

EXPERIENCE — LISA SHUMAN, SANTEE, CALIF. MOVING PEOPLE'S HEARTS WITH OUR VOICES

I have been a member of the SGI since November 1980. I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism almost 18 years ago, by a nurse who told me about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo when I was very sick in the hospital. She encouraged me to chant to improve my health condition. Everything about this practice sparked my interest so I began to chant to change many things in my life.

Throughout my years of practicing this Buddhism, I have experienced many incredible benefits. One of my most recent dreams came true when I was able to sing with the Blue Sky Chorus at an important event in the community. Three years ago, I joined the chorus which has been very enjoyable and beneficial. I am also involved with working for the rights of the disabled, which I took a personal interest in because I am disabled. I was born with a spinal cord injury that left me a paraplegic. My years of training in the SGI has taught me to continually challenge myself despite my disability.

Last year, when I was on the planning committee for an event called Disability Independence Day (DID), I made a determination to have our SGI Women's Division Chorus, The Blue Sky Chorus, sing at the following year's event. I felt that it would be extremely beneficial for people involved in the disability rights movement to be exposed to the SGI. The following words from Nichiren Daishonin encouraged me to accomplish this dream: "All living beings who hear (Myoho-renge-kyo) are the living beings who gain benefit" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 415).

In a message to the chorus members on May 7, SGI President Ikeda stated: "The energetic singing voices of those with strong faith communicate to, move, and elicit a sympathetic cord within the depths of people's lives. Your voices function as a window of life to the universe. All great things begin with the sound of a voice reaching the ear. Only to the degree that your own heart is moved, will your singing touch the hearts of others. With all of your voices of joy and inspiration of faith, please create a spirit and rhythm of courage and advancement throughout the United States."

He has also said: "True art, true culture, strives to enrich the individual and encourage self-expression, while at the same time seeking to reach out, touch, communicate and bring people together. It promotes a spirit where bringing joy and happiness to others takes precedence over fame or wealth.... The SGI's movement to promote culture, reaching from the grass roots to the global level, is also like a bright, colorful garden of flowers spreading across the globe."

Shortly after I made this determination to have the Blue Sky Chorus sing at the Disability Independence Day event, I became ill with a serious kidney stone problem. I was in and out of the hospital for a month due to three large kidney stones hindering the function of my left kidney. During this struggle, I received encouragement from my seniors in faith. I did gongyo and chanted as much as I could. I was determined to maintain the spirit of the Blue Sky Chorus and the SGI and "win no matter what, to overcome this health problem." I had surgery to remove the kidney stones and quickly recovered.

Soon after my surgery, I went to chorus practice and thanked everyone for all of the loving support and encouragement I had received. I greatly appreciated all of the prayers that many of the chorus members had sent me.

At the beginning of this year, Blue Sky Chorus began singing at events in the San Diego

Community. I renewed my determination for us to sing at the Disability Independence Day, never losing sight of my goal. I submitted a written request to the planning committee asking for our chorus to sing at this year's event. The planning committee's initial response was that we were not "disabled enough," because I was the only one in the chorus with a visible disability. I understood their point because the whole emphasis of the DID event is to give people with disabilities the opportunity to perform. Nevertheless, I spoke to the planning committee again, and followed up with a written proposal including the background of the SGI, Blue Sky Chorus and our mission. I chanted for hours for the chorus to perform.

Finally, the DID committee accepted our proposal and said they were looking forward to the chorus being part of the program. This was a major victory. I knew I still had challenges ahead to accomplish my dream. I started chanting to really touch everyone's heart with our voices.

On the day of the Disability Independence Day Celebration, our chorus performance was a smashing success! Everyone in the audience seemed to love the music and performance. Later, I received wonderful feedback regarding our performance. Several people wanted to know more about the SGI. Others wanted to know if it would be possible to join our chorus. I am so happy and proud to be part of Blue Sky Chorus. Thank you, Blue Sky Chorus, for the support and compassion I have received to enable me to realize this dream.