

EXPERIENCE—TOMELL DE SILVA, ORLAND PARK, ILL. 'FREELY SHAPING MY FUTURE'

Tomell de Silva creates a brilliant future through challenging himself at school.

I have a dream!” A quote we all have come to know. But unlike Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, I had a dream that any young child would have. A dream that I believed would never come true. My dream was to have friends, to feel accepted and be happy, and to do well in school. But these things remained just dreams. From the first grade, I struggled with these problems.

I am 14 years old and currently in ninth grade and have been an SGI-USA member since birth. Most of my life, I have lived in a predominantly Caucasian community, and was one of two minority students in my school. I am half African American and half Japanese.

It was a struggle from the beginning. I was constantly excluded from any social life at school, and as for my grades, they were among the lowest in the school. When report cards were issued, there was not enough room for the teachers to write additional comments like “very talkative!”; “extremely disruptive!”; “needs severe improvement!”; and “lacks understanding!” My parents, puzzled at the low grades and comments, were disappointed, and could not understand why.

My parents chose to send me to Sylvan Learning Center, which promised to help me achieve at least one grade higher in one class by the end of the year. Unfortunately, it didn’t help.

Devastated once again, my parents withdrew me from the daily classes and hired a home tutor, thinking that it would simulate a “home schooled” feeling. As before, the results were unsuccessful.

I lived in agony and pain. I didn’t understand why I was doing so poorly, and to a certain extent, didn’t care. My lack of motivation and understanding of my schoolwork often brought my mother to tears. She would cry at night pondering why her son was doing so badly. She chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo every day for me to improve and to be happy. But every year, she was brought to tears once again.

My social life looked no brighter than my education. I didn’t see myself as being different from any other person, yet I was being excluded for reasons that I could not understand. My peers in school would often talk to me at the beginning of the year, but as the year progressed, they slowly faded away until the point where they ended our friendship. This cycle happened yearly, and I began to doubt my ability to do anything. I felt as if there would be no end to my struggles.

As I grew older, the problems worsened. In fifth grade, I was not only being neglected by my peers but also my teacher. Whenever I raised my hand to answer a question, she never acknowledged me. She simply waited until one of the other students raised their hand. She also constantly made mistakes in my grades by placing a lower one in her grade book than the actual grade given to me. She would yell at me often for no apparent reason.

As these incidents continued, I began to realize what was really taking place. I was being discriminated against because I was different. I told my mother, and I will never forget the dreadful look on her face as I poured out what was happening at school every day. She was shocked and her face reddened with anger.

In no time, she spoke with the school principal but he simply told my mom that there was nothing wrong, and that the teacher was not excluding anyone in any way. He even declined to meet with her saying that there was no need and nothing more could be said or done. In disbelief and completely infuriated, she hung up the phone. This was only one of many similar instances.

When questioned, the teacher claimed it was simply a mistake. But that “mistake” was made more than five times a quarter, each quarter.

Nothing ever seemed to go right for me. I felt despised by my peers and teachers. No matter what I did to succeed, I always felt like I failed.

Although my mother has a very strong Buddhist practice, I did not pray consistently. My determination and will to chant were at an all-time low. I knew theoretically that if I chant my life would improve, but since I hadn’t experienced anything life-changing, I doubted it would work.

My mother knew my suffering and throughout my life she encouraged me about the tremendous benefits of practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. At my lowest point, I finally gave into my mother’s urging and began to chant on a regular basis. During the two-year period from fifth to seventh grade, my practice became more consistent.

Seventh grade was a major turning point for me. I had completely regained my confidence and rebuilt my self-esteem and will power. Proud of my “new” self, I entered seventh grade with a fresh outlook and a will to fulfill my dreams. I made the determination to no longer be held back by my bad grades and to make friends.

During this time, I accomplished one of the most astounding things — I made the honor role. I was overwhelmed with joy and I will never forget the first time I saw my name on the honor role board. I also began to develop lasting friendships and totally turned around my relationships with my teachers.

In eighth grade, I accomplished every one of my dreams and even surpassed the standards I set for myself. For the first time, I was elected by my peers to represent them on the Student Council Board, which organizes dances, school activities, extracurricular activities and various sports. Furthermore, I was elected by the staff of the school to join the Principals Council, which is a board that gives the student body power to change or improve the school. It is tremendously hard to get elected to either of these boards and maintain the level of performance expected. And when only 10 students are picked out of nearly 400, then the job becomes even more pressured. All the students were counting on us, and I was determined to fulfill the requirements and meet all of my goals.

On top of that, I achieved a 4.0 grade point average — there were only five students who achieved this for the year. At the commencement ceremony, to congratulate all of the honorees, I received a Medal of Honor and a special certificate. It was one of the happiest times in my life. I will never forget that day.

That night, I chanted in appreciation for the evening’s events.

On my graduation day, June 2, a very special honor was given to me. I was one of two students out of a class of 363 to receive the American Legion Award, given to only the top students who exceed not only in academics, but also in sports and other activities. My parents were so proud of me. I could honestly say, at that moment, I was the happiest person on this earth.

I am now in high school and attend the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, which I love. This is a private school, which only accepts a limited number of new students. We are treated as if we are college students, with all the freedom and

responsibility. It's one of the most prestigious high schools in Illinois—and it is very diverse. I am also succeeding in everything I do there.

I feel appreciative to have this opportunity to receive such a tremendous education. I believe that a good education is the key to success and to a better world. I believe a good education leads to a better understanding of the world, and a better understanding of the world will help create peace. The dream of a peaceful world is so obscured by hate that it often seems impossible to accomplish. But I believe it can be done.

Some people believe that an education will simply get you ahead in life and serves no other purpose, but it does more. Hatred, ignorance and prejudice are often caused by a lack of education; they are learned, not inherited. Through education we can come to appreciate the diversity of this world, instead of hating our differences. Through learning and understanding each culture, each ethnic group and each contribution made by different people, we expand not only our knowledge but also our own lives. By educating myself, I am able to have a better understanding of how each of us is interconnected.

I read SGI President Ikeda's guidance daily because it helps me to direct my life. I can always encourage friends my age when they are struggling and now they feel compelled to read his guidance, too. He says: "Your teen years are a period to build the foundation of your future happiness. It is the age when your body and mind are still very fresh and flexible, and you can absorb many things that will be important to you for the rest of your life. It is the age when you can master some skills or devote yourself to studying, in which you can freely shape your future as you please" (*The Way of Youth*, p. 51).

My goal is one day to be like my stepfather, who is my mentor in life and the one person I can look up to. I would like to become a cardiovascular surgeon not only because my father is in the field of cardiology, but because I want to help people and save lives.

My faith has developed so much through this experience and I feel I'm beginning to grasp Buddhism more. I changed my attitude in my prayer. I no longer beg when I pray, rather I've found that the strength to accomplish my goals comes from within with a prayer of determination.

I owe my success to my Buddhist practice because it has enabled me to expand my power—and to my family, who has always been there, right by my side. I want to thank my brother who has encouraged me as well as made me a stronger person both physically (we wrestle a lot) and mentally. Finally, I want to thank my mom for her continuous encouragement. She is another mentor, guiding me through the roughest times in my life. I love my family for everything they have provided for me. I am truly thankful.