

RAISING OUR CHILDREN CONFERENCE EXPANDS ITS SCOPE BY DON SANDERS LOS ANGELES CORRESPONDENT

The messengers of the future were the focus of the Raising Our Children Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center on July 27–30. The fourth meeting of this conference was not just for parents. Among the participants were educators who work with children and are applying themselves to helping parents teach their children about the SGI and our Buddhist practice.

This was a goal achieved by National Boys and Girls Group Coordinators Palma Odano and Cass Wilson, and many of the returning participants who seek to draw from the vast pool of creative talent in our organization to support families.

Recognizing how mightily parents struggle with balancing family, work and activity commitments, SGI-USA Women's Leader Matilda Buck also attended to offer encouragement and hear participants' concerns.

Part of what was new was increased male participation, although the women have certainly been the driving force in making this conference so powerful, refreshing and lively.

Chris Jaffe, an educator from Indiana and a father himself, led a workshop titled "Being the Best Father to Your Children." Out of the dialogue conducted in this workshop by both men and women came the idea that there are two very unbalanced myths operative in our society with respect to fathers. One is that they are unessential, dumb and unimportant. The other is that they should "do it all."

The consensus built by the group is that fathers have a powerful influence on children both through their presence and their absence, and that we need a new vision of the role of fathers. Another point brought out is that men cause women deep suffering by losing touch with their own significance.

A new and original workshop was the "Z-Wave Mentoring Program for Boys and Girls Group." The program utilizes the educational theories of Tsunesaburo Maki-guchi and Howard Gardner, as well as the socratic method, in an extraordinary way to provide a varied experiential activity for children ages 7–12. Children learn that work in the adult world is based on relationships, and with relationships to the community. Mentors help children grasp the basics of faith and engage in hands-on projects, and the parents do not need to make it all happen themselves. Discussion among children and mentors within the activity has focused on numerous Buddhist concepts and terms and SGI President Ikeda's *Discussions on Youth* books.

This program, begun in Santa Monica, Calif., is on its way to replication in other areas soon.

The conference participants collectively raised many strong concerns. The four days will undoubtedly be the fuel for a lot of fresh dialogue all over the SGI-USA. Many parents expressed a longing to see a paradigm shift in how our organization views children. Tremendous energy went into seeking ways to make meetings attractive and friendly to children.

SGI President Ikeda, in his message to the conference, writes: "I hope that each of you will create the best environment for our children, like a lighthouse of hope illuminating the path toward the future."

While we owe an unrepayable debt of gratitude to all the pioneers who have paved the

way to bring us to where we stand now, we must invest solidly in our future as well, raising many bright and inspired young people to take us where we still need to go.

For more information on the SGI-USA Boys and Girls Group, please contact Palma Odano at Podano@aol.com.