

HEIDI'S EXPERIENCE
...AT THE SGI-USA FLORIDA NATURE AND CULTURE CENTER(FNCC)
HEIDI BERGMAN, NEW YORK

As soon as I heard about the first FNCC Soka Spirit conference, I wanted to go. I love the FNCC. And I believe in the importance of the Soka Spirit movement.

Now, I have to say I was not expecting it to be loads of fun. I actually thought it would be a pretty heavy experience. I even wondered if I would fall asleep during a long lecture on the history of the priesthood (heavy subjects make me sleepy). Plus, I don't have direct contact with any temple members. I wanted to be involved. But I needed to know how. That's what I went to FNCC to find out.

And I did find out. First, let me say that I did not fall asleep during anyone's lecture. And I am so glad because that would have been pretty embarrassing. It was actually like being at a University of Buddhism (but without the exams!). The topics we studied were wide ranging and applied to my life. I learned a lot while I was there. I heard different people's perspectives from around the country. There were people who came from as far as Hawaii.

One story that really made an impact on me was the experience of a man who does massage therapy. One of his clients is a female judge. Over a period of several years he has educated her about Buddhism, including the difference between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu. One day this judge was speaking to a friend of hers and mentioned Buddhism to her. It turned out that the judge's friend is a temple member. The temple member proceeded to speak badly of the SGI and say that we were practicing Buddhism incorrectly. But the judge knew better. She was not swayed because she had a relationship with an SGI member and he had already explained the difference to her. Since the judge had all the facts, she made a sound judgment (so to speak).

What that says to me is that even if we don't know a temple member, we can still contribute by doing shakubuku (propagation). And I say from experience that nothing elevates my life-condition faster than encouraging someone to practice. Even if I feel miserable, when I summon up the courage to tell someone about Buddhism, my life immediately begins to expand and I feel better. And I have to say I've found that being able to do shakubuku starts with daimoku.

Another point I was reminded of at the conference is the importance of study. To be unswayed by the wolf in sheep's clothing, one cannot be naive. In other words, to refute erroneous teachings, we need to know the difference between Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and what the temple is preaching. We never know when the opportunity will arise.

After the lectures, we broke into small discussion groups. We shared our experiences, our views, and we encouraged one another. By the end of the discussion, I looked around the table and thought to myself, "This is what kosen-rufu is like." It was incredible. And then I understood why we can all feel President Ikeda's spirit at FNCC. His spirit is kosen-rufu. And I was reminded that we are all on this planet together. I have an opportunity to make a difference.

We who practice Buddhism are all leaders, regardless of position. I am determined to protect Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, starting with daimoku, study and shakubuku. This includes supporting and protecting the SGI. And that involves taking responsibility to ensure that the SGI continues to evolve as a humanistic organization devoted to leading all people to happiness.