

EXPERIENCE—JORGE SILVERIO, BURBANK, CALIF. SPREADING HOPE AND JOY IN CUBA

When I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism 27 years ago, I had a lot of problems. I had gotten married three months earlier, was not happy with my wife, and we had many debts. I had not finished high school yet and was making minimum wage. I was very insecure and had no plans for the future.

Gradually after practicing, getting involved with young men's activities and studying SGI President Ikeda's guidance, I began to feel a joy and confidence within me that I had never felt before. I stopped criticizing and blaming others for my problems. I started taking responsibility and setting goals for my life. Eventually I became a chiropractor, opened my own office, bought a house and developed a happy family.

However, throughout the years, my practice has had its ups and downs. During the early '80s, due to many "valid reasons," I began to participate less and less in activities and gradually lost my passion for the practice, to the point that I stopped for about three years. One day about three or four years ago, my wife, Valerie, tricked me into going to a New Year's Eve meeting. While there, I heard an experience that really touched me and I decided to practice again.

However, it was a very selfish practice. I was missing an essential ingredient—practicing for others. I had no desire to get involved in SGI activities, or to help others. I kept seeking to regain the feeling that I remembered having at the very beginning of my practice. I continued to talk to leaders, read President Ikeda's guidance and chanted consistently about this situation.

About three years ago, I went to a conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center and experienced the feeling I was seeking. Unfortunately, it didn't last long.

In 1998, I went to another FNCC conference, in Spanish, and this time made a determination to start practicing for others. It has been a consistent challenge. Interestingly enough, the more I practice for others, the more I feel that happy feeling returning. I finally realized that you can't get the full benefit of this practice without helping others.

In January of 1998, my father passed away. Needless to say, my 75-year-old mother, Aida, was very depressed and sad after losing her partner of 50 years. She lives in Miami, Fla., and last April she came to visit me for a few weeks. I encouraged her to chant and took her to many SGI activities held in Spanish to motivate her to practice. She started practicing and even took the entrance exam and passed it.

When she returned to Miami, she made contact with the members there and to my amazement, continued her practice, going to activities as often as four times a week. In June, she went to Cuba, where we lived until I was 12, to visit family. She took an extra set of beads and a sutra book, as she was determined to get her sister to practice. Her plan was to tell her to chant at the same time in the morning and evening as she did, and this way they would be together, at least in spirit.

To her surprise, not only did my aunt started to practice, but 25 members of the family started as well. She called me from Cuba very excited, telling me the news and asking me to send her 25 Gohonzon. Of course I told her that first they had to learn gongyo and get connected to the SGI. At this point, I had no idea that there was an organization in Cuba. I found out there is a chapter in Cuba with the majority of members practicing in La

Habana (Havana).

My mother and my aunt began to chant for me to go to Cuba and help teach these family members how to practice. In October, just two months ago, my mother and I went to Cuba. I am amazed at how they kept practicing since June with no experienced members to help them. All they had were a few sutra books and beads, a slow gongyo tape and another tape I had made for them about how to do gongyo. I had also sent a few books and articles in Spanish that they had shared with one another.

I couldn't believe their sincerity. They had decided on their own to meet once a week to study and practice gongyo. Some of them could do gongyo perfectly. A few of the 9- to 14-year-old kids knew the first page of the gongyo book by heart. They were sharing the practice with other family members, friends and neighbors.

Our family is spread out over three different areas of Cuba. In Guanabo, which is 45 minutes from Havana, there were five families, as well as neighbors practicing since June. By the time we left, there were about 15.

Twice a day, the whole time we were in Cuba, we would do slow gongyo and daimoku. The whole family would join in, and they would invite friends and neighbors. They would discuss the practice with anyone who would listen. These gatherings would turn into meetings with people relating experiences and asking questions about the practice, numbering 10 to 20 people.

In Camaguey, about a 10-hour drive from Havana, we had 35 people at one of these meetings. Before we left, they decided since the group had grown to 40 members, they would meet once a week at two or three different locations, and then come together once a month.

And let me tell you some of the benefits they are receiving. As soon as we arrived in Cuba, we went to visit an uncle and his wife. We told her about the practice, gave her a sutra book and beads with instructions on how to practice, and left. Two weeks later before we left, she told my mother that she had been chanting about not having to have breast surgery to remove some suspicious lumps in her breast. When she went to see the doctor for a check-up, her cysts had completely disappeared. Others mentioned feeling more relaxed, energetic, optimistic and less worried about their problems.

We attended two SGI meetings in Havana. One of these meetings was held in an apartment that was so packed that people were standing by the door because they couldn't fit in the room. People shared experiences and later two children sang "We Are the World" with Gakkai words.

The situation in Cuba today is, needless to say, very depressing. People make very little money. The highest monthly salary is about \$20. We have found that the people are living in such desperate circumstances that they are very open to something like Buddhism, which gives them hope for a better, more fulfilling life.

The members there need literature, sutra books, beads, etc. Their growth is happening so fast that they will soon run out of supplies.

This experience has made me realize the important role and impact that any one of us can have toward kosen-rufu. No one, not even my mother, would have thought that out of her desire to introduce her sister to Buddhism, so many new people would start practicing, in Cuba of all places.

I have made a determination to not give up on the members in Cuba, to do everything in my power to support their development and to continue to develop my faith and practice, not only for myself, but for others as well.