

TRAILBLAZERS!
MAKING AN IMPACT THROUGH LISTENING
BY MAGGIE EISENBERG, SAN FRANCISCO

The morning of Sept. 11, I awoke to the shocking sounds of live radio coverage in New York after the second tower of the World Trade Center was hit. I went to an early morning constitutional law class right before the school was shut down. My professor arrived a few minutes late, thanked us for showing up, said that what just happened would change our lives forever, and that he thought we should all go home and be with our friends and families as he did not feel a lecture on the Constitution was relevant under the circumstances. I spent the next few hours with a classmate, watching television and trying to digest what I was seeing. We talked at length about how deeply upsetting it all was, and when she left I sat down to chant. A couple of days later, when I saw my friend again, she told me how glad she had been to spend those few hours with me because she respected my opinions and appreciated my ability to listen.

Listening is one of the most important, yet often overlooked elements of dialogue. Without listening, there can be no true exchange. Some time ago, I noticed that sometimes when I talked to people, I listened passively. I heard what they were saying to me, but I did not really take it in and think about it. My responses at those times were mechanical and shallow, or sometimes I did not even know what to say because I was not truly listening. Sometimes it was that I was preoccupied with other things. But I think I was actually so self-conscious and worried about what I should say, that I was unable to take in other people's lives and what they were saying to me.

When we were preparing for the Northern California Zone Family Youth Festival, one young women's division activity group leader made a simple yet profound observation. She expressed her concern that several of us were getting so caught up in the logistics of the festival that we were forgetting to really talk to each other. She noticed that she had been saying to people, "How are you?" and not really listening or even waiting for a response. Or if the person's response was, "Fine," she would just leave it at that instead of making sure that person really was fine.

"What is the most important point in conducting dialogue? It is to be a good listener. Though seemingly simple, listening well is actually quite difficult. The ancient Greek philosopher Zeno said, 'Two ears to one tongue, therefore hear twice as much as you speak'" (SGI President Ikeda, *Faith Into Action*, p. 184). Listening is the only real way to share this Buddhism with others. No matter how profound one's words are, or how eloquently she can explain the amazing philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, people will not want to listen to her if she does not listen to them. The only way to touch a person's life, and to make an impact, is first to listen to that person.