

TRI-VALLEY DISTRICT WITH THE DYNAMITE SPIRIT — SOUTH ALAMEDA COUNTY, CALIF.

When my husband, Harry, and I transferred here three years ago, Tri-Valley District was called Pleasanton District, named for a popular East Bay suburb. We are essentially the last bastion, going east, of kosen-rufu in the San Francisco region — you might call it an outlying area. Geographically, we are the largest district in the South Alameda County Chapter. After the geographic reorganization, or “geo-reo” as it is commonly referred to, in August 1998, we became Tri-Valley District with the Dynamite Spirit. The members chose Tri-Valley because we cover three major valleys: Amador, San Ramon and Livermore. Some members suggested we add “with the Dynamite Spirit” and, after a general consensus, it was done.

We generally must travel 45 minutes to an hour to our community center or to the San Francisco Culture Center, and that’s on a good traffic day. The distance issue has made the members here self-reliant, courageous and unified in their belief in this Buddhism. They are pure-spirited and very capable people.

The last three years has seen a wonderful transformation in the development of this small town district. Many of the members are “transplants,” people who have moved here from Oregon, Washington, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. There is, however, a sizable number of members who lived here already. It’s the unique blend of different approaches which has enhanced the quality of all of our daily practices.

When we were appointed district leaders, we immediately held a district strategy meeting to get an idea of what we wanted to do and where we wanted the district to be in three years. We established that we wanted to be a chapter in the year 2000, to be an area by 2002, and have a community center between 2000 and 2002. That was the basis of our district plan.

It has been our experience that if you try to operate without a plan, members grow, but they don’t really understand why activities are important or their impact on individual lives. Goals give the members a vision of the district’s growth and can unite everyone toward a common cause—OUR PLAN. This also helps leaders, because we can then design activities that members want to participate in and maximize attendance. We feel it’s a leader’s responsibility to show overwhelming success in all activities and in daily life. When meetings encourage the members it naturally builds enthusiasm; trust in the leadership, teamwork and unity will naturally result. Once you can show the members that the impossible is possible with the Gohonzon, their lives become fearless. They really challenge themselves—they’re no longer in a comfort zone.

After we set the plan we rolled up our sleeves, got in the trenches and worked on implementation. The first order of business was to focus on developing a rhythmic and joyful gongyo, which sets the tone for unified activities.

We asked Tri-Valley members what makes our district unique. Many commented on similar themes: the warm, family feeling; the care and support given to all members; the regular daimoku chanted throughout the district; and the inclusion of everyone — members’ kids and non-member spouses alike. We make our discussion meetings a place where people enjoy coming. Our monthly discussion meetings are held on weekends, for the convenience of the most members. Presentations by the Boy’s and Girl’s Group are included in every meeting — they sometimes even co-emcee, which adds great energy.

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Each of the three groups in our district is responsible for providing a presentation related to the theme. The theme is always relevant to current issues in the members' lives, such as sickness, or doubts about ourselves or our practice. Study is incorporated to reinforce our theme. The presentations provide something for everybody. We strive to recognize each member's strengths and support in strengthening his or her weaknesses. Each member is encouraged to participate, from performing researching and putting together presentations for someone else—whatever they can contribute.

Every member is encouraged to study. Members eligible to take SGI study exams participate in bi-monthly study meetings, and everyone is invited to share in the dialogue.

Open dialogue is embraced. We try to use every idea at one point or another; it may not be good for one type of activity but it would be great for another. Harry always says, "No idea is a bad idea, it's just a different way of looking at something."

One of the main issues we addressed when Tri-Valley District began was poor communication. Members would hear of activities at the last minute and would be expected to drop everything to attend; this caused great stress. Worse still, some did not hear about activities at all and just drifted along. To remedy this, we publish our own district calendar. On the back of our calendar is a newsletter with the different activities going on in the district; it contains information on SGI-USA campaigns, chapter activities and daimoku sessions. Also in the newsletter, we congratulate members on their achievements inside and outside of the SGI-USA (we've had two babies and one wedding in the last year); we also provide information on how to reach all the leaders in our district. Now the group leaders only need to remind members of activities, as opposed to being their sole connection to the organization.

After we receive the area calendar, we hold a monthly District Info Night. It's an opportunity to plan the upcoming month's activities and begin working on the discussion meeting. We also set dates, times and locations for the district meeting, bi-monthly Goshu study, Boy's and Girl's Group activities, Japanese study and the next months District Info. Night. This meeting is lively and brimming with discussion. This is where most of our "work" is done and, we believe, where our success for the next month is initiated.

Everyone feels free to inform each other of activities. Members now connect across group designations, so most people are aware of what is going on.

We enjoy each other's company and many members are great friends. Families do things together, and we attend functions in support of members who perform or compete in public. Some nights you might find half of our district at a sushi restaurant owned by members, bringing high life-conditions and an appetite. Through these relationships we have improved our communication by leaps and bounds.

Since the geo-reo, our district has almost tripled in size and participation. We feel people are attracted to our district activities because they are fun—full of energy, laughter and love. For those of us who are "transplants," we have no other family here, and our district is an oasis of love and caring. This is not to say we have no problems or all of the answers; we receive our share of human revolution and growing pains. Our biggest weakness is the lack of active youth division and some gaps in leadership. However that is both our challenge and our opportunity, to realize our dreams in the future.

There is a member we call the gem. She may just possibly be the first person to chant in the Tri-Valley. She's vibrant and playful and shows up at meetings "with bells on." She has seen this area evolve over 15 years and inspires all of us to maintain our youthful spir-

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it. I do believe it has been her prayer to see this area develop, and we are proud to practice alongside her and all of the awesome members here. Tri-Valley members are dedicated to improving our district, growing into an area and getting a community center very soon!

— *DEBRA AND HARRY TOLLIVER*

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