

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE YOUTH SUPPORT GROUPS CONFERENCE

Lisa Yukie Sasaki, Irvine, California

Although I came to this conference as a Byakuren first and foremost, I could not detach myself from being a Student Division member also. I am a fourth-year student at the University of California, Irvine. I have a little more than six months before graduating and I am determined, during this short time, to introduce students to this practice. I do not have a goal of a specific number of introductions, but a goal to truly change the lives of students seeking the Daishonin's teachings.

Every morning before leaving for school, I will make this determination in front of the Gohonzon and pray that those "seeking-minded students" will somehow be attracted to me. After a deeply thoughtful and enlightening dialogue with my roommate at the FNCC, I understand my need to chant to truly understand the question, "Why am I doing shakubuku?" Is it because other members and leaders have said to do so? Is it because I only want to gain benefits? Or is it because I genuinely care about others and want to lead them to a wonderful, most amazing life of happiness? I feel each person needs to answer this question personally.

As SGI President Ikeda writes in *Glass Children and Other Essays*: "[Q]ualities most vital to youth are courage, conviction, and hope. Courageous action on the part of the young is the source from which all else is created. And it is conviction that guides and lends support to courage" (p. 50). I will have the courage to meet new people and introduce them to this practice. I will have the conviction to fight each day on the frontlines and become a capable, humanistic and compassionate member of society. I will have the hope that many others will stand up and fight alongside me and become proud disciples of SGI President Ikeda. Thank you.

Shibani Singh, Dallas

I recently got back from the Florida Nature and Culture Center after attending the Youth Division Support Groups conference. This was my first visit to the FNCC. As soon as I arrived, the beauty and serenity of the place took me by complete surprise. The first thought that came to me was that the FNCC reflects SGI President Ikeda's life — in the huge expanses of green grass, beautiful flora and fauna, and the calm stillness of Toda Lake.

While in prison, President Toda had written, "The Ceremony in the Air is not over yet." I realized this during my four-day stay at FNCC. Bodhisattvas had gathered from all parts of America to remember and renew their pledge for kosen-rufu. While it was a time of intensive training to imbibe the Soka Spirit in our lives and to seek President Ikeda, it was also a time for me to connect and form strong bonds of friendship with my Soka brothers and sisters. Sharing experiences, laughing and sharing one another's joys and victories, crying and feeling for one another's struggles, it was an opportunity for me to learn to open my life and develop greater compassion. At the same time, I determined like never before, that from now on, I

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would take personal responsibility to raise successors for kosen-rufu. During the many guidance sessions, discussions and cultural presentations, I felt like I was returning to *kuon ganjo* (time without beginning or end) to remember and redetermine my pledge to work for the happiness of others.

Leaving FNCC after four days, I felt sad but excited because I was eager to come back and start taking action based on all that I had learned and determined. Going to FNCC was truly like going to meet President Ikeda and I came back feeling like a different person, determined and confident that I will show actual proof and win. And I will share this most wonderful practice with everyone I meet.

Vicky Markunas, Northern Virginia

Of course, the first thing I thought when I saw the Florida Nature and Culture Center was: “Wow! It’s so beautiful!” Then I went straight to the pool. That night while doing gongyo with everyone, I started to get choked up. I was thinking about how miserable I was in my teens and how much appreciation I had for this Buddhism. Through the many visits I’ve had from young women and from being in Byakuren, I have overcome so much and feel so happy to be alive.

Early the next morning, our training sessions started. Throughout the day, we received several messages from SGI President Ikeda. He also gave us mid-afternoon snacks. I had never felt a real connection with President Ikeda before. He was just some guy who everyone thought was great and gave great speeches. But now I feel that he really is thinking about every single person in the SGI and cares very deeply about all of our happiness.

Even in the midst of paradise, I realized that I had to challenge myself to keep up my life-condition. It was so great that the minute I started to feel it drop, I could go chant with other youth and, when I was done, go for a refreshing bike ride, stopping here and there to have conversations and then continuing on my way.

The last night there we had an amazing talent show. There were so many funny and talented people there. I was laughing and screaming and clapping and it was the best show I’d ever seen.

I am so glad I went to the FNCC. My life was really asleep, but now I feel like President Ikeda’s poem “Soar—Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!” when he said:

Awake! Arise! / That you also may know life’s
deep and genuine joy. / Turn away from a life
of sadness, / From passive drifting, / From
tragic weeping at death and loss.

My life has really awakened and I am determined to make the Byakuren in my area young women who will be looked up to, as I looked up to the Byakuren when I was a little girl.