

SOKA SPIRIT FIGHTING ON THE SIDE OF JUSTICE

The following is an interview on Soka Spirit between SGI-USA Young Women's Leader Wendy DeSouza (left) and Linnea Peery, a district leader in Los Angeles (right).

Wendy DeSouza: What were your first experiences with Soka Spirit?

Linnea Peery: I joined the SGI in 1990, right before Operation C was implemented. High Priest Nikken Abe was making statements that he would basically turn our Gohonzons off if we didn't practice directly with Nichiren Shoshu. That seemed so silly to me, and I figured it would be obvious to other people as well. But I wondered why people had to talk about this issue so much. I felt annoyed whenever I heard "temple", "Nikken" or "evil" at a meeting. I wanted to hear about being happy and creating peace — I couldn't see how the temple issue related to that.

Wendy: Was there an event or experience that inspired you to look further?

Linnea: I was at a meeting where I heard a youth leader share that fighting injustice is the quickest way to enlightenment. Something about the words "quick" and "enlightenment" must have appealed to my fondness for shortcuts. The next day, I began chanting for the victory of the SGI. I immediately experienced a change in my life condition. I felt like I had been in a fog that was beginning to clear. I started to realize that my perspective about my place in the organization and as a Bodhisattva of the Earth was really passive and counter to Buddhism.

Wendy: How so?

Linnea: I had unconsciously been assuming that other people would take care of this situation. These other people would chant about it and make it go away, while the rest of us could just tend to our lives and ride it out. The more I studied and sought to understand the meaning of Soka Spirit, I realized that I had been taking the existence of this great organization for granted. People were trying to destroy it and I was just waiting around! All I'd heard about equality among the practitioners of the Law and viewing this as my organization was finally making a connection in my brain. I *was* other people. If I didn't protect the organization, who would?

Wendy: What kind of action did you take?

Linnea: I didn't know any Nichiren Shoshu members, but I wanted other SGI members to appreciate how much we could learn and develop ourselves through understanding this issue. I continued to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo about it and participated in local Soka Spirit activities that were happening every month. I became the Soka Spirit representative for my district and determined to do a short presentation every month on the issue, be it through updates, what I had learned at a meeting or personal experiences. It was intimidating, but I felt it was too important

to be ignored.

Wendy: How did people respond?

Linnea: A couple of people came up to me and said they hadn't felt strongly about facing the issues surrounding Soka Spirit before, but now they wanted to chant about it. That encouraged me a lot. There were times when I felt like a lot of people didn't see what Soka Spirit had to do with their own lives, or they thought it was negative and didn't want to hear about it. I could certainly relate to those perspectives!

Wendy: How have those perspectives changed for you?

Linnea: For one thing, I started to see what's happening today in a historical context. The history of Buddhism is lined with efforts to block people's ability to practice Buddhism correctly and courageous people standing up to protect it. Nichiren Daishonin endured great persecutions but never stopped speaking out about the superiority of the Lotus Sutra. The first two Soka Gakkai presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, went to jail rather than accept a Shinto object of worship. Those instances may seem somewhat unreal to us because they happened before most of us were born. Actually, the current situation with Nichiren Shoshu is yet another function to keep the propagation of true Buddhism from advancing and we have to be the courageous people who stand up to protect it.

I find it upsetting that the Daishonin's teachings are twisted by those who have a personal agenda, but at the same time, I've come to appreciate it as a great opportunity. This is happening because it's time to take the advancement of kosen-rufu to a new level. Through understanding this issue, we can help people understand Buddhism on a deep level and become the most amazing people in our daily lives.

Wendy: I was talking with a young woman in San Diego who's very active in Soka Spirit activities. She mentioned that while a lot of young men seem to be active, she was having a hard time getting young women involved. When I asked her why, she said that although this is a generalization, young men tend to be passionate about fighting injustice. On the other hand, women seem hesitant about disrupting harmony or "rocking the boat." She felt that young women would get involved based on the idea of protecting people. We talked about the need to approach Soka Spirit at different angles so that we can reach everybody.

Linnea: I think that makes a lot of sense. I know facing conflicts can be a challenge for women because many of us want to be the peacemakers. That's certainly true for me. One thing I've learned from Soka Spirit is that compassion comes in many forms. I like this guidance from SGI President Ikeda where he says: "We have to speak out. With impassioned words, we need to resolutely attack abuses of power that cause people suffering. This is fighting on the side of justice. It is wrong to remain silent when confronted with injustice. Doing so is tantamount to supporting and condoning evil" (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 216).