

EXPERIENCE—TARIK MITCHEM, LOUISVILLE, KY. BRINGING LIGHT TO DARKNESS

Tarik Mitchem shares how reading the ‘World Tribune’ illuminates his life and helps him understand the value of his life and practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Life for me started as a struggle for survival. I was born 10 weeks premature with a rare fetal syndrome. A valve in my heart would not open so I could not breathe on my own; I was breathing as if I was still in my mother’s womb.

Each breath I took was a solitary battle. Drastic measures were taken to save my life because I was given only two hours to live. At that time, my parents did not know I was to be the doctor’s first test case for a new medical procedure. Before this procedure, premature infants with fetal syndrome died because nothing could be done to save them.

No one knew exactly what the result would be. The moment of intense uncertainty for everyone ended when medicine was injected into my heart and I began breathing on my own. I stopped the struggle for my existence; I became Tarik! But my world was to be a silent one, though it was not known at the time. Because of the lack of oxygen in my first few hours of life, I had become profoundly deaf.

My mom, who was always sensitive to my needs, discovered my deafness when I was 4 months old, but the doctor would not confirm it until I turned 1. Then I was fitted with hearing aids to amplify sounds. By the time I was 4, I was more adept at voicing sounds and I was curiously trying to produce new ones.

One day when I was with my cousin Dez visiting our grandparents, we decided to walk to his home on the same block. As soon as we entered his home, Dez immediately knelt in front of his family’s altar, so I knelt too. He voiced what sounded like singsong words to me. I attempted to imitate him. Then he repeated the words. Even though my sounds were not distinct, together, we chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Although I had no recollection of this event, my aunt recently shared this story with me. Several years went by before I would chant those words again.

In 1981, without my knowledge, my mom started chanting in her bedroom with the door closed. Whenever my younger brother would question her about the noises he heard, she would reply, “Oh, that’s the radio.”

When I was 11, I began to see my mom reading the *World Tribune*, a different-looking newspaper that sometimes had Japanese characters on the page. My aunt encouraged my mom to subscribe to this newspaper. At that time, I didn’t know that my dad had demanded that she stop reading the *World Tribune*. In spite of his objections, she persisted in reading each issue and continued to chant behind her closed bedroom door.

Whenever I saw the newspaper lying around the house, I read it. Of course, I didn’t fully understand what I read because my deafness made it difficult for me. I’m sure I would frustrate my mother by constantly asking her the meanings of certain words, but she always tried to explain them to me. My understanding steadily improved as I continued to read the *World Tribune*.

My mother continued to do things that appeared to be weird to me. She would face a bare wall in the living room and say words to it. I couldn’t hear her nor could I see her lips because her back was to me, so I thought she was talking to herself. Soon strangers with

smiles on their faces came to our house to face the same bare wall and say words to it. Even though these actions were puzzling to me, I didn't ask any questions.

My mother received the SGI membership certificate in 1992 and her Gohonzon in 1993, which she set in a box by the once bare wall. Of course, I had no idea what these things were, so I thought, "What else will appear?" I didn't ask her any questions and she didn't discuss much with me, though I anxiously continued to read the *World Tribune*.

A year later, my mom began communicating to me about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism by using cued speech, a hand technique that allows deaf individuals to read lips better. For four years she persisted in this sharing. Even though I always listened, I didn't think that what she said had any relevance for my life. But the newspaper articles were meaningful to me.

My attitude about life wasn't serious even though serious things began to happen to me.

In June 1997, I faced another struggle with life and death. Two of my deaf friends and I were hanging out when three young men held us up at gunpoint. One of them put a gun to one of my friend's head and demanded his wallet. Thinking about saving our lives, I gave him the money in my wallet.

I tried to remain calm even though the thought of being killed kept going through my head. All of this happened in a matter of minutes, but it seemed like a lifetime.

As quickly as they had appeared, they jumped in a car and drove away. They were captured that same night by an undercover cop whom they had tried to rob. Now they're serving long sentences in prison because we were brave enough to identify them in court several times.

Thinking back to that experience, I felt my mom's chanting for me to be more serious about life was what enabled me to have the wisdom and courage to remain calm so I could take the crucial action that saved all our lives. Nevertheless, I continued to act as if every second of my life wasn't crucial.

My irresponsible attitude continued until I was in the midst of yet another life and death struggle. I wasn't prepared for the physical or spiritual impact that would change how I view life.

In 1999, I had a serious car accident. Even though my car was totaled, nobody suffered any life-threatening injuries. My mom told me how fortunate I was to be alive, and that no one else was killed.

This became a turning point—I began to take life more seriously. I asked myself, "Why are these things happening to me?" I went to my mom about the words I couldn't hear but that I knew were important for my life. She cued the words Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and I chanted them. Here it was 19 years later, and I was able to say those words again, but with a clearer voice and much deeper meaning than when I was 4!

Now, after so many years of living my life thoughtlessly and being easily defeated, I am beginning to realize that I have control over my life. I have many dreams and my biggest dream is to return to college and further my education. In April, I enrolled in Jefferson Community College here in Louisville. I am interested in pursuing a business degree. I know this will be difficult, but I am willing to win over my weaknesses.

SGI President Ikeda's guidance in *Discussions On Youth* has inspired me: "When you chant, you create the cause for your success. Daimoku is for your benefit. It strengthens your life force and sharpens your mind. It enables you to tap the vital inner strength to give full play to your talents and abilities."

I am beginning to take action for my life. I am learning gongyo with my mom. As she

points to each word, I look at the word and then I look at her mouth to read her lips so I can then say the word. I participate in youth activities at the SGI community center in Louisville. Last summer, I attended the Chicago Youth Cultural Festival with Dez and other youth from Kentucky. Dez took notes for me on some of the key points. Through participating in the festival, I learned that taking action can make a difference in my life.

Even though my life started as a struggle between life and death, so many people have continually encouraged me to bring light to darkness by practicing Buddhism. Over the years, I've been constantly encouraged by reading people's experiences in the *World Tribune*, along with other articles written by the *World Tribune* staff. I may not always remember what they wrote, but the spirit with which they wrote has touched my heart.

President Ikeda's encouragement has helped me especially when I felt that no one would understand my pain and suffering. His guidance continues to help me as I take action to live out the meaning of my name — Tarik — one who brings light to darkness.

— *With help from Glenda Mitchem and Catherine Thompkins*