

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE STUDENT DIVISION CONFERENCE

**MELISSA SYLVER
LIVES IN SAN FRANCISCO
GRADUATE OF UC SANTA BARBARA
MAJORED IN SOCIOLOGY WITH A FOCUS IN SPANISH**

My goal in coming to this conference was to have complete truth in my relationship with my boyfriend, even if the realization was painful. Right before I had to write my experience that I gave at the conference, I had the desire to chant in front of the lake with the moon overhead at the FNCC. My roommate and I chanted out there, and needing a focal point, we chose a tree at the opposite end of the lake. I began chanting about communication and taking responsibility.

At one point, the water became perfectly still, and I noticed that there was no difference between the tree and its reflection in the water. I was reminded of guidance I received from Wendy DeSouza. She told me very strictly that in a relationship, you first have to be the person that you want to be with. So what I learned was that no matter what it pertains to in my life, that it first begins with me developing my character. In coming here, I had set a goal and chanted about it — I truly feel that I have been completely victorious.

**BERNARD ELLORIN
LIVES IN SAN DIEGO
ATTENDS SOUTH WESTERN COLLEGE
MAJORING IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY**

When the East Bay members said how we shouldn't just call members to tell them about meetings, but also to say hello because they might be suffering and need to talk, it really affected me. My brother just passed away, and a few days before he died, he approached me while I was taking a nap and asked me to chant with him. For some reason, I said no, and I'm still really struggling with this. But now I understand the importance of reaching out to people in need.

I also related to what Danny Nagashima said — that the mentor puts his whole life into showing the disciple what's good, what's true. I play Filipino music for a dance company, and I realized that my mission is to educate people about Filipino culture through my music. I feel that Filipinos in the U.S. don't really recognize their own culture. I want to educate people about Filipino culture and help to bring this kind of research into the mainstream.

**SUGURU ABE
LIVES IN PHOENIX
ATTENDS ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
MAJORING IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION**

In Japan, the student division is, for the most part, separate from the youth division and the rest of the organization. But here, students are part of the youth division, support their districts, have to study for school, all in addition to being involved in the student division. So we're busier, and it seems like such a challenge to fulfill our

mission. But what I saw at the FNCC is each student seeking something, and it's so encouraging. I just want to learn as much as possible while I'm here and become totally happy before President Ikeda comes to America.

**E-CHERN MARK
LIVES IN LOS ANGELES
ATTENDS CAL STATE UNIVERSITY, L.A.
MAJORING IN NURSING**

Truthfully, when I got off the plane, I didn't feel anything. I began doubting whether I'd get the "spirit" of the FNCC. Mystically, through the experiences that were given the next day, one by one all of the questions I had were answered. I was also humbled by the fact that many of us were struggling, and realized that through our Buddhist practice, we would all make it through. Now I feel as if my seeking spirit has deepened.

Another experience that impacted my life was when a young man from Virginia approached me and two of my friends. He thanked us with tears in his eyes for a song we had sung together with the chorus at the SGI-USA Youth Culture Festival in Los Angeles last year. He told us that the song had totally changed his perspective on life, and said, "I owe my life to you." From now on, I'm determined to develop a more open mind and to be less fearful in general, and I know that my daimoku will be the fuel for this.

**ALISON MIDDLETON
LIVES IN CLINTON, MD.
GRADUATE OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF MARYLAND EASTERN SHORE
MAJORED IN HOTEL/RESTAURANT MANAGEMENT**

I really enjoyed what Danny Nagashima said about fusing your life with the Gohonzon, and how he said that the mentor-disciple relationship is lateral, not vertical. Before coming to the FNCC, I had no real concept of just how deep the relationship is with President Ikeda. I've never had the desire to connect with him before, and didn't realize until this conference how important it is to connect with him. I also learned that the mentor-disciple relationship means to be of the same mind as our true mentor, Nichiren Daishonin. And I really liked what Danny said about how even if we don't feel we have any mentors in our lives, that the Gohonzon can be our mentor.

In my personal guidance session with Renu Jiandani, she told me how much I needed to believe in myself. We all have responsibilities to stand up against what is wrong in order to change the world, and each of us has the power to do this. I always knew I had this power, but didn't really use it. I am determined to do so when I get back.

**ANDREW UTADA
LAFAYETTE HILLS, PA.
ATTENDS HARVARD UNIVERSITY
PH.D. IN BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING**

I went to the FNCC with the idea that I really needed a jumpstart in my practice before starting graduate school in the fall, and because as a student division member,

I really wanted to know what was going on. However, when I reflect back on my mindset, I do not feel that I had the seeking mind to make any kind of breakthrough. I went there very passively expecting just to absorb some spirit, and in fact felt quite intimidated by how amazing my fellow student division members are. In general, I found myself arrogantly comparing myself to other people.

Despite my arrogant nature working to stop me from learning anything from the conference, I had the help of 175 students members sharing their personal struggles, sufferings and subsequent victories through this practice to soften my hard head. While listening to many people's experiences, I began to notice how easy it is to look at someone and assume that they are not suffering simply because it does not show on his or her face.

Through experiencing firsthand how everyone supported and encouraged everyone else during the experiences and the talent show "that-would-not-die," I began to feel in the depths of my heart that the way we must respond to President Ikeda is to take care of one another.

Lastly, I am overjoyed at being a part of the SGI family and I am so grateful to the FNCC staff, our national leaders and the student division for making this a breakthrough experience for me and many other student division members.

**KUNIKO KODAMA
LIVES IN SANTA CRUZ, CALIF.
ATTENDS CABRILLO COLLEGE
MAJORING IN ESL AND GENERAL ED.**

Before the conference, I just looked at what I didn't do in my life, how I had failed and I felt so disappointed in myself. But through my human revolution and my struggles in America, I am able to feel closer to President Ikeda's struggles. I deeply appreciate how much he wants to be here with us in America, and I sincerely want to do kosen-rufu here. Now, I'm constantly asking myself, "What can I do as President Ikeda's disciple?"

I feel so much happiness, because now I hear President Ikeda's voice saying, "I would never want you to be unhappy." I realized that being his disciple means being happy. I feel that he wants to be with each one of us and to talk with and get to know each one of us. Now, instead of suffering from my skin problem, I'm beginning to admire it, to be proud of it.

**FLORA MCGILL
LIVES IN SEATTLE
ATTENDS CORNISH COLLEGE OF THE ARTS
MAJORING IN MUSIC**

I feel so proud to be part of the student division, because it is a very significant time to be a student. As student division, I feel that President Ikeda is talking to us as a group of individuals, unified in spirit, who are taking responsibility for the future.

We're consciously deciding to train ourselves — becoming a student is that decision. This is the seed of our human revolution. We're choosing to grow, to take risks and to have the courage to challenge ourselves where we are right now. Courage is the key to everything — it's the prime point. If we don't have courage, then we won't be able to handle the pressures that will arise when we make the determination

to become happy. To know yourself, your goals, your fears, your strengths and weaknesses, and how to reach out to people — that requires courage. When we use our faith to muster up the courage for our lives, to me, that is faith itself.

**JASON EVANS
LIVES IN NORFOLK, VA.
ATTENDS OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
MAJORING IN GRAPHIC ARTS**

The student division conference was certainly an emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth on the grand stage of the future. I was touched to the core of my life by the compassion and courage that each individual expressed. They are truly in accordance with SGI President Ikeda's compassion as he expressed it to us through his many messages and gifts. I deeply sensed the immense confidence that he has for us in each of his actions. Every one of these individuals will be known throughout history as champions of kosen-rufu and leaders of the world. President Ikeda is counting on us. Let's show him through our victories that we will become pioneers of the future!

**GRIFF MCDANIEL
LIVES IN PALO ALTO, CALIF.
ATTENDS FOOTHILL COLLEGE
MAJORING IN ECONOMICS**

I was surprised that not everyone knew about or fully understood the importance of Soka Spirit. Before the Soka Spirit session, I think all most of us had heard was "Oooh...the temple is bad." But I felt that the session really informed people well, and I was impressed with how easily everyone picked it up. Also, something that Tammy, a young woman from New Jersey, said really impacted me. In her experience, she used the example of the priesthood tearing down the Grand Main Temple (Sho-Hondo) and said, "Look what they have to do to stop us!"

But actually, it wasn't through the lectures but the experiences that I learned the most about the spirit of the student division. I appreciated the fact that no one was telling us how to do student division activities, but rather it was through the experiences that we learned how to create our own way of doing activities. I felt this kind of fresh energy throughout the conference, even from the very beginning.

**ANDREW VAN DEN HOUTEN
LIVES IN PALO ALTO, CALIF.
ATTENDS EMERSON COLLEGE
MAJORING IN MEDIA STUDIES WITH A CONCENTRATION IN FILM**

Going to the FNCC and meeting so many wonderful, young and intelligent Buddhists (who know how to have fun!), I have become motivated to work much more vigorously at my studies. I am now even considering the possibility of furthering my education after college. The physical and emotional struggles that my peers have endured, while practicing Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism, shows me that in order to be a beautiful person, one truly does need to face all kinds of obstacles. Developing compassion and understanding for all students, and young people, is now a goal that I will strive for on a daily basis. Baring your life to people you don't

know isn't easy. Thank you again for all the incredible experiences.

**KWANG-SIG LEE
LIVES IN AMES, IOWA
ATTENDS IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
MAJORING IN ECONOMICS**

I learned one lesson from this conference. It was that I should be courageous anytime and anywhere. I was an emcee in the session, "Personalizing the Soka Spirit," and I was a participant in two presentations of that session. I had two options: The first was to be passive; to do my part only in my seat. The second was to be active; to go to the center of my audience and to do my part as if I communicated with them. When watching American members' fluent presentations before mine, I thought: "I came to the United States just one year ago. Can I really be successful in the center of my audience?" But I could win over that thought and successfully do my job in the middle of my audience. I am sure that this experience will be one turning point in my practice and life.