

**YOUTH PERFORMANCE GROUPS CONFERENCE 2000**  
**BY WILLIE MACK,**  
**LOS ANGELES**

The SGI-USA youth performing groups met at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, July 6–9, for an amazing conference. For 85 percent of the participants, it was their first visit to the FNCC while 70 percent were under age 18.

The various youth performing groups were represented — the Music Corps, Fife and Drum Corps, dance groups, Taiko Drummers, a martial arts group, and theater groups. There were also youth not yet part of a group but determined to start one in their region. Participants came to the conference in an effort to deepen their understanding of SGI President Ikeda’s spirit through their talents and to deepen their faith and understanding of Buddhism.

There were a total of five conference sessions, each of which was filled with dialogue about friendships, school, work, relationships and the development of performance groups.

Session 1 was a lecture on the mentor–disciple relationship by SGI-USA Youth Division Leader James Herrmann where he shared his personal experience with SGI President Ikeda and his continuing efforts to develop this relationship.

Some key points that James made were:

- ❖ a mentor helps the disciple discover his/her identity;
- ❖ discover who you are through the mentor–disciple relationship by breaking through your ego and recognizing not only your own potential, but also the potential of others;
- ❖ the responsibility of the disciple is to seek out the mentor’s heart;
- ❖ the mentor–disciple relationship cannot merely be understood at a conceptual level, rather, it is best understood and appreciated through continuous struggle and hard work.

Conference sessions 2 (Our Vision for the Future) and 3 (Cultural Expression of Bodhisattvas) consisted of break-out sessions. During this time, participants shared experiences of practicing in their regions, their hopes and determinations for their respective groups and overcoming various struggles within their lives through daimoku and participating in activities. They also studied President Ikeda’s “Precepts for Music Corps” and “Angels of Peace” (a poem written to the Fife and Drum Corps). Each person thoughtfully and sincerely answered the question: “How can we inspire members through our performances?”

During the divisional conferences (meetings by gender), one young man admitted he was struggling with understanding other young men and as of yet, he had never been able to bond with them. However, through the dialogue, he felt he was bonding with other young men for the first time. It was a definite breakthrough. Other experiences included overcoming difficult family situations that seemed hopeless only days before.

On Saturday, there was a Soka Spirit session presented by members from San Francisco done in a talk show format with a panel that included SGI-USA Student Division Leader Daisaku Leslie and SGI-USA Music Corps Leader Andy Matsuda.

That evening, at an incredible talent show, there was a profound feeling that

everyone was performing together; no one was left to perform alone.

During the final session where members gave their impressions of the conference itself, one young woman, deeply moved, said, “I have changed my life not only in this life, but all my lifetimes to come.” Another shared her struggle in overcoming her fear of sharing this practice with others, saying, “Now I can tell people I’m a Buddhist.”

The unity and friendships created over the weekend were incredible. No one wanted to leave—people spent hours saying good-bye. Everyone left with a new spirit to fully challenge themselves to seek out President Ikeda’s heart and develop into youth that will touch people’s lives through performance.