

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO WIN

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The stadium was filled to capacity as more than sixty thousand friends, family members and faculty of North Carolina State University gathered to celebrate the graduates of the class of 1998. It was an exciting morning for me. Upon previous graduations of my undergraduate and master's degrees, I had already begun work assignments in Berlin, Germany and Japan, and was unable to "walk" with my classmates. On this day I was actually going to receive my doctorate diploma in person rather than through the mail. I had insisted that my mentor Dr. Edgar J. Boone (above photo, right) be seated with me. During the course of my doctoral studies, he had refused to allow me to fail. It was he who deserved accolades.

My trek through the doctoral gauntlet began with the encouragement of Professor Rikio Kimata of Soka University, Japan, who learned that I was living in Raleigh, North Carolina. "You are an educator, and you live in Raleigh, but you are not learning from Dr. Edgar Boone? Don't be foolish! Go learn from him!" he insisted. Not wanting to be foolish, I called Dr. Boone upon my return to Raleigh and made an appointment to meet with him.

Our first meeting in June 1995 was one that I'll never forget. Dr. Boone welcomed me warmly and asked about my goals. I told him I wanted to pursue my doctorate in adult and higher education administration under his tutelage. I outlined my goal of completing the program in two years, and informed him that I would have to do so while continuing to work full time. He asked about my health, age, family and philosophy regarding life and education.

I have never had the opportunity to be just a student in college. I have always had to work full time while supporting a family; therefore the idea of my working full time while pursuing my doctorate seemed natural. I was, however, approaching my fiftieth birthday and had been away from academic studies for more than fifteen years. My age was of concern to me, but Dr. Boone, who was approaching seventy, encouraged me by saying, "You are young with much still to accomplish!" As we continued our dialogue he said, "Mike, I will mentor you through this program, but if you fail to meet your goal it will not be my fault." I was to learn what he meant by that statement as we progressed through the program.

That first day we worked together to plot a course of study. We decided which courses I would complete. We also decided upon my dissertation topic. From that day on, I became the protégé of Dr. Edgar J. Boone. However, some details had to be attended to before I could be accepted into the program. First, I had to retake the Graduate Records Examination. I also had to take three courses and make an 'A' in all three to prove myself capable of becoming a doctoral candidate.

I was permitted to take only one course per semester while awaiting judgement on my acceptance into the program. I began research on my dissertation even though I had not yet been accepted. Dr. Boone encouraged me by saying: "Go into those classes and into your dissertation work as if you are a candidate. If you believe and act like a candidate, then the committee will believe it too!"

I challenged every course with excitement. I felt like I was twenty-something again! From every class I gained something that I could use. With each visit to the library, I gained something that I could apply. Every lecture, every discussion and every paper were geared to learning something new. Every cell in my body was focused toward accomplishing my goal.

In July 1996, I received acceptance into the doctoral program at North Carolina State University. I then began taking two courses per semester, and one or two each summer session.

In less than two years after having been accepted into the program, I was graduating. I sat proudly with my mentor in the stadium that day, graduating before my fifty-second birthday, having done so while maintaining my Buddhist practice, my work and my sanity. (The last is, according to some, questionable.)

The program usually takes three to four years to complete. What was it that enabled me to accomplish my goal and complete my doctorate in such a short time? First, I maintained my daily Buddhist practice of prayers and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and attended SGI activities. I fed on the encouragement provided by my fellow members. Our monthly Men's Division meetings were especially encouraging for me. Believe it or not, there were many points provided in the *World Tribune* and the *Living Buddhism* that helped me with my class papers and dissertation. The sources cited in SGI President Ikeda's speeches are great places to begin researching numerous topics in education. I recommend these highly to any student or researcher of education.

Second, my wife's full support and her powerful prayer enabled me to focus on my goal. It will take many lifetimes of dedicated practice to ever repay her. Many nights I did not come home at all, rather, spending time in the library, or in my office preparing papers and doing research. The neglect that she must have experienced is the one blemish on this otherwise beneficial accomplishment in my life.

Third, I had a mentor who did not accept failure. Every Monday morning for two years I was in Dr. Boone's office at 6:30 receiving his guidance as to what steps to take next in completing my program. Almost every morning he called me at 5:30 to ask me what I was doing that day to accomplish my goal. Every time we met, he reminded me of my commitment to myself and to my goal, and on each occasion he asked me about my health, family's well-being and work. He encouraged me to balance each of these in my life and use every moment as a learning moment.

So on that morning in May 1998, I sat in the stands, proud of what I had accomplished, but recognized that the accomplishment was due to the efforts of many. I was a graduate being celebrated, while those who had worked so diligently behind the scenes looked on. I realized that day that the lessons of my doctoral programs were not so much what had occurred in the classroom, but what had occurred through the process of this challenging experience, which had created change within my life. Some of the more important lessons that I learned are that a mentor takes extraordinary steps to teach and encourage a protégé — to affect the success of a protégé. If Dr. Boone called me at 5:30, that means that he was awake before me. He showed me with his life what it means to teach one human being the elements of victory. I saw in Dr. Boone concrete evidence of what President Ikeda teaches us all: a continuous striving to teach and encourage others to win. Although not a Buddhist by religious affiliation, his life enabled him to exhibit the compassion of his innate Buddha nature.

For every accomplishment in life there are those unseen heroes who propel the celebrated forward. Those who, although in the shadows, work diligently for the success of those who run the race, climb the mountain, or complete a doctoral program.

For every accomplishment in life there is challenge and struggle. No one wins a race by sitting in the stands. No one climbs a mountain by sitting beside the stream admiring the view. And no one completes a doctorate without dedicated and focused hard work.

Focused and consistent chanting works when it is based upon a goal and determined effort that is specific to fulfilling one's prayer for the accomplishment of that goal. Any time that I experienced a writing block or had difficulty focusing on a task for study or for work, I went to

the Gohonzon and chanted. On every occasion my life responded with the actions necessary for success.

Never assume that you can't. No matter what your age, your circumstances or your previous history of procrastination, shortsightedness or seeming stupidity (pardon me for transferring my history to you), determine that you can. Set your prayers and actions to accomplishing your goal, and you will.

Upon graduating I was told that I would never receive a promotion or be offered a job at any college or university in North Carolina as long as I am a Buddhist. However, for two years I co-taught a course with Dr. Boone at North Carolina State University. I am the head administrator for the North Carolina Department of Corrections where I manage the curriculum for criminal justice certification, providing classes in human relations, diversity, ethics and computer training. I was asked to present Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to the fifty-seven chaplains for the Department of Corrections. On my job, I have expanded an academy that was once housed in an abandoned prison into a five-campus academy with each campus having new facilities that serve the five regions of North Carolina. I have founded an international research institution and serve as its president: a loosely connected group of scholars who are interested in education's impact on people. We research and present papers at conferences. I use Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's educational theories as a basis for my research. Last year there were two members and this year there are sixteen.

I have participated as a panelist at interfaith seminars and presented perspectives of life and death based upon Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I am a member of one of North Carolina's Education and Training Standards Committees. I am being afforded so many opportunities to teach and learn. I experience the concept of teacher-as-student/student-as-teacher on a daily basis. I do not have to be employed by a college or university to exercise my skills as an educator.

President Ikeda has on more than one occasion stressed the noble concept that a university is not a place or set of buildings; rather it is anywhere that learning for the sake of humanity takes place. "Learning is the very purpose of human life..." he states in his recent views on education (*Living Buddhism*, February 2001, p. 15). He further states: "If we are to build a society that serves the essential needs of education in the twenty-first century, we must not become divided or isolated. Rather, we must deepen human bonds that transform differences" (Ibid., p. 18).

If a college or university does not come to me then I will go to the University of Humanity, and like Dr. Boone and President Ikeda, share my life with others in mutual learning experiences that transform differences and break through the barriers of bias.

Because I responded to one person who said "don't be foolish, go and learn," I have created new doors of opportunity in my life. Because I took action to seek out and listen to my mentor, I learned to open those doors. Because I challenged my life by setting a goal and praying for wisdom and strength of action to accomplish that goal, I have moved through those doors to create even newer doors. And because I practice in the SGI under the tutelage of President Ikeda, I can more readily see the true nature of things and take action to create harmony where there is dissonance and gain the trust of those with whom I work.

Every positive aspect of my doctoral studies is a direct result of my faith and practice in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism within the SGI-USA. More than the learning that took place in the classroom is the learning that took place in my life through the process of challenging myself. And because my faith and practice provided the determination to succeed, I have won this victory and accomplished an important goal in my life.

President Ikeda offered these words of encouragement (*World Tribune*, September 29, 2000, p. 12):

*Do not envy others; instead praise them!
Do not resent others; instead surpass them!
Summon your courage, and work cheerfully!
Do what needs to be done! Do it now!
Focus always on the present!
For only in the present exists eternity!
I am determined to apply these words to my life.*

In his poem “Soar ~ Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!” (*World Tribune*, August 11, 2000, pp. 6–7), President Ikeda also says:

*“More effectively than countless doctoral theses,
you are sharing with others the profound and subtle teachings of Buddhism.
Off in the distance, there may be those who criticize us with wan, foolish, sarcastic smiles.
Concealing the pain of their own hearts,
they watch with longing and envy
— our lives, shining with commitment and courage...
The malicious acts directed against us ...
only bring suffering upon their authors.*

The person who told me that as a Buddhist I would not be promoted or hired into a new job has since become my friend. He has attended several Buddhist meetings and chanted with me. That person has given me cause to rise above the bias and prejudice shown to me and to surpass it with cheerful courage.

I am eternally grateful to Professor Kimata, Dr. Boone, my wife Yoshiko, President Ikeda and my fellow SGI members. Without their support and encouragement, I may have let this goal remain a dream. I’m much too young not to have dreams and goals, but not too old to win.