

## YOUTH BLOSSOM IN NORTHEASTERN ZONE

**The following articles tell the stories of three young people who participated in the Northeastern Zone Family Youth Festival held on July 14 at Madison Square Garden Theater in New York City. We begin with words from a women's division member who made a determination to find young people in her community to get involved with the festival.**

### **CLAUDIA WELLINGTON, YONKERS, N.Y.**

South Yonkers is an international melting pot primarily consisting of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 — and it seems as if they are all on my street corner on Friday and Saturday nights! I often look at their bright faces, so full of hope for the future and wonder, “How can I reach them?”

It appears as though the city has given up on these young people. There are few organized activities, and the one neighborhood movie theater is closed. Many of the young men in the neighborhood gravitate toward street rivalries and many young women are single mothers.

I moved here four years ago and immediately felt this was where I could take a stand for world peace. I made friends with the local vendors through casual dialogue and by sending them New Year's greetings. I also befriended the residents of my apartment building, inviting them to SGI-USA meetings. They were polite, but the answer was always no. I had to reach out in a different way. It was time for me to actively take Buddhism out to the community, rather than asking the community to come to me.

When plans for the Northeastern Zone Family Youth Festival were announced, I felt this was a great opportunity to put SGI President Ikeda's guidance into action and fulfill my dream of fostering young people.

I chanted sincere daimoku. I was appointed my district's promotion leader for the festival. At our planning meeting, Miguel Paz, a father of two teenage girls, noted that whatever teens do, they want to feel there is something in it for them. He said the biggest attraction for this event was the fact that they would have the opportunity to perform on the stage at the Madison Square Garden Theater. We decided flyers would be a great way to promote the festival.

I hit the streets, putting up flyers on lampposts and talking to every young person I met. The flyers were torn down by the next morning, but undeterred, I put more up. I was on a mission!

When approached with flyers, neighborhood vendors responded enthusiastically. Almost every restaurant, deli, video store and grocery store I visited put flyers up in their business and promoted the festival for me. The local McDonald's even allowed me to promote inside their restaurant.

One afternoon, I got a call from one young man named Rafael Rodriguez. He was excited about the chance to perform in the festival.

When I went to rehearsals for the festival, I saw Buddhists and non-Buddhists rehearsing and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo together. Many guests readily joined the chanting sessions in a way that seemed as natural as breathing.

I also watched the leaders of the various performance groups encourage these young people in a friendly manner to use chanting to help them perform better. This is what I had always hoped—that somehow we could take the practice further away from the “talk” aspect and make it an immediate, personal and practical experience for guests.

The thing that is so fantastic about this entire experience is that, even though the festival is over, I still get calls from excited young people who have seen a flyer and say they have an act that they want to put on the stage. My dream is to one day hold a South Yonkers Youth Festival.

### **RAKSHANDA IFTIKHAR, 16, YONKERS, N.Y.**

I participated in the Family Youth Festival as part of the gymnastics group. It was such an exciting part of the show. It was wonderful for me to perform with my group in front of thousands of people. Whenever I see any type of show on television I love it, and I knew I wanted to do that, too. When I got this opportunity, I didn't let it go. I took advantage of it and learned so much, and I did it in front of people. I would like to show my appreciation to Claudia Wellington, who told us about the show and to all our group leaders who trained the performers.

I am not a Buddhist, but I liked it when everyone got together to chant. I felt it gave everyone the courage to do well. This show made us strong and gave everybody a chance to show their talent. In my opinion, it was the greatest show I had ever seen.

### **TIFFANY RODRIGUEZ, 11, YONKERS, N.Y.**

When my brother Rafael told me he was going to be in a show at Madison Square Garden, I told him I wanted to be in it too, so he took me with him to the next rehearsal.

I wanted to join the African dance troupe but it was already full. The gymnastics group was open, but I was not sure because I had never done gymnastics before. I was also worried that even if I did do gymnastics, I would not follow through and actually be in the show.

In the fourth grade, I had taken African dance and quit before the show went on stage because I was afraid people would boo or laugh at me. I was afraid the same thing would happen this time. I was also worried that it was too late—it was already the week before everything was supposed to start, but the gymnastics leader said to come anyway.

When I got to rehearsal, they were learning to do the wave. I had to watch and figure this out by myself. When I got in line, I asked the person next to me about how to do the wave and he gave me instructions. When you do the wave, the person next to you pulls you down, and you have to keep your feet hard on the ground. You feel like you are going to fall over, and you cannot bend your knees. I was really afraid I would mess up, and that people would laugh at me. I remembered what the leader said, “If you get nervous, just chant.” I had never chanted before, but I started chanting and I felt much better. I had more confidence in myself.

When we got on stage, it felt so good to have people clap for me. That was the first time I had gotten a lot of applause. I felt like I won. I am always afraid that people will boo at me or that I will not do anything right. When we did the wave and when I started chanting, I felt like I could do it. From now on, with anything I

have to do, I do not care what others think, I'll chant.

### **RAFAEL RODRIGUEZ, 19, YONKERS, N.Y.**

I have always dreamed about performing at Madison Square Garden, and I did it! I performed with the gymnastics team at the Northeastern Zone Family Youth Festival. When we walked into Madison Square Garden the day of the show, I said to my sister who also performed in the show: "Tiffany, touch that door! That's the door that \*N Sync and the Backstreet Boys walked through! Now we're touching it!" This was my dream, and it had come true!

I saw a sign on a lamppost in my neighborhood that said, "Performers wanted for a show at Madison Square Garden." I talked to Claudia Wellington, who told me about the show. She said that Buddhists were sponsoring it, but that we didn't have to be Buddhist to be in it. She said to just come and have some fun and to bring a friend if I wanted to. She told me to be at her house the following Saturday morning at 8:30, but I was so excited, I got there at 8:00!

At my first rehearsal, I heard people chanting. Claudia wrote the words Nam-myoho-renge-kyo on a sheet of paper and encouraged me to try it. It was strange at first, but I always like to try new things, so I chanted a little bit.

Because I had written a couple of songs and had recorded a demo record, I joined the chorus, but when I saw guys flying through the air and building human pyramids, I knew gymnastics was for me! I like to be active and I like to move a lot. We practiced really hard, sometimes in the sun and through hot weather.

Three days before the show, things started to go wrong. I was working out in a gym and I hurt my big toe. I called Claudia to tell her I couldn't be in the show, but she encouraged me not to give up. Then I learned that my father, whom I hadn't seen in many years, was in rehab. The day I was to see him was the day of the show. I called Claudia again and told her I couldn't be in the show, but she reminded me that since I had not seen my father in so many years, another day would not make any difference. She reminded me of the promise I had made to myself to appear on the stage at Madison Square Garden. I agreed to do the show because I did not want to give up on my dream.

The night before the last rehearsal, I came down with a high fever. I took a shower to cool off and while I was in the shower, I remembered a little girl at rehearsal who said she had come down with a high fever once and had chanted and her fever had gone away, so I started chanting in the shower. My fever was gone the next morning. I thought, "Whoa! This chanting really works!"

On the day of the show, we were practicing the pyramid. I was on the first level. When you build the pyramid, people step on you and the weight is heavy. As we were trying to lift the pyramid, one of the guys in my group said he was afraid he could not hold all the weight. I told him, "Don't think about the weight. Just chant, and you can do it." I could not believe I was the one encouraging another person to chant when I had only chanted a couple of times myself!

After the show, people clapped for us and congratulated us. I had never experienced that before and it felt great. My mother came to watch the show and she was so happy. She encouraged me to work hard so that maybe I could do it again one day.

Sometimes I doubt myself and give up trying because I'm afraid I will mess up or

because I'm afraid things will not happen for me. With chanting, I can see my whole life clearer and I know I can do whatever I want to do.

When I got home after the show, my friends asked me where I had been all day. When I told them I had performed at Madison Square Garden, they could not believe it! The next morning, I got eight of my friends together in my living room and we built a pyramid based on the instructions I got from the show. I told my friends to chant and they would be able to do it. My fiancée Liz even showed my friends how to chant. We are going to keep rehearsing because I want us to do our pyramid at the New York Culture Center soon!