

JUNIOR HIGH/HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2000

Participants at this jam-packed conference, already taking leadership in their hometowns, came to deepen their understanding of and commitment to helping others.

By Shan Serafin, *Seize the Day* Co-Editor

“We Are the Hope of the World” was the bold theme of this year’s Junior High/High School conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. Judging from the feedback and reported impact from around the nation, members at this conference underwent life-changing growth.

From day one, things got off to a booming start...literally. Midway through Thursday afternoon, when most of the participants were arriving at the Florida airports, a massive thunderstorm cracked down. Flights were delayed and planes had to re-route for fuel. But most participants were too excited to be inconvenienced. Members like Alex Castro from California, who endured an onslaught of rejections seeking jobs to pay for airfare, and Kristina Davis of Massachusetts, also fighting to get to the FNCC, were bursting with smiles just being there. Both of them managed to find money for the trip at the very last minute, in clutch victories.

Friday morning began with a lecture by SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima. Danny flew out to Florida solely to attend this one session. He returned home later that day, leaving behind 180 wiser participants. He discussed the writing “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” and the profound connection between Nichiren Daishnin’s life and the spread of Buddhism 700 years later. Whew!

Next up was a choice: participants attended either a session on leadership or a session on being the “Amazing Teen.” The leadership session, as Andrew Steiner of Seattle put it, “reinforced everyone’s understanding of real responsibility.” The “Amazing Teen” session, consisting of small discussions on both the suffering and unlimited potential of young people, allowed members to share intimate dialogues on key issues.

Participants then had another choice, this time between “The Creativity Workshop,” a session helping future leaders practice conducting their own creative activities, and a Victory Over Violence session, wherein young people assembled in small groups to share their struggles with and triumphs over violence.

The day culminated with a great session on the basics of Buddhism. The room lit up with input as people shared various questions they’d been asked about this religion. It became clear that teenagers are hit with a broad range of questions, from odd interrogation like “Do you chant under a waterfall?” to stimulating inquiry — “If you don’t have a priesthood, how do you reach enlightenment?” With great impromptu gusto, the session morphed into a lively panel discussion.

The next day, on Saturday, Ed Feasel, dean of students at Soka University of America, shared details about the university. The SUA campus in Aliso Viejo, Calif., opening next May, will launch SGI President Ikeda’s final endeavor, which is to establish the Soka system of education in the United States. Upon hearing that SUA

will accept only 100 students in its first year, one participant exclaimed: “Only 100? That’s too competitive!”

Ed allayed such concern remarking that SUA will have no minimum cut-off for GPA or SAT scores. Acknowledging that every student is unique, SUA will evaluate candidates based on their talents, interests and passions and what they can contribute to the university. So, truly, SUA stands as an ideal nurturing environment. Andy Worshill of Los Angeles commented that going to SUA would be like attending an FNCC conference for four years!

After divisional time (discussions grouped by gender on issues directly related to being a young man or woman), the conference progressed in the traditional FNCC way — afternoon excursions to the Everglades, the mall and the beach; an evening of camaraderie and fun at a talent show; and a night full of deep conversations.

The next and final day, bittersweet for some, new and old friends exchanged good-byes and made determinations about staying in touch and when to see one another next. A few of these expressions are included in this issue of *Seize the Day*. Read on!