

EXPERIENCE—LINDA COLTON, INDIAN HEAD, MD. EDUCATING LINDA

Linda Colton, a high school mathematics teacher, learns how to become an outstanding person at work.

At my first meeting of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism 15 years ago, Phil Rosenberg said that I was fortunate to be a teacher because my students would act like a barometer—letting me know where my life and practice were at. I have now been teaching mathematics in public high school for 20 years. When I began I was determined; teaching is what I want to do. Being over 30 when I started, I had already done some substitute work and had no illusions about what I was getting into. Many people, mostly teachers warned me against it or just kept silent.

Despite this, I jumped headlong into teaching and quickly started to sputter. Although I was doing my best, in my first year the principal was all over me. I wrote detailed lesson plans and was praised for my ideas, but implementing them was a different story. By my third year of teaching I was in hell. The students were harassing me daily. I had the lowest level classes, they made the “sweat hogs” look inviting.

In March 1983, I received the Gohonzon and the situation intensified. Geometry—my best class—petitioned to get rid of me. Every kid in the class signed. I told my principal I would redouble my efforts. I could not afford to be fired—monetarily or emotionally. It took me 10 years to decide to teach. I had studied too hard and come too far and I needed the job. There was no turning back.

I continued to chant and received lots of encouragement in faith. It was always the same: “Your students will behave when you are compassionate. Chant to know when to be strict and when to be compassionate.” I awoke at 4:30 every morning and chanted one hour before work.

By the time the SGI-USA Culture Department was started in 1990, I was drowning. I asked for advice and it was to go to the Culture Department meetings. I hated going. I felt I did not belong—I was not a teacher. I was a phony. I hated the job. As the years went by, I listened closely to other educators in the Culture Department who wanted to quit too; or given half a chance would get out or were getting out. I went to a meeting with the head of the educators group of the SGI, and listened closely as another teacher was getting encouragement. After 20 years of teaching, she desperately wanted to quit. We were both hoping the guidance would be “certainly, chant and work in the profession you think best.” It wasn't. All he kept saying was how much education means to SGI President Ikeda and to civilization. He would not budge; he would not agree with her. I, of course, was listening closely—there must be a way out.

I received guidance from a senior in faith regarding the tremendous pressure I was under every day. She said to chant for a purpose. I said I didn't want to chant for a purpose, I just wanted to quit. She said, “Oh, but you must.” I did.

At the next Culture Department meeting, I was assigned to a group that was asked to read President Ikeda's speech on the purpose of education every day until the next meeting. In his speech, President Ikeda says, “The fundamental task of education must be to ensure that knowledge serves to further the cause of human happiness and peace...and

while education is perhaps the slowest means to social change, it is the only means” (August 1996 *Seikyo Times*, p.8).

I continued to read this speech daily for months. Although I understood its meaning in my head I still hated my job—and hated my students even more for ruining my career. I continued to chant.

A new principal came to the school who was very strict. He zeroed in on me right away and gave me a bad report in classroom management. For the next two years, I chanted about it with full confidence that the next report would be good. And it was. The principal was shocked and said he’d never had a teacher change their classroom management like that before. I knew I was changing my karma, but I was still aching inside.

By now I would have quit in a split second, if only I could have afforded it. I had had enough. I had changed a lot, but was still miserable—more so than ever as the pressure was starting to affect me physically. But although I spoke about quitting, in my heart I knew I never could leave with anything less than a deep sense that I had won. I had watched others who had sidestepped their challenge and it brought nothing but more of the same or worse.

Pasted to my prayer book, I read the following passage from “Questions and Answers About Embracing the Lotus Sutra” every morning: “Now if you wish to attain Buddhahood, you have only to lower the banners of your arrogance, cast aside the staff of your anger, and devote yourself exclusively to the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra!” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 58–59).

The more I read this passage, the more I realized it was my own arrogance and anger in the classroom that caused my students—those little “barometers”—to respond negatively to me.

September 1997 came and we got a new principal who was even stricter than the previous one. Every time I went to the bathroom, I would start crying uncontrollably. He visited every teacher’s class, every day. I’ve always had poor-to-terrible relationships with administrators, so fortunately when he came to the school, I sincerely chanted to support him and for him to be the best principal ever.

I went to the Florida Nature and Culture Center in the summer of 1997 and sought advice from a senior in faith. As soon as I mentioned I was a teacher, he asked me to please write to President Ikeda.

I wrote President Ikeda and told him the amazing benefits I had received in my practice in other aspects of my life. I purposely didn’t mention my teaching career, keeping the letter upbeat and positive. President Ikeda sent me back a two-word message: “Cheer up.” I knew he could see clearly through to that deep ache. Now I knew I had to change.

Two months into the ’97–’98 school year, a parent wrote a 20-page typed letter to the principal about me. The principal dragged me into his office and said: “In 25 years I have never received such a letter. Do your students even respect you?”

Of course, I immediately sought guidance; it was to read the letter with a fine-tooth comb. It took me two days just to open it and read beyond the first page.

I chanted more—especially to support my principal. I was really beginning to like him. Every time he saw me, he would remind me this is my evaluation year. The pressure increased and my mouth tightened.

In June during my evaluation, the principal said I was an experienced and dedicated teacher. He said classroom management was my Achilles’ heel. As soon as I heard that, I knew I would win—I knew this was the beginning of the end. All I had to do was chant

about my Achilles' heel and I was in. This ache inside to quit was going to go away. I gave my principal a big smile, and said:, "You are absolutely right. Thank you very much."

When September rolled around again, I remembered the guidance I received that summer at a conference. I started chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo envisioning that I was in a treasure tower picking up wisdom, courage, compassion, etc. Every time I got to courage, I had an uneasy feeling inside. I zeroed in on courage—it worked.

From the first day of school I knew it—I was in control of my classroom. I was cool and calm, but very strict. The students responded. The principal responded. When it came time for him to give me an evaluation because of my poor marks the previous year, he was practically apologizing to me. I reminded him again and again that it is not me, but he who has created such a great environment to teach in. And I meant it.

I now see myself as a valuable human being. Education has always been a huge part of my life, but at the time I began practicing Buddhism I had already lost a sense of value in my own education and in myself. I now have dignity and self-respect because I do something valuable every day. This is my human revolution. This is what the Soka Gakkai is about—creating value-creating human beings.

Although I may have lacked courage, I always had enough wisdom to seek out the advice of my seniors in faith before making a major life-decision. And I could never get one such senior to support my desire to quit. Thank you so much for never allowing me to give in to my weakness. I am so happy for the first time in 20 years. The ache is gone and I love seeing my students every day.

But this experience is still on-going. Although I am not the best teacher in my school, for the first time I believe I can be a great teacher. President Ikeda says in *The Human Revolution*, "As a Soka Gakkai member, to make kosen-rufu your life's foundation, it is essential that you become an outstanding person at your place of work." I must do this.