

EXCHANGE MEETING IMPRESSIONS

MARK WOODS, CHICAGO

One of the major highlights of my participation in this year's youth training course was attending the exchange meeting. All of the 41 American youth were separated into four groups and each attended a different local meeting in Tokyo. My particular meeting in the Minato Ward began with a brief tour of several historic Soka Gakkai sites, including the grade school where first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi taught, as well as the original offices of the Soka Gakkai.

Afterward, we were taken to a local restaurant owned by a Soka Gakkai member and were treated to a delicious meal. During our dinner we had the opportunity to hold a dialogue with several local youth members. Being a Gajokai member, I was encouraged to find that several of the youth there were also Gajokai members. I even had the opportunity to meet the local Gajokai and Soka Group leaders. Their sincerity and warmth moved me.

After dinner, we were taken to a local community center where we were blown away by the enthusiastic reception from the Japanese members. Bright smiles and thunderous applause greeted us as we made our way into the Gohonzon room. Realizing the members had made every effort to ensure our comfort and warm welcome, we took our seats and began to chant appreciative daimoku. After gongyo and a brief introduction, the meeting began with an inspiring experience by a local young women's division member. Her sincerity and determination encouraged me as she recounted her personal struggles. Next we were honored with a beautiful dance performance by the women's division members.

As I watched the faces of the women in the audience, I was reminded of my mother's struggle to help me build my own faith. Tears flooded my eyes as I realized that my practice, as well as that of my family, was a direct result of the efforts of these courageous pioneers. Through their expressions of compassion and sincerity, I could clearly feel SGI President Ikeda's heart.

I felt an immediate connection to every member present. And despite the differences in culture and language, I felt as if I was at home. At the end of the meeting we were flooded with gifts and well wishes. Several members approached me to shake hands or embrace. Although we could not communicate clearly with words, the messages we sent through our hearts were crystal clear. Several Boys and Girls Group members also approached me. Their courageous and joyful spirit thrilled me. As we began to leave, I made a determination to bring their compassion back to the United States and share it with my members. Furthermore, I determined to repay their sincerity with a revitalized sense of dedication to fight to advance the American kosen-rufu movement that they and our mentor, President Ikeda, have fought to establish.

RENEE L. RICHARDS, HARTFORD, CONN.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to the Shinjuku Honjin District members for the wonderful dinner, inspiring musical and dance performances, as well as the amazing experience given by a member of the Soka Gakkai Doctor's

Division during the exchange meeting.

The hospitality the SGI-USA youth group received during the exchange meeting was the most beautiful display of camaraderie I have ever experienced. I was humbled by the members' attention to detail in planning for our arrival. They were thoughtful enough to even provide shoe compartments for us, labeled with each participant's name.

During the course of the meeting, the SGI-USA youth taught the Japanese members a cheer, which they performed with enthusiasm. As we exchanged gifts with the Japanese members and their guests, the SGI-USA youth emphasized that these gifts were an extension of our friendship and also an encouragement to visit us someday in America. The gifts we received from the Japanese members reflected their efforts to unite with President Ikeda and create a global solidarity within SGI and the world.

Once the meeting had officially ended, the SGI-USA youth met with the Japanese youth and shared our experiences and favorite passages from Nichiren Daishonin's writings. We also exchanged e-mail addresses with the promise to keep in contact. As we were leaving the district meeting, the Japanese members gave us sandwiches and fruit for a late night snack.

The tremendous efforts demonstrated by the SGI-USA youth and the Japanese members to care for and cherish each other during the exchange meeting is testimony to how we, as disciples of President Ikeda, have grasped our mentor's vision to devote ourselves to kosen-rufu through united bonds of friendship and trust. President Ikeda stated at the headquarters leaders meeting we attended that one of our greatest treasures should be the bond of friendships we create within the SGI and throughout the world. I am confident that one of my greatest treasures will always be the time I spent with the members of the Shinjuku Honjin District.