

EXPERIENCE—SARAH BRETZ, SAN DIEGO LIVING PROOF: AFTER THE CRASH

Sarah Bretz says, ‘I have had to start my life completely over.’

It is truly the wondrous power of the Mystic Law that enables me to tell you my story, told to me by other people, because I remember nothing of what happened on the day that changed my life.

I have been practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism for 12 years. I practiced in Santa Barbara, Berkeley, Calif., and Washington, D.C., before I moved to San Diego in February 1997. I moved there to be with my fiancée and began working out of my home as a researcher, in the field of energy efficiency in climate change prevention, for my employer in Berkeley. It was a benefit of my practice to bring my job with me.

My fiancée worked on Shelter Island, and we sailed a lot together. We were fortunate enough to buy a condo right in the Shelter Island area where housing was limited. At the time we bought the condo, he helped with the down payment but would not be on the title, something that later turned out to be a benefit.

During this time, I participated in SGI-USA activities as a young women’s chapter leader. My fiancée supported my Buddhist practice and activities, but had no interest in practicing Buddhism or attending a meeting. But because I was committed to my practice and knew that the law of cause and effect is tremendously strong, I put my practice ahead of other demands. I was fairly happy and my life was going well, but I continued struggling to make causes for my future.

My fiancée liked old cars. He had a 1950 Ford sedan and a 1956 Mercedes convertible. After I sold my own car, I usually drove his Ford to meetings. However, on a Saturday morning in May 1999, it was having mechanical difficulties, so I decided to drive the Mercedes, which had been rebuilt recently, but hadn’t been driven in many years.

That Saturday I volunteered during the May contribution campaign to be a receptionist at the San Diego Community Center and was on the way there when the Mercedes suddenly stopped in the fourth lane of the 163 Freeway for an unknown reason. A driver, who did not see me, hit me from behind at full speed. As a result of the impact, I was thrown from the convertible and hit my head on the pavement. The crash happened right in front of Sharp Memorial Hospital, so I received immediate medical attention.

My brain injury was critical, and surgery needed to be performed immediately. It so happened one of the best surgeons in the field was at the hospital that day, although he was not scheduled to be there. The hospital contacted my fiancée about my accident, but said I might not be alive when he arrived at the hospital. My father was also contacted. When he arrived at the hospital, he had to make the life-and-death decision about the surgery that risked leaving me in a vegetative state. However, if he did not give permission, he was told I would probably not survive for more than half an hour.

At the time of my surgery, several districts in my chapter were having their discussion meetings when they heard about my accident. They were told my surgery might take nine hours. A leader at one meeting encouraged the members to chant for me. She asked them to offer this prayer to the Gohonzon, “Sarah, fight for your life, fight for your life,” with every daimoku. Everyone started chanting for me, and by the time the meeting was over,

the surgery was finished. It lasted less than three hours. Everyone found out that my surgery was a success.

But I was still in danger. They needed to keep me in an induced coma to keep the pressure down in my brain. I was in a coma for about three weeks. SGI-USA members, especially the youth, immediately started a 24-hour chanting session. Youth in other cities and states were contacted and were also chanting for me. Their prayers were penetrating my life. The members refused to let me die.

During the following month, members continued to chant and pray for me. When I came out of my coma, friends visited me in the hospital and chanted with me, which was very thoughtful and did me a lot of good. My family and fiancée, although they did not practice Buddhism, were very impressed by the sincerity and support of the members. They welcomed their visits. They seemed to understand that somehow chanting was working for me.

Within two months, I was out of the hospital, and my recovery was coming along better than expected for someone suffering from such a severe injury.

I am presently in school in the Acquired Brain Injury Program at Mesa College, one of the best in the nation. I take different classes in memory strategy, redevelopment of self-identity and vocational training. The students really encourage me, and they are amazed I am doing so well.

However, recovering from my injury has been very difficult. Although my practice makes it easier, I am still disabled in ways that others may not recognize. I have problems with memory and staying focused and am still not able to drive. These are just a few of my daily challenges now, which are symptoms of a frontal lobe injury. However, considering the doctors had to remove part of my brain, I am extremely fortunate to be alive with no physical injury — just a small scar covered by my hair.

In the last year and a half since my accident, I have had to start my life completely over. I have had to rebuild my self-identity. The strain this had on my relationship was more than my fiancée could handle, and we are no longer together. Our breakup was very difficult for me to cope with, but because of my practice, I know it was for the best.

There have been many difficulties involving finances and lawsuits regarding the accident, but I keep having victories with the Gohonzon. I thought for sure I would lose my condo, but I've been able to hold on to it. After chanting for victory in legal matters, the hospital, which had a \$200,000 lien on me, settled for just \$200.

One thing I have learned from this is if it hadn't been for all the efforts I made in my Buddhist practice before the accident, things would not be as good as they are now. I would not be recovering as quickly, but most importantly, I would not even be alive. I hope that through my experience, others will realize that from one day to the next, we never know our destiny. To make good causes whenever possible is so important.

In "The Three Kinds of Treasure," Nichiren Daishonin says: "Buddhism teaches that when the Buddha nature manifests itself from within, it will obtain protection from without. This is one of its fundamental principles" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 848).

I am so appreciative of all the support I have received from my SGI family. I also received some gifts from SGI President Ikeda when I was in the hospital, which I will always cherish. I will also cherish the scrapbook members put together to encourage me. I have a card from the members I keep on my altar, and I am returning prayers to those who chanted for me.

I cannot express how grateful I am to be an SGI member and have found the Gohonzon in this lifetime. I owe my life to this practice.

I am thankful for the opportunity to rehabilitate through the Acquired Brain Injury Program because I want to develop my endurance for working and making sure that I do it thoroughly. In the future, I am looking forward to working in the field of energy efficiency in climate change prevention once again. I am currently working with an adjustment counselor who has helped place me for a volunteer position in the medical library at Sharp Hospital and will eventually help me find a job.

By the way, I have a new boyfriend who loves and cares for me.

I thank everyone so much, including those I don't even know, who have prayed for me and continue to support me. I will always stick with the SGI organization and do my utmost for world peace.