

EXPERIENCE—ROBERT SHEELEY, CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO STANDING UP FOR JUSTICE

Many people feel that issues surrounding homophobia, racism, sexism, police harassment and brutality, and all other forms of bias and prejudice are not their problem. But the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Buddhism also teaches that all people have a Buddha nature and have the same potential for enlightenment; therefore, if the human race is ever to know world peace, everyone must be treated equally and with respect.

I am an SGI-USA young men’s division member currently practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in Cleveland, Ohio. I began my practice in 1987 in Hollywood, Calif., thanks to the help of my good friends Kate and Hal Burns.

On the night of June 6, I was out on a date. When my date dropped me off at my truck, which was parked in front of a bar frequented mostly by gay men, we decided to have a good night kiss. At that moment, police officers pulled up and flashed lights in the driver’s side window. The officers said that I was engaged in a specific type of sexual behavior and cited me with a misdemeanor. My date received a citation for driving without a license. Although I was outraged, I managed to stay calm. As the officers left, they said, “Do that disgusting stuff at home!”

Driving home, I was angry, afraid and feeling victimized. I had never been cited for a “crime” before, and I didn’t want a criminal record. “What does this all mean? What should I do?” These questions constantly popped in and out of my mind. In the days that followed I sought advice from family, friends and legal professionals. Everyone had an opinion: “Plead no contest.” “Hire a lawyer.” “Represent yourself.” “Get a pro bono lawyer.” “Waive it, and send a check; you can’t win anyway!” I felt confused and overwhelmed.

When my arraignment day came, I watched everyone plead “No contest,” pay their fines and court costs, and leave. When my turn came, before I knew it, I heard myself saying, “Not guilty.” I was given a trial date for the following week. I decided to represent myself, but I panicked when I realized I had no idea how to go about doing it.

Fortunately, despite numerous bouts of feeling discouraged, throughout this entire time I was chanting one to three hours a day, consistently doing morning and evening gongyo, and studying Buddhism and other subjects regularly—as I usually do. There is one passage in particular from Nichiren Daishonin’s writing, “The Opening of the Eyes,” that often encourages me: “Although I and my disciples may encounter various difficulties, if we do not harbor doubts in our hearts, we will as a matter of course attain Buddhahood. Do not have doubts simply because heaven does not lend you protection. Do not be discouraged because you do not lead an easy and secure existence in this life. This is what I have taught my disciples morning and evening, and yet they begin to harbor doubts and abandon their faith.... Foolish men are likely to forget the promises they have made when the crucial moment comes” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2, p. 205).

On June 30, I went to the justice center in downtown Cleveland still feeling uncertain, but rock solid in the righteousness of my plea. There was no turning back. I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to myself until the very last minute. One of the officers showed up in the courtroom, and eventually we were both sworn in. When asked to describe the events leading up to my citation, the officer went into great pornographic detail portraying my

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Keywords: Cleveland Diversity Experiences Heights Justice Ohio Robert Sheeley Standing Tolerance

involvement in a specific sexual act. His entire statement was nothing more than out right lies. In no way had I done what he accused me of doing.

When it was my turn to speak, I stood up in the packed courtroom and passionately gave the statement that I'd written the previous day: "Your Honor, I am here today because of the absolute truth of my innocence. The officers have accused me of engaging in explicit sexual misconduct in a car with my date, when in fact, all we were doing was kissing. I should hope that the fact that my date was another male was not the motivation for these officers to falsely charge me, given that we live in a society in which all people are deemed to be created equal—including gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people.

"Every day I devote myself to the consistent practice of certain principles and convictions. In addition to conducting myself appropriately in public, one of these principles is to stand up for myself when I have been unfairly and unjustly accused. On my side, I have no money, no lawyer and no proof. I only have the truth, of which I, my date and these officers are fully aware.

"There may be many things that this court can do to me, but one thing it can never do is change the truth of what happened that night.

"In one sense, I guess I should thank these officers. We must remember that Rosa Parks was not the first to fight harassment and injustice on the segregated buses of the South. It was the accumulation of acts of harassment by persons in authority that aroused righteous indignation within the people, making them say, 'Enough is enough!' I look forward to the day when gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people do the same. My being here today as a result of being falsely accused will contribute to that day."

After listening to my statement, the judge quickly found me "not guilty." I breathed a huge sigh of relief! I couldn't believe I had won! I had no court cost, no fines and no record! Although the major ordeal was over, I knew I still had work to do. I had to spread the word of my victory.

I immediately got my story published in locally based publications with wide circulations: *The Gay People's Chronicle*, *Cleveland Life*, and the *Cleveland Free Times*. I also facilitated a group discussion on police harassment at the Cleveland Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center.

The public response to my experience was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. I received numerous positive calls from all over Ohio and other places—from people I'd never met who had read my story and were deeply moved by my actions based on Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism! Using my Buddhist practice, I had changed poison into medicine.

Because of this experience, I more deeply realize the conspicuous and unconscious benefits of reading and studying Buddhism. Over the years, I have studied a lot of leadership, biographical, historical, sociological and political material. Exposure to these ideas accumulates in my mind and being. I wrote my court statement in five to 10 minutes, jotting it down in a state of anxiety, not knowing the impact it would have. I believe that having a strong foundation in study, coupled with sincere chanting, is what helped me write and articulate my court statement, challenge my obstacle and win.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda often encourages us to constantly study and to chant with our whole heart. By doing just that, I ended up encouraging thousands of people, while deepening my own faith and my commitment to establishing justice throughout society.

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