

FESTIVAL PARTICIPANTS EXPRESS THEIR APPRECIATION

Nadia Oussenko, Water Dance Choreographer: Nadia, who has practiced for about a year and received the Gohonzon a few weeks ago, used her involvement in the culture festival to learn to take her challenges to the Gohonzon.

“My biggest challenge in this culture festival is working with dancers who are at different levels and experienced in all different types of dance. We had such a short time to all get on the same page, without sacrificing the choreography.

“It’s been an absolutely great experience, but sometimes I start to freak out. My practice is the thing I turn to when that starts to happen. Chanting is the last thing I want to do when I’m angry, and it’s tempting to just stay in that rut, but I realize that as soon as I start chanting, it gets better.

“I have been able to change my tendency to give out horrible energy toward others. I am learning patience, how to get through personal obstacles myself and how to get through pressure situations with others. It’s going to serve me my entire life.”

Yoshi Ueda, Soka Group Leader: Yoshi, recently appointed a Soka Group leader, saw this culture festival as an opportunity to fulfill a commitment to SGI President Ikeda.

“I have practiced for about 16 years and have performed in culture festivals before in Japan. This is my first one in the United States, and it is a very special event for me.

“President Ikeda suggested that the youth of Chicago have a grand musical festival. This culture festival is a great opportunity to respond to his expectation for the youth.

“It has been a big challenge because there were not that many people in the young men’s support group at first. We did many home visits and chanted a lot to get people involved, and now we have many helpers. We have seen much more support from young people.”

David Kovac, Theater Group Director: David has performed in SGI activities for about 16 years, since childhood. His involvement in this culture festival has enhanced his ability to take responsibility and put faith first.

“People say, ‘Faith first, chant first,’ and I want to say, ‘I’ve been hearing that line ever since I was 12 years old.’ But then I think, I’m here because I want to take that approach. If I’m not going to chant first, why am I here? If I’m not going to chant first, this would just be like any other gig that I might do.

“In the real world, faith doesn’t come first. Money comes first, or fame comes first. But in this culture festival, people say ‘faith first’ and you do that, and then you see you can also choose to do that in other areas of your life.”

Diana Campos, Dancer: When Diana heard about plans for a youth division culture festival, she was determined to be involved.

“I’ve always heard stories about the organization’s old rhythm, and I always wanted to be a part of it. Performing in events like this culture festival is not for the sake of art; it’s for training your life in an environment where you feel free to learn.

“I started dancing with the Era of Humanity before I even started chanting. I just understood this summer the importance of the SGI. The youth division members are drawn to the culture festival for the struggle and the excitement; and then they come to learn it’s to

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strengthen your faith and train your life.

“Practicing for this performance taught me something important. I teach dance, and I love to teach, but I really want to be a dancer. It’s my dream, and I let it slip by the way-side. It’s easier to teach.

“This summer, I realized I’d given up on myself and lost faith in myself. I reaffirmed my dream to be a dancer. This has been the best summer of my life.”

Sandy Wolf, Art Coordinator: Sandy draws a strong parallel between the mission of the parrot and the unity of culture festival participants.

“People did so much with so little, it’s absolutely stunning. The art group was very careful in stretching supplies. They saved so much money that all of the groups could afford to use the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts an extra night.

“Everyone practiced on different days or worked on different things and created unity in their own groups. So many more people could be trained that way. Now they’re bringing it all together into one big piece. Even though we didn’t see each other every single day, we had this deep prayer to succeed, to be victorious.

“Even the little kids helped with the masks and sets. Their help was welcomed and highly praised. I really feel like I changed something profound. I always wondered how parents could get their children to understand what the SGI is all about. And kids always shied away from me, but now they’re running up to me and hugging me.”

Stanley Johnston-Henderson, Trombone Player: Fourteen-year-old Stanley is a culture festival veteran. He’s done three of them already. And as he grows, he understands more and more why.

“In the other festivals, I was in the Boys and Girls Group. This is my first culture festival as a junior and senior high school band member. I love it. I like coming to practice, and I like performing in the culture festivals because of the benefits I get afterward.

“When I was going into fifth grade, I didn’t know how to read well or write or do math. I chanted to help fill a daimoku chart for a culture festival performance. When I went into the fifth grade, I was at the top of my class. Studying was easy.

“I have been chanting a lot for this one. I’m looking forward to starting high school soon.”

Jason Raines, Theater Group: Jason is learning to use his practice and his performances to enhance his own life and the lives of others.

“I heard a lot about this practice from friends for a long time. Six months ago, I let go of my skepticism and started practicing. Of course, then I got benefits and saw actual proof.

“I wanted to be a part of this culture festival because it’s what I like to do. I’m one of the animals in the forest. My biggest challenge is to give the part the weight it deserves. I want to really feel it.

“I have a lot of challenges and conflicts coming up now, some big decisions. My chanting is helping me use the challenges to enhance other people’s lives as well as my own. This culture festival is really helping me learn not to shun responsibility.”

Kazumi Hiroe, Byakuren: Although Kazumi, 33, was born into this religion, she just started practicing a year and a half ago and used this culture festival to get to know the

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organization better.

“I have been doing administrative work for the festival and will work as a Byakuren during the actual performances. Communication is the most difficult obstacle for me at this time, since I am just learning about the organization. My goal and everybody’s goal is to have unity.

“In spite of obstacles, this has been a very positive experience. I am getting to know so many wonderful people. There are small and big obstacles every single day, in my personal life and in the organization. I get through it with determination.

“I am encouraged by President Ikeda’s guidance to not be swayed by praise or criticism. Just trust the Law.”

Amy Lusk, African Drum Leader: Amy expresses awe and appreciation for the entire youth division’s determination to step up to the responsibility of the culture festival.

“Two things make this culture festival special: First, it’s grassroots in the youth division. The youth are responsible for everything. They wrote three songs, did the set and did the sound. The men’s and women’s divisions supported, but this gave the youth the opportunity to stand up and take responsibility. And they are, and that’s what’s beautiful.

“Also, the youth of Chicago have a strong commitment to President Ikeda to show his spirit to the world. They want to inspire all youth—members, non-members, sons and daughters of members. They want to show what the strength of the mentor–disciple relationship can do for you.

“The Chicago Culture Center feels like it’s buzzing with all this unity. It’s wonderful to get involved in the festival because it motivates you to kick up your daimoku and momentum to chant more .”

Gyasi Ayo Kress, Story-teller: Gyasi’s passionate storytelling technique develops out of his own human revolution and spiritual growth.

“This culture festival is my third performance with the SGI, but in the past I was just a kid who performed on stage. This time I’m aware of my responsibility for the entire show. The storyteller sets the altruistic tone.

“I used to just perform and get benefits. My biggest challenge in this culture festival is to really rise to the opportunity and, as a result, accomplish everything I’ve ever wanted in life as a performer. I chant to understand that.

“It’s the equivalent of keeping the Gohonzon in the center of my life. I chant as much as possible for that.”

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