

EXPERIENCE — DANIELLE WISE, BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF. FINDING PEACE IN THE WAKE OF COLUMBINE

A 1981 graduate of Columbine High School, Danielle Wise is rising above her own suffering and using her Buddhist practice to help herself and others heal from the Columbine tragedy.

I was introduced to the SGI almost two years ago when a wonderful woman suddenly appeared in my life to rent a room from me. Our conversation quickly turned to her practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and I knew it was going to be the next step in my spiritual journey. I could go on for pages listing the daily benefits I have found since beginning my own practice.

On Jan. 1, I began praying for clarity of what faith is to me and to know by the end of the year what I was to do with my acting career. I was going along pretty swiftly as the benefits to this prayer were showing up daily, but a great challenge was yet to come.

There are few outstanding moments in life where I have felt my world suddenly and irrevocably change. April 20 will be forever etched in my mind. I was at work, at a restaurant with eight televisions constantly airing CNN. At first I looked up and felt a brief frustration as they were announcing another school shooting. But as it progressed and they were able to narrow down the location, the scene became too familiar. It was the high school my brother and I had graduated from and my home — Columbine, Colo. We had just visited the campus in January, at 11:30 a.m., the same time of the shooting.

Shock as I have rarely felt set in. As I watched, I realized I knew some of the teachers in the areas that were under fire. That night, my mom called to let me know a close personal family friend, a junior, had left the cafeteria to go home for lunch as the shots started. Although I knew she is forever emotionally changed, I was relieved to find she was physically safe. But there were the 13 who died, and the two boys who committed the violence, to think of. I also realized what an enormous endeavor it was going to be to heal the hundreds of people who were in the midst of it.

I prayed. I cried. I got angry at the human condition and refused to pray. I prayed. I studied the Daishonin's teachings and learned more about his exiles and strength and the commitment he had for others. I read a lot of SGI President Ikeda's guidance and studied *The New Human Revolution*. Their convictions and faith were strong, their compassion moved me to tears. I could believe in karma, I could understand my own suffering, but how could I ever understand why and how those 15 people in Columbine had to suffer such a fate? I weep every time I think of those two boys and what it must have been like in their hearts and thoughts.

I went to our district study meeting and listened to people lamenting over lost loves and dissatisfaction in jobs, and I got even more frustrated. Kosovo, Columbine, our emotions, so much to conquer in the world...I was feeling overwhelmed. How could my faith make it through this? We began a discussion, and a visiting member from another district began to share her experience of being one of the first children to begin the segregation process in the '60s. Her parents had worked with Dr. Martin Luther King. The National Guard escorted her to school, rattlesnakes were put in her locker to harm her—and all this occurred when she was a child.

I shared my fears of our future as a nation and as a world, and my fears that I had not

been and possibly could not be strong enough to wage a battle against violence. Their encouragement gave me strength. I was reminded that there may have been days Dr. King did not feel he was prepared for what lay ahead but his conviction carried him through. I was also reminded that, as a Buddhist, and especially as an SGI member, I have made a commitment for world peace. I was facing my challenge and was now to find who I was willing to be for others. My empathy causes me to feel the pain and suffering of others but it does no good to stay there; I must make a stand for the healing process and the changes that could occur—this is cause and effect.

About a week after the Columbine tragedy, I had been praying to find what I was to do. I was speaking to my friend who introduced me to Buddhism and I suddenly blurted out, “What do you think of me getting my master’s degree in psychology?” I was quite surprised with myself since I had never thought I would go back to school.

As I progressed with the goal, I realized that between my acting training and my desire to understand my family’s ills, I had been studying philosophy and psychology all my life with vigor. I am now waiting for my acceptance into a master’s program, and I might even go for my Ph.D.! As I pray in front of the Gohonzon, my fears go away. I know this will give me the path to help others.

Strangers see the blue and silver ribbon I wear and ask what it is for. When I explain that it’s in memory of those who lost their lives at Columbine and symbolizes a stand against violence, some have no idea what I am talking about and some are moved to tears. Many ask me questions to help them with their fears, frustrations and need to heal. I feel it is only through my Buddhist practice that I am able to help others find peace. I discuss human nature and the evidence of cause and effect. I ask them where they see it in their lives. I ask them if they can see where forgiveness is being asked of us and the ability to have patience with all other people. I honor the opportunity to be a cause for peace and hope. The concept of cause and effect gives people the greatest hope and space to create goals for themselves.

I can also share that The Alumni Association of Columbine High School, of which I am a member, has been created. We are saddened that an event such as this brought us together, but we are committed to being present in the community. Our goal is to have an office on campus and create mentoring programs, networking opportunities, scholarships and much more.

On July 25, we had our first all-school reunion. We had 25 years of graduating students represented, eight bands, school fundraising booths (the volleyball team was there to raise money to honor their team captain who was killed) and a tent with a small portion of the mail and gifts that had come in from all over the world. Tiles were painted by hundreds of people and will be displayed in the school.

The principal spoke about the healing and declared Aug. 16, the first day of school, as the “day we take our school back.” The alumni organization plans to support this, and the community of Columbine High School will enter the campus together. Plus, we reunited with people we haven’t seen in years and created friendships with people we never knew before.

One more thing: I met a boy who had been shot in the face and was released from the hospital the day before our reunion. We didn’t talk. I shook his hand. He just wanted to walk his dog around and hang out with his friends. He wanted to have a normal day, be a normal kid. He knows everyone knows who he is just by seeing him.

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As I flew home the next day, I thought about him and began to cry. I listened to people on the plane, angry that it was hot while we waited, angry that they only had Diet Coke left. I felt overwhelmed. Words cannot describe the appreciation I have for the support and guidance I have had from fellow SGI members, which gives me such freedom to grow and find peace.

Twenty-one victims are bearing the physical wounds, three are still hospitalized. Families are losing jobs and homes caring for their children. There is still much work to be done. My thoughts cannot ignore the suffering in the world, but my prayers and my actions can be part of the healing and growth. Human nature will be what it will be. My Buddhist practice catapults me into who I will be for the peace to come.

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Danielle Wise graduated from Columbine High School in 1981 as Elaine Danielle Inselman.

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