

## **EXPERIENCE – JEAN FRYE SIDWELL, WEST HILLS, CALIF. SINGING HER WAY TO SUCCESS**

**Fighting depression, low self-esteem and chronic voice problems, Jean Frye Sidwell developed her childhood passion for singing into a successful music career.**

When I was growing up, life was very difficult. My father was in the military and we moved constantly. Each time we moved my five brothers and I would have to change schools, sometimes in the middle of the school year.

Having no other girls in my family made moving especially hard on me. I often felt lonely and sad; being the new kid all the time was never fun. It got to the point where I didn't seek out new friends and kept to myself a lot. As I got older, one way I would keep from feeling lonely was to sing. I loved singing. I would go to my room, close the door, put on my favorite record and sing for hours. I loved it so much that I continued singing through junior high and high school. I was always told that I sounded really good and was eventually asked to perform for school functions. I loved performing, too, and at that point I was hooked!

In 1976, I joined a band and started singing professionally. I was 17. I left the band in 1978 and moved from the Midwest back to where I was born near San Diego. I dreamed of pursuing a career as a recording artist in California — the land of opportunity. I had no idea how difficult this would be. I would learn that, as with many endeavors in the performing arts, it is very difficult to survive financially and there are so many negative messages out there about having a successful career.

For the next few years, I struggled deeply with my own demons. Being on my own for the first time, I again felt lonely and sad. I began to eat to fill the void and developed a weight problem. Struggling with depression and low self-esteem, I began to have suicidal thoughts. Singing had always helped me in the past, so I decided to enroll in music school full time with voice as my major.

My best friend in school had been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and told me about chanting. He invited me to various activities but I never went. I respected his practice but I wasn't ready to practice myself.

I eventually managed to find a way to make a living as a singer. I joined another band in 1980, and began traveling with them. I was so happy when I was singing on stage, but my internal struggles were always just underneath the surface. Soon I began having serious problems with my voice. After a while it seemed I was hoarse most of the time. I went from one vocal instructor to another and still could not overcome it.

Finally, I lost my voice completely and had to stop singing for a minimum of six months. I was devastated. The one thing in my life I had always held on to no matter how bad things got, the thing I gained a sense of identity from, was no longer available to me.

In 1981, I decided to take a big step and move to Los Angeles — if I couldn't sing I would at least be at the center of where the music industry was. I enrolled in dance classes and the first person I met, Olivia, also an aspiring singer, became a very good friend. We often talked about finding a sense of community and spirituality. The next year she left town for a while and we lost touch.

In 1983, I hit rock bottom. I still wanted very much to sing but I was petrified of losing

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my voice again. I lost myself in a relationship with an alcoholic boyfriend. It ended when he came home drunk one night and hit me. Again, I was devastated. I felt everything was caving in. I was sad and lonely and I wanted to die. I was beginning to wonder if I shouldn't just forget about a music career, pack it up and move back home. Around that time my friend Olivia came back into town. I would find out later this was no coincidence.

I needed a roommate and she was in need of a place to stay so I invited her to stay with me. Olivia was also really struggling. Two weeks later she went to an introductory meeting on Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and received the Gohonzon shortly thereafter. For the next month she chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo every day and I noticed something start to change in her — although I didn't want to acknowledge it. I remembered that my best friend in junior college had told me about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo years earlier. It had seemed to help him so I supported Olivia in her practice. As for me, I had grown so familiar with suffering that it represented a strange security to me — I didn't want to let it go. Olivia would encourage me to chant, but I wouldn't. I got more depressed and she got happier.

Finally one day she got me to chant for 20 minutes. Afterward I felt like a heaviness had been lifted off my life, like the black cloud I had been living under was gone and the sun had come out. I'll never forget that day. I received my Gohonzon shortly thereafter.

We both jumped in and practiced very hard. We chanted a lot, joined the young women's dance team, sang songs at weekly discussion meetings and helped others to practice Buddhism. I still had a deep fear of losing my voice, so singing engagements were few and far between. I was always encouraged by seniors in faith to challenge this and told I could accomplish anything with my practice to the Gohonzon.

During this time I got my first full-time job as a secretary! I had no experience and basically got paid well to learn office skills. In 1985, I made a determination to challenge the situation with my voice and joined the SGI-USA young women's chorus. The next few years were so difficult for me. I lost my voice on many occasions, but amazingly I was allowed to perform anyway. That doesn't happen anywhere else!

Many times during a performance I would just mouth the words of the song and smile as tears would run down my face. I remember thinking: "What am I doing here?? I have no voice! Why don't I just give it up!?" In spite of how I felt at times, I took on more responsibility in the chorus and I was always encouraged to keep fighting — that this situation would definitely change.

A fellow chorus member and friend whom I had recently met and introduced to Buddhism had similar voice problems. She had just begun studying voice with a classically trained teacher and recommended that I see her for a consultation. I was leery because the teachers I'd had before had done nothing for my problems — some actually even made it worse! She assured me that this teacher was different. I began studying with her and immediately saw a difference in my voice. I studied with her for four years and since that time have never lost my voice or even had minor problems.

Since then, I began to sing a lot more professionally. I also realized that I wasn't going crazy any more over my weight and it hasn't been a problem since. I had so much support in my life that feeling lonely was no longer an option!

The depression was another matter, though, and it continued to show up regularly. In fact, it actually became worse over time. Some days I had to chant just to get through the day. In time I realized it kept showing up and getting worse so I could change my life.

I went to a therapist to get help with my depression. At my first visit I was asked many

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questions. One of the last questions was about whether I had ever been abused sexually. I started crying. Sadly, my answer was yes. From the age of 6 until I was 11, two of my brothers repeatedly molested me. I had never shared this with anyone. It was as if a secret door had been opened on my life. I left there feeling an incredible sense of sadness, relief and dismay that I could have kept these secrets for so long. My life made so much more sense — my struggles with overeating, low self-esteem, abusive relationships — at that point I began the difficult journey to understand who I really was inside. I chanted a lot that year.

In 1991, I started working a part-time job and sang professionally as much as I could. I met a musician named Chris while working on a friend's original music project. We fell in love and a year later we got married — something else I had chanted for — but that's a whole other experience.

He was so different from the men I had known in my life. We put together a band and began playing music on the weekends for private parties. We made good money but it was not enough to do things like buy a house. We got 40-hour-per-week jobs and commuted to work two hours every day, which was extremely difficult for us. We really wanted to be doing music for a living but both of our jobs paid well and included great benefits. We had no idea at the time, but we were establishing a foundation for what was to follow.

My daily practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism has taught me to never give up on my dream and each day and every year to make a new determination. On New Year's Day in 1996, I determined to do only music and to make a very good living doing it. I wrote this down on a piece of paper and put it away. That year both Chris and I began feeling very restless and frustrated at our jobs. We had both done well, receiving promotions and pay raises — we had even bought a house two years earlier. But how could we possibly ever have this much financial security doing music? Sometimes it felt as if we might never leave our jobs!

I remembered the determination I had made at the beginning of the year and redetermined in my chanting to accomplish my goal.

Shortly thereafter Chris' company was under new management and the situation became unbearable for him. He began submitting resumes to other companies and I kept chanting. One day I was having a casual conversation with a musician friend and I happened to mention that Chris was trying to make a change in jobs. To my surprise he was happy to hear it because he had been looking for someone to join him in his new business, which was producing, recording and selling his own original music! It turned out to be the perfect situation for us. With lots of hard work, by the end of 1996 we had both left our jobs and were gainfully employed in our own business doing only music! We were making three times the money and actually working less!

In 1997, I made another New Year's determination — to record my first CD! By July it was done and we were selling it through our company through our company. The response was so overwhelming that I recorded a second CD in 1998! It also has sold very well so far — 1998 was the most successful year either of us has ever had. We never would have imagined our dream could be fulfilled in the unique way that it has.

We receive emails and correspondence from around the world from people who have purchased our music. They tell us how much listening to our music has enhanced their daily lives. One woman shared that she and her husband purchased one of my CDs one day, took it home and played it all afternoon. That evening her husband passed away unexpectedly. She wanted me to know that our music had made the last day of his life so peace-

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ful. This has proven to me something SGI President Ikeda has always said: that we are all here to fulfill our individual missions and it is up to us to fight to do so with our daily practice of this Buddhism — to live a life of true joy and to share this with others.

Chris was so encouraged by all of this that he started to chant from time to time. Recently due to the reorganization of the membership, we have joined Canoga Park District. With the support of members in our new district, he is chanting every day now. And we have lots to chant about. Being in business for ourselves is great, but it is also an enormous challenge, not to mention the fact that we run the business together — we both have very strong opinions about how it should be done! That part is still a work in progress.

The past 16 years have been an incredibly difficult and rewarding journey. With the help of many counseling sessions, lots of chanting and encouragement and the right antidepressant medication, I am a different person than I was in 1990. Although I still struggle at times with depression, this has forced me to be more in tune with my life and to respect and take care of myself better. I tend to overextend myself, putting everyone and everything else first. I'm learning if I don't take care of myself, I can't give the best of myself to others.

I am so grateful for my friend Olivia, my husband and this wonderful SGI organization, and the amazing opportunity I've had to practice this Buddhism!

I know that without them I would not have the kind of life I'm living today.

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