

AMERICAN YOUTH TAKE A STAND AGAINST VIOLENCE

Northwest

by *Chris Conley and Akemi Fujimoto*

On Aug. 14–15, Delridge District Youth put up a Victory Over Violence booth at the West Seattle Art, Nature, and Literature Festival in Seattle. We are so excited about this opportunity to connect with the people in our community. We used our pledge of nonviolence; poems of Walt Whitman; quotes from Mahatma Gandhi and President Ikeda; pictures of Rosa Parks, Jeanette Rankin and Martin Luther King Jr.; and children's stories of "Kankucho" and "General Stone Tiger" to raise awareness of nonviolence in each person's mind. A total of 126 signatures were collected and many were handed out for people to take home. We had many great opportunities to meet and dialogue with all kinds of people; such as a pastor who is on an interfaith committee, a young lady from a peace camp in Seattle, teenagers and preschoolers who shared their stories with us – and who promised not to use violence in their lives! We'd like to express our gratitude for all the support and encouragement from our senior leaders and members.

Northeast

Jr. HS/HS Northeast Zone Conference on Nonviolence

by *Sean and Yuko Grover, New York*

At a time when violence is escalating, we may lose hope for our country's future. Though new legislation and regulations may help, can structural changes alone solve the deeply rooted problem of violence in our country?

"Violence only leads to self-destruction," Atiba Joseph, a high school member from New York, commented after attending the Junior High and High School Division's Northeast Zone Conference on Nonviolence. "I'm going to take what I learned here back to my district," added another teen member Renee Angela Samuels.

On Aug. 15–16, nearly 100 teens from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Boston gathered in the New England Culture Center to chant, study and dialogue about solutions to violence. Teens and parents from the Boston area greeted the buses of visiting Junior High and High School members with cheers and applause. The festive atmosphere continued throughout the weekend as teens exchanged experiences and creative ideas on creating a violence-free society.

In preparation for the conference, the teens studied and created presentations based on President Ikeda's 1999 Peace Proposal. After each area's presentation, they broke up in discussion groups that examine the role of trust and mistrust as a precursor to violence. Dialogue continued into the evening and throughout the generous dinner prepared by the Boston members.

"The food was great," a member from Albany noted. "New England members are number one," commented Connecticut Junior High and High School member Ken Thompson.

Saturday evening concluded with a dance and talent show. Under the glow of New England Culture Center lights, the teens danced joyfully to the rhythms of Hip-Hop and "techno" music and performed songs and poetry for one another.

On Sunday, the teens toured the Boston Research Center, viewed the Victory Over Violence video created by the Youth Peace Conference, and attended a lecture by the center's director, Ginny Straus.

Ms. Straus related how she struggled to overcome her fear and lack of confidence. She stressed the key to developing confidence is chanting daimoku. "Fear is confidence before daimoku," she commented. She also encouraged each member to discover his or her own mission, noting President Ikeda taught her, "This is the key to happiness."

At the conclusion of the conference, a national Jr. HS/HS leader Jomo Thorne declared the solution for all of society's problems exist within our own lives. "Believe in yourself," he urged, "and you can create a whole new history for yourself and your country." He continued, "Ultimately, the key to victory over violence is challenging oneself to do human revolution."

After hugging, snapping photos and exchanging phone numbers, the teens boarded their buses for home. "It was great to meet kids my age who chant. We need to do this a lot more," one teen member commented. "It felt really good chanting every day. I'm going to have a strong practice when I return to Albany," 12-year-old Ashley Bunn added.

The conference proved that teens, as well as adults, can create tremendous value when they base their lives on the life-affirming philosophy of Buddhism. The friendship and trust they cultivated through this conference is the ultimate starting point for each member to pursue his or her own mission and fight against violence.

Fifteen-year-old Junior High and High School member Jason Horton summed up the conference: "We teens can make a difference and can teach younger children about non-violence. It's my determination that by the time I'm a grandfather, there will be no violence."

Washington, D.C., Region Kicks Off VOV Campaign with Junior/High Camp-Out!
by Ariana Bock and Chelsea Honderich

Washington, D.C. — On the weekend of Aug. 6–8, the Washington, D.C., Region youth sponsored a camp-out for the junior high and high school division members at Fairlee Manor in Chestertown, MD. The Victory Over Violence campaign lent an air of great purpose to the weekend activities and made a huge impact on the JHHS members. The whole weekend was a tremendous success! We had a total of 63 participants, including 49 junior high and high school members and 14 chaperones from six of the eight areas in our region — Baltimore, Montgomery, Washington, Virginia, Prince Georges and North Carolina, plus one member from New York!

Participants readily formed new friendships and strengthened old ones — not only among the junior high and high school members themselves, but also with the chaperones. Through developing such bonds together, we also naturally befriended the camp staff, who led us in a Team-building Course and a High-Ropes Challenge Course all day Saturday. For the team-building activities, we participated in a series of problem-solving games and initiatives that encouraged and rewarded teamwork and communication. This activity helped to build trust among us and offered a variety of leadership opportunities that stimulated our hidden potential. The High Ropes Challenge Course, including a tower, catwalk and zip line, tested our self-confidence as we faced new and different challenges —40 feet above the ground! But everyone provided positive support and encouragement to one another. As we confronted our self-imposed limits, many of us found our-

selves loudly chanting “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo!” as we walked along a thin wire rope tied high up between two trees! The staff was wonderful, saying: “That’s it, keep chanting, you’ll be fine! I gotcha!” The camp staff praised the group’s politeness and good behavior, saying they had never seen a group work so well together and learn so quickly with such determination. We were delighted by the praise and felt it reflected our efforts in faith.

Throughout the weekend, we kicked off the Victory Over Violence campaign! On Saturday night, we watched the VOV video and held a wide-ranging discussion of nonviolence, passive violence and Buddhism. Discussion delved also into such issues as name-calling, racism and apathy. Many of the young adults spoke about wanting to share their practice with their friends and parents. Some youth commented that this experience at the camp-out made them feel more a part of their August VOV discussion meetings, too!

By the end of the weekend, no one wanted to leave and everyone was happy to have participated! Many of us were running around making VOV signs with our hands. When some of the youth from Montgomery Area (in Maryland) stopped to eat on the way home, french fries, too, were crafted into VOV formation!

Most importantly, we all joyfully deepened our understanding of our Buddhist practice together, by teaming up with a buddy to chant our morning and evening prayers and reconfirming the importance of Buddhist study and chanting, as well as practice for ourselves and for others. It was a fortune-building weekend filled with vibrant, shining youth having lots of fun and gaining valuable wisdom for our lives!