

## EXPERIENCE—ANGIE LEAD, SEATTLE BEING TRUE TO MYSELF

**Angie Lead of Seattle says: ‘I have always been a very shy person and was able to get through life without really dealing with my weakness until I went to SUA, Calabasas. It was there that I came out of my shell.’**

I have always been a very shy person and was able to get through life without really dealing with my weakness until I attended graduate school at Soka University of America, Calabasas. It was there that I came out of my shell. But first I’d like to share a little bit about my background.

I was raised as an only child by my mother, a single parent, in Bellingham, Wash., a small city near the border between Washington State and Canada. When I was 6, my mother remarried and I gained a stepfather, two stepsisters and a stepbrother. Just a few years after that, my stepsisters and brother were kidnapped from our family by their birth mother. We did not see them for nearly six years. When they finally returned to us, our family began a long struggle of dealing with what they had experienced during the time with their alcoholic mother and her very abusive boyfriend.

There were times when all my family did was fight and scream, at which point all I could do was escape. I tried to keep myself too busy to be at home. Most of my weekends were spent at my grandparents’ house in Seattle, my safe haven.

When I was in the fifth grade, I joined the school orchestra and learned to play the violin. My time spent in orchestra activities gave me the satisfaction of hard work, wonderful friends and peace of mind. I constantly tried to be the perfect daughter and student so that no one would really know how my life was at home. My only true salvation was my consistent Buddhist practice which I started as a toddler with my mother in 1976, specifically chanting to the Gohonzon, receiving encouragement from SGI President Ikeda’s words and participating in SGI activities.

When I was 9, I joined the SGI-USA Fife and Drum Corps in Seattle. It was through my experiences in the Fife and Drum Corps that I was able to build a strong foundation for my life. I began by learning to play the fife, a small flute, and later went on to be a flute section leader. In the Fife and Drum Corps, I learned the meaning of hard work, unity and challenging myself to the limit. What I remember most about being in the Fife and Drum Corps is the spirit to “never give up.” No matter how hard it was to keep marching or playing the same song over and over, our drum major encouraged us to keep going. I really looked up to the drum majors—to me they were everything I wanted to be. They were independent, warm-hearted and strong. When I was 17, I auditioned for the position of drum major for our fife and drum corps, a responsibility I had for five years. I learned that perseverance was the key to success.

That same year, which was just before my senior year of high school, my mother was diagnosed with severe diabetes and she and my stepfather divorced. At this point, my mother and I moved from Bellingham to Seattle to live with my grandparents. This new change in my life became a turning point.

Throughout my youth so far, the one thing that had kept me going was my Buddhist practice within the SGI. This is my eternal home. No matter what happens in my life, I

know that I have the potential to overcome every obstacle and challenge any goal because I consistently practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to the best of my ability.

One such goal I had was attending Soka University of America (SUA) in Calabasas, Calif., founded by Daisaku Ikeda in 1987. I first heard of the SUA Graduate School's master of arts degree program in Second and Foreign Language Education with a concentration in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Dr. Tomoko Takahashi, the dean of the SUA Graduate School, when she visited the Seattle Culture Center in 1997.

At that time, I was a few months away from receiving my bachelor's degree in American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after graduation. I thought about getting a post graduate degree in public policy or law; like most people I changed my mind a million times. But then I came across something that helped me make up my mind.

President Ikeda always emphasizes the importance of education: "Passion comes from having a profound recognition of and commitment to one's mission. I, too, have resolved to dedicate my life to education, because I know that education determines the future and is the foundation for building peace and lasting value"(Sept. 18, 1998, *World Tribune*, p. 7).

When I received my acceptance letter from the SUA Graduate School, I was very happy and excited, and yet I also felt I was not ready. After chanting much sincere daimoku, I made the difficult decision to postpone my plans to attend the SUA Graduate School. I felt I was not ready to leave my life in Seattle.

From the time I made that decision, during 1997-98, I had experienced so much personal growth, and later realized that I needed that in order to take on the challenge of completing the master's program at the SUA Graduate School. During this time, I was living with my grandparents, who both became ill at different times. During this trying time, I was finishing my bachelor's degree, working part-time at United Parcel Service, and trying my best to fulfill my leadership responsibilities for SGI-USA's Junior High and High School Division for the Pacific Northwest Region.

It was during this difficult time that a poem from SGI President Daisaku Ikeda that was written in Feb. 1998 became my life's challenge and goal. In the poem he says: Live with hope / Aspire for lofty ideals / Be true to yourself— / There your inner brilliance shines.

Despite my strong determination and persistent Buddhist practice, I was not able to live the words *Be true to yourself*. I was not challenging my weakness to become strong because I still had a lack of self-confidence. Most of all, I was still plagued by my fear to leave the safe environment I had in Seattle, my nest.

In 1998, a few months before applications were due for the SUA's master's program, I was encouraged by my mother and a member of our local SGI organization to apply once more to the SUA Graduate School. I still had the dream of attending SUA in my heart and decided to challenge myself. At this time, I chanted with all my might to make the best decision for me for my life. I knew that I really wanted to attend the SUA Graduate School, so I continued to chant to the Gohonzon and threw myself into studying Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and SGI activities. In weeks, I received the acceptance letter that I had been waiting for.

When I arrived at SUA, Calabasas, people told me that this experience would change my life, and it did. Completing SUA's master's program to teach English as a second and foreign language was by far my life's greatest struggle and victory. It was at the SUA

Graduate School that I challenged myself to the fullest— where I came out of my shell.

At SUA, I was consistently able to battle my self-doubt and fear. Throughout our program, my classmates and I did many group assignments, in which I had to learn to speak up for myself. My tendency has always been to let people influence my opinions, which stemmed from self-doubt. There were many times that I just wanted to give in. However, every time I was down and felt I couldn't go on, I would chant to the Gohonzon and read President Ikeda's guidance. Also, my classmates at the graduate school were always there for me. I can recall many times when we would confide in one another about our dreams and struggles. Because of the small class size, my classmates and I received so much attention from the faculty and the staff at SUA. My professors never once hesitated to offer me their utmost support whenever I needed help with a project or paper.

My family also encouraged me to keep going and not give up on my dreams. What ultimately enabled me to change was myself. I knew that I had overcome my shyness in order to become happy.

It wasn't until my third semester at the SUA Graduate School that I finally felt free. This was the most intense period of the program because I had three courses, I began student teaching and I was working on my master's project. It was at this time that I remembered the words from President Ikeda, "Be true to yourself.... There your inner brilliance shines."

I realized that being true to myself was my biggest struggle. I was always afraid of what people thought of me and most of all I was afraid that I was not good enough. In his poem "Become Strong," President Ikeda says: "Fear is hell; courage is joy." This is so true. I realized that the moment I let fear take over is the moment I lose. What I learned is that I did not need to be perfect. I just needed to be me.

At SUA I learned so much about life. I learned that being a good friend requires patience, trust and selflessness. I learned that our students are the greatest teachers. Most of all, I learned the meaning of Soka education. To me it represents the trust between teacher and student. To know that someone trusts you with their whole heart is the most profound connection between two people. This is what my professors gave me at the SUA Graduate School and what I hope to give my students as well. The experiences I had there are my priceless treasures because of what I learned and accomplished.

This coming March I will begin teaching English for Tokyo Soka High School in Japan. Being able to contribute my life to Soka education is truly an honor and a tremendous joy for me. My goal is to meet every expectation as an educator for the sake of my students, for the sake of Soka education.