital?" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Dai-shonin*, vol. 1, p. 254–55). To me this meant, if you do not continue to fight on the path for your goals in life no matter what the obstacles are, you will never reveal your hidden potential and complete your journey into the winner's circle.

Hearing this passage made me realize that I started my own journey to Kyoto — the goal of obtaining a law degree — 11 years ago, shortly after I arrived in New York. I had only intended to get a paralegal degree so I could seek employment in the legal field in New York. I had many years of legal secretarial work in the entertainment industry in California, but always wondered if I had any aptitude in "real world" law, not just the realm of preparing contracts for the "stars." Well, never underestimate the power of our practice to the Gohonzon! After earning my paralegal certificate, my inner voice then pushed me forward toward trying to become an attorney. But I was 43 and didn't even have an undergraduate degree. Everyone tried to discourage me from this crazy idea — except my SGI friends.

With support and encouragement from the SGI members, the months, years, countless grueling exams and numerous obstacles passed by. One huge obstacle was just getting accepted by a law school. I achieved my bachelor's degree in political science by 1990. Even though I graduated magna cum laude, I was passed over by every law school I applied to for two years. As the 1992 term started without me, I was very discouraged.

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However, in September 1992 one week after classes had begun, I received a call from City University of New York School of Law in New York City telling me that a new law student had broken her leg that weekend and could not continue. They offered me first choice off their waiting list of hundreds of applicants to take her place. I had to resign from my paralegal job immediately and jump right into classes that teach at a 100-mile-an-hour pace. This also meant getting up at 4 a.m. to drive a long distance to school five days a week. Those law school years were three of the most challenging years of my life, and every day I wondered if I had the strength to keep going. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo abundantly saved me from quitting many times!

Along with this my 85-year-old dad, with whom I was living and was his sole caregiver, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in my first year of law school. I now had to juggle magnified worry and care for him with the stress and demands of law school. By the third year, Dad was declining rapidly and moved upstate where he could live with my sister and be monitored by a memory disorders clinic. His house was sold in my last semester, and moving vans were clearing it out while I was trying to take final exams and find a place for myself to live within 30 days of graduating. Nevertheless, in May of 1995, I received my law degree.

One more obstacle stood in the way of my goal — the “Mount Everest” of all exams — the New York Bar. There was no time to prepare, with all this upheaval going on, to take the Bar right after graduation, which is the best chance anyone ever has of passing, while the thousands of legal rules are still somewhat fresh. My old enemy, chronic physical illness in the form of severe pancreatitis, also returned at that time! These obstacles caused me to wait for a full year before taking the New York Bar for the first time.

Three times I prepared for months on end, studying day and night while juggling demanding law clerk jobs. Three times I failed to score enough points to pass. Each time, the board of examiners increased the difficulty of the exam to the point that even extremely bright young people were failing over and over, some taking it up to 12 times, then just giving up.

Every day I would read SGI President Ikeda's encouragement and gain courage to keep going forward. Regarding achieving goals he said, “Don't give up when you feel discouraged — just renew your determination. If you fall down seven times, get up eight! The important thing is that you don't get down on yourself and throw in the towel.”

I took the Bar for the fourth time in February of 1998, and the results were published in May. It was the most difficult exam ever given with the highest failure rate ever — 53 percent of the people failed. My heart sank when I read that in *The New York Law Journal*. I was certain that I had failed again.

However, I am at long last sharing my experience because — I passed the exam — this time I accomplished the impossible! And with a high score! I can't tell you what sweet victory this has been, but what makes me happiest is that it is our victory — I would have stopped on the 11th day on that road to Kyoto long ago without the encouragement and support of SGI members! I am delighted to tell you that I was sworn in by the appellate court last September and now have a license to practice law in the state of New York.

Now, back to the “20-year connection theory.” I was still living in California, and around 1981 I remember that President Ikeda said to give yourself at least a 20-year goal to stick with this practice. Just like an oak tree, you don't see much for the first few years after the seed is planted in the ground, and maybe the tree isn't very tall even after 10 years. We always seem to want to see results overnight when we chant for our goals and

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dreams. But have patience, he said, and compare your life after 20 years to when you started this Buddhist practice.

In 1978, I had chronically poor health, was in and out of hospitals undergoing three major surgeries, had no confidence or stamina to hold any job other than typing and small office jobs. I was told by doctors that my disks were disintegrating in my back. They said I would be unable to stand or walk for the rest of my life by the time I was 40. Well, I'm certainly past 40 today! As my health improved and strengthened over the years, I began to both work and go to school instead of just barely getting through an easy eight-hour work day.

The only thing I added to my life in 1978 was this practice — steady and constant, day in and day out.

It was 1998 when I stood to take the oath to become an attorney, exactly 20 years later. The comparison to whom I was in 1978 is overwhelming. Over the years I've constantly challenged adversity with this practice and have undergone tremendous inner-life changes that have enabled me to achieve things that I never dreamed could happen! By the way, my dad, against all odds, is holding his own against the devastating effects of Alzheimer's and will soon be featured in an upcoming segment of *Dateline NBC*. I continue to learn that with Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in your life, each day is a priceless treasure and absolutely nothing is impossible!!

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