

## **NEW LEADERSHIP FOR SOKA GROUP AND GAJOKAI BY SGI-USA YMD LEADER CORY TAYLOR**

*At the Central Executive Conference on Sept. 22, Ken Nakagawa and Eric Freedman were appointed the new SGI-USA Soka Group and Gajokai Leaders.*

I want to take this opportunity to introduce Ken Nakagawa and Eric Freedman to all of you. But before I do, I want to briefly pay tribute to their predecessors, David Eisenberg and Bobby Debozi.

Bobby Debozi's very name is synonymous with "fighting behind the scenes." He has quietly served the SGI-USA members as Gajokai leader with determination, guts, selflessness and dignity. He breathed new life into the Gajokai organization, and used himself to teach what it meant to lead by example. Bobby never asked for anything in return.

David Eisenberg brought new identity to the Soka Group. Embodying the spirit of "strict on the inside, warm on the outside," David fought relentlessly to serve the SGI-USA members with detailed plans, abundant daimoku and his own sweat. He revitalized the Soka Group organization. He was like a big brother — someone Soka Group members could always look up to.

The late 1990s were challenging years for the Soka Group and Gajokai in the SGI-USA. These were years of great transition, growth and development. Side by side with their comrades, Bobby and David led these groups, upholding and revitalizing the spirit and principles for which they exist. They did this while never compromising their front-line responsibilities! They deserve our greatest respect and gratitude.

Now, we stand at the threshold of the 21st century. Leading the Soka Group and Gajokai into that century will be Ken Nakagawa and Eric Freedman, two of the most capable young men in the SGI-USA. Ken is the young men's leader for Brooklyn-Queens-Long Island Region (BQLI), while Eric is the young men's leader for L.A. Coastal Region. Both have actively participated in the Soka Group and Gajokai since their high school days. Both have distinguished themselves as exceptional leaders in service to the members from behind the scenes.

While uniting with Eric and Ken, it is important to remember that it is up to each of us, the members of the Soka Group and Gajokai, to become outstanding young people of character, responsibility, compassion and bold action.

In his poem "Soar — Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!" SGI President Ikeda writes, "Direct your steps on this grand and golden path, which others, inspired by your example, will also yearn to tread."

Members of the Gajokai and Soka Group — be confident in your mission! You are the treasure of the SGI-USA. We are entering the most important of times! Please do your very best!

I ask that all of you, members of the Soka Group and Gajokai of America, unite with Ken and Eric, and create model organizations for the 21st century.

## **THE TRAINING GROUND FOR OUR LIVES ERIC FREEDMAN, SGI-USA GAJOKAI LEADER**

Gajokai has been, and continues to be, a training group for those who are serious about capturing SGI President Ikeda's heart, winning in daily life and developing a fighting spirit to absolutely never give up.

I sincerely hope that each young man will seize the opportunity to train themselves in the Gajokai and experience the life-changing effect this group has had on thousands of young men, including myself.

When I talk about "training" in the Gajokai, I am referring to the type of training that we take with us into our jobs, family and social circles. For example, Gajokai teaches responsible behavior such as being punctual. We all know the downside of tardiness at school or work.

Gajokai also teaches the importance of prayer. One of the greatest benefits I have derived from doing Gajokai has been for me to learn how to pray and care for others. From age 17, I was constantly being encouraged that before a Gajokai shift, I must chant for the success of the meeting and the safety and happiness of each and every member.

Society teaches us to compete with others and to look out for number one. But in the Gajokai, we learn to care for others; with prayer and effort, we are able to protect the members, and ensure that they have a wonderful and safe experience at our SGI facilities. Where else but in SGI youth training groups can someone learn such a life-changing lesson?

SGI President Ikeda always praises those who fight behind the scenes, and consistently says that it is precisely because of the unseen efforts for the sake of the members that one can grow and develop one's character, becoming a great leader for the future. President Ikeda created the Gajokai as a training ground for young men to develop. In an address to the Gajokai members, he said: "Conviction, effort and perseverance are the basics of a leader's character. At the same time, these are the eternal guidelines for the Gajokai.... I want each of you to build your own castle of faith while purely solidifying the three mottos of conviction, effort and perseverance in your life" (*Gajokai Handbook*).

It is my absolute conviction that each and every Gajokai member who chooses to actively participate in this group will, without fail, develop into a world-class individual and achieve all of their goals and dreams. There is no doubt that anyone who decides to put aside their own concerns and learn how to care for others through this group will have absolutely no regrets! I would like to declare that the SGI-USA Gajokai will become a shining example for the entire world, and from its ranks will spawn future leaders in all endeavors. I am determined to do my very best to help each and every Gajokai member experience amazing results in their lives. Thank you!

## **PROTECTING THE SGI THROUGH SOKA SPIRIT AND SHAKUBUKU KEN NAKAGAWA, SGI-USA SOKA GROUP LEADER**

Upon accepting responsibility as Soka Group leader for the United States, I stole a moment to reflect on my years of training in this group.

Ahh! I can smell it now: Standing alone in a stifling subway station reeking with urine, miles away from the activity; sweeping and cleaning an activity site in the freezing cold at the crack of dawn, hours before any members arrived. For some, this may seem a bit extreme. But to me and my fellow Soka Group comrades, this is our badge of honor.

SGI President Ikeda states: “To earnestly work for kosen-rufu behind the scenes, without being concerned whether others see or recognize your efforts — that is the tradition of the SGI. Those who work hard outside the spotlight are the true heroes” (*Conversations with Youth*, p. 120).

President Ikeda, more than anyone, fights behind the scenes for the members’ happiness and security. That is why he recognizes and respects those who work behind the scenes. It is through my Soka Group training that I have developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of SGI President Ikeda’s heart and the mentor–disciple relationship.

How can we prepare for President Ikeda’s arrival in America next year as Soka Group members? The mission of Soka Group is to protect the members and protect the SGI. This not only means ensuring the member’s safety at meetings, but also protecting our organization against evil influences. In that sense, by supporting the Soka Spirit movement, we are also fulfilling our mission as Soka Group.

Shakubuku is also the mission of Soka Group. By selflessly helping someone to become happy — that is what Soka Group is all about. Doing shakubuku fortifies our state of life and strengthens the Buddha’s forces against negative influences. I feel this is the best way to prepare ourselves for President Ikeda’s arrival in America next year as Soka Group.

To my fellow comrades in the Soka Group, I say: “Are you ready to fight seriously together against injustice?” I personally pledge to all of you that I will fight even harder in this Soka Spirit movement, and I will introduce at least one person to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism by the time President Ikeda comes next year. I look forward to seeing all of you at the Florida Nature and Culture Center in November for the Support Groups’ Conference.