

ASHLEY'S EXPERIENCE ALBANY, N.Y

Hi! My name is Ashley Bunn and I am 13. I was pretty excited to go to the FNCC for the Youth Performance Groups conference. It was my first time going somewhere without my family. I had heard people share how attending conferences at the FNCC had changed their lives. I was skeptical at first, but I really began to seek that “Soka Spirit” and hoped I would feel it once I got off the bus.

On the first day, it never really struck me that I was in Florida at the famous FNCC, but I began to feel a bond with my fellow participants. I still felt somewhat alone, but I wanted to dive right in so I could get that life-changing experience that everyone talked about. The people there were so great. It was as if I had known them for years — and I learned almost everyone’s name. I just felt so at home, like they were my family, my friends, even my best friends. It was the best time of my life!

I’ve always known how much of a privilege it is to be Buddhist, but never truly felt it in my heart. It was as if I was hiding a secret. However, connecting to other Buddhists my age at the conference actually made me proud to be a Buddhist. All my life I have lived with so many insecurities about myself and how I looked. But there I was and I didn’t have any insecurities. It was always a lot easier to try to be someone I wasn’t than to honestly look at myself. I guess you could say that I would act as if I was superior to everyone around me to help me feel better.

As a result of this conference, I found a new me and I love it. The friends I made at the FNCC helped me see that I wasn’t a princess or better than anyone else. I was just the same as they were while at the same time unique in my own way. I gained more confidence in myself and wasn’t scared of what people thought.

On Saturday, there was a talent show — my life-changing experience.

I had no shoes (because they got stolen at the beach when I went sightseeing earlier that day) and no hairdryer so I couldn’t fix my own hair. Then I did something I’ll never forget. I dropped into the chair in front of the mirror in my room and started to cry. I was going to sing and, usually, I don’t get nervous before a performance because everything is always perfect. But this time was different. I was faced with what I thought at the time were major obstacles. I started to chant to have the confidence to change my situation.

After chanting for a while, I felt different. I got up, wiped the tears from my eyes, did my make-up, put my hair back, got my music and left my room. I was still scared, but somewhere in my mind I became confident that everything would be okay. I determined that if I had to perform bare-footed, I would; if my hair got messed up, I would put it back; and if my make-up faded, then that would just be less that I would have to take off my face at the end of the night.

When it was my turn to perform, it was as if my bones were rattling. Everyone was taking pictures and recording the performance on their cameras, and when the emcee called my name, it was like a dream. Everyone was so supportive and made me feel so comfortable. It was as if nothing could go wrong and nothing did go wrong. I gave an incredible performance and so did my newfound friends in the talent show.

Then, on the last day, it really hit me when I was chanting — I was at the FNCC and just had the best time of my life. I felt so happy and yet so sad. I started to cry

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again. I was happy because I met friends for life and people I will never forget. But I was also sad because I didn't know when I would ever see any of them again.

However, I know now that because I chant and practice with the SGI, I will always be with my new friends! We are connected through our hearts and our daimoku. Also, a member from Los Angeles inspired me to develop a chorus in Albany. This has become my determination: to develop a chorus in Albany and bring them to the FNCC so they can experience the same kind of joy and Soka Spirit that I felt, still feel and always will.

I would like to say a special thanks to my father because without him it would not have been possible for me to attend the conference. And of course, thank you to everyone else who made it possible for me to go to the FNCC.

To everyone who hasn't been to the FNCC yet: You should try to go because it really does change your life.