

**EXPERIENCE—REN ZARNESKY, ALAMOGORDO, N.M.  
FOREVER GRATEFUL  
AS TOLD TO JUDY HYMAN**

**Ren Zarnesky brings happiness to her family through her Buddhist practice.**

In the mid-1950s, I lived in Saigon with my husband and our six children. My husband, though Vietnamese, spoke fluent French and worked as a translator for the French government. We owned our home and had a good life. Then, the French left Saigon and the communists came in. Soon after, communists came to our home in the night and took my husband away. I never saw him again. Friends told me later that the communists had shot him and thrown his body into the river.

Our house was taken over by communists, and the children and I were turned out with only a few personal possessions. I was quite young and had no work experience, so I took in sewing to support my family. Though I worked hard, life was still very difficult. Two of my children died due to unknown causes.

A neighbor, who was married to an American, told me her husband's best friend (also an American) was looking for a housekeeper. She brought this handsome American to visit me and he offered me a job. I did not speak English, nor did he speak Vietnamese, but we communicated through my Vietnamese friend and her husband. I was to be a live-in housekeeper, but of course, there was no place for my children. My aunt, however, agreed to take care of the children and I accepted the job.

The American paid me well and I was able to see that my children did not starve. After working a year as his housekeeper, this American asked if I would become his girlfriend.

To his credit, he didn't try to deceive me that he intended marriage. He was a young man, younger than I. He had had many girlfriends, but had never married and said frankly that he found most women to be after his money. Besides, I had too many children.

After some hesitation, I decided to talk it over with my aunt. She pointed out that he had rescued me and my children from a life of poverty, protected me and made it possible for me to protect my children. Obviously I wasn't able to take care of them alone, and with my husband gone, there was no one left to look after us. So, she wondered, what choice did I have? Her advice was to "close my eyes and make him happy."

The American and I were lovers for three years, during which time I became pregnant.

While I was pregnant, he was transferred back to America. He asked me to wait for him, but still refused to make any commitment of marriage. However, after discussing the situation with his mother, he soon returned to Vietnam and we were married. We moved to America with our newborn baby, leaving my other children with my aunt in Saigon.

Our marriage seemed to go well for a time. After the Vietnam War ended, my husband allowed me to go back and bring my three youngest Vietnamese children to the United States. My oldest son, then 17, had left my aunt's home and we were unable to contact him. Later we learned the communists had imprisoned him because his mother had married an American.

After I returned to America with my Vietnamese children, my husband's attitude changed dramatically. He seemed angry with the children and began to discipline them immediately. He expected them to come straight home from school, stay in their room and do their homework. If they disobeyed him in the slightest way, he disciplined them in a

way I thought was unreasonably strict and harsh. We argued constantly. All my hopes and dreams of having a happy family life seemed to dissipate.

I cried all the time. I thought of leaving him, but I had no place to go. I even thought of killing myself, but if I did that, who would take care of the children? I stayed on and did my best to please him, but I was miserable. Not long after, he took a job in the Middle East, and my children and I were alone again. My husband sent money back to us, so we were not in danger of starving, but I was lonely and frightened without him. He came home for a month only once a year but each time, we argued and he seemed relieved to go back to his job.

Around that time, I enrolled in a class to learn English as a Second Language. One of my classmates was a member of the SGI-USA. She taught me how to chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo and told me I could overcome all my problems and become happy if I practiced Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Although my family had practiced Vietnamese Buddhism, I was glad to try anything that might relieve my suffering. I began chanting, trying to learn gongyo and going to Buddhist meetings as often as possible. My friend told me to keep chanting even if I didn't understand, and on Jan. 4, 1981, I received the Gohonzon.

As I did my best to practice faithfully, chanting daily to the Gohonzon, a subtle change began to take place in my thinking. For the first time, I began seeing things from my husband's perspective. He was young, had never been married and not been around children much until our own marriage. I realized he must have found the sudden acquisition of such a big family confusing and trying. I began chanting to understand him better, and to be more helpful instead of criticizing so much. Instead of arguing with him when he chastised the children, I began encouraging them to appreciate him and to respect his wishes. I showed my own appreciation by telling my husband how happy he made me by bringing my three children to America and giving them a good home. I realized how fortunate I was to have a husband who was a good provider as well as faithful. He wasn't perfect, but as my attitude changed, his behavior began to change, too.

On his visits home from the Middle East, my husband began spending more time with the children, and really seemed to care about them. When my youngest son entered high school, my husband saw to it that he had a car to drive. He seemed genuinely interested in seeing that all the children's needs were met so they could enjoy life and do well in school. He began to treat me with more respect and kindness, too. As I practiced steadily, our family situation thrived.

After several years, my husband took a job at Holloman Air force Base, near our home in Alamogordo, N.M., and moved back in with us. We were a family again at last.

My husband continues to be a good husband and father. He allows me to visit my family in Vietnam often, he brings me flowers, supports my Buddhist practice and doesn't even complain about eating leftovers any more. Now, he makes me happy.

All our children have finished high school, and two graduated from college. They all have good jobs and good marriages. Best of all, my Vietnamese children love their stepfather. My youngest son said to me recently: "Daddy taught me how to write, how to fix my car, how to manage money and how to be a good citizen. At first I thought he was bad, but now, I love him. Thank you, Mama, for giving me Daddy."

My oldest son, imprisoned by the communists for 10 years, was released several years ago. Last year, under the sponsorship of his younger siblings, he was able to bring his wife and daughter to America. Thanks to chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo, my dream of having a

happy family has come true.

I thank my friend who introduced me to this Buddhism. I thank my Alamogordo Buddhist family who encouraged me and helped me practice, and I thank all the members of the SGI-USA for enabling me to develop and strengthen my faith in the Gohonzon. Through practicing this Buddhism, I have changed my life completely, and I will be forever grateful.