

EXPERIENCE—KORY JAMES, LOS ANGELES FREE FROM THE CYCLE OF DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

Kory James overcomes his depression and chants to change his family's mental health in the 'preceding seven generations and the seven generations that follow.'

Based on my family's mental health history, I feel I was genetically predisposed to suicidal thoughts and depression. I was 9 when my mother experienced severe depression after she divorced my father, an elder minister in the Jehovah's Witness religion. She had believed that her marriage was going to last forever and could not cope with it breaking up; doctors told us later that she had a bio-chemical disorder and was prescribed anti-depressants for years afterward.

When I was 19, my father committed suicide; he had experienced mental problems during the last six months of his life. After his death, I found out that he had been diagnosed with a chemical imbalance and that he had refused to take any medication. For many years I blamed myself for not being able to save his life.

I believe my own depression was triggered full force around age 11, when I accidentally hurt my friend while playing on a teeter-totter. My friend's parents were extremely angry and my mother sided with them. Afterward, hopelessness and depression consumed my life; not only did I feel miserable about hurting my friend, I was not allowed to ever see him again or bring closure to this accident.

Being raised as a Jehovah's Witness, I was discouraged from becoming too close with other children because they were "worldly" and part of an evil system that was going to be destroyed at Armageddon. As a result, I never made many friends. For much of my childhood I felt alone, an outcast.

Another major depression hit me at age 17 after I moved in with my dad and I realized I was gay. This went against everything I was raised to believe as a Jehovah's Witness. I tried for a while to hide from it, but couldn't and began to believe that I did "have a black heart" as the Bible says homosexuals do.

At 18, I attempted suicide. I believed I was just going to die at Armageddon anyway, so I might as well take care of it now. I was so tired of living a lie and feeling worthless.

When I woke up three days later, my sister was sitting on the side of my hospital bed. She asked how I was; I just cried, wishing I had died.

Soon after I was released from the hospital, I made a determination to never again allow a religion or anyone else's ideas to cause me to deny who I was. I began to embrace my true self.

But this was just the beginning. I had gotten in touch with a major problem that caused me pain but I still had to deal with the fear, guilt and depression I felt about being gay and abandoning the religion in which I was raised.

Somehow I managed to get through my father's suicide and my identity crisis by hiding my depression and pretending to be the life of the party wherever I went. But I knew I was my own worst enemy. I was afraid of myself, afraid that the negative part of me would kill me one night when I was weak.

As a defense mechanism to hide from my reality, I began to live recklessly. I had gotten into a relationship with a girl that I had met at a party one night. Though she knew I was

gay, she didn't care. I moved in with her and all we did most of the time was have wild parties until police showed up.

By age 24, I knew I could no longer deal with my depression alone and had to face my life. I began to see a clinical psychologist who prescribed anti-depressants for me. I didn't like how they made me feel—actually, I didn't feel anything. It was as if I was just existing, as if I was emotionless, so I just stopped taking them after a few months. I also stopped seeing the therapist.

In the early '80s, my Aunt Barbra, who had a history of depression and attempted suicide, began chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. She had overcome depression and a heart condition. She told me about Buddhism, but I never gave it much thought, figuring it was one of the many weird things that my aunt did. I later found out that even though my aunt was receiving many benefits from her practice of Buddhism, she was afraid to tell me too much about it for fear of angering my mother, still a practicing Jehovah's Witness.

In early 1986, a friend, who had just begun to chant, introduced me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism once again. She said that if I chanted I could become happy. I thought about my Aunt Barbra and how much her life had changed. At this point, I was ready to do about anything.

I began chanting and received the Gohonzon on June 28, 1986. Eventually, as I continued to chant, I began feeling less and less suicidal. I started noticing that my depression would last for shorter and shorter periods of time.

After a few months, I got connected with other SGI members and began practicing in a district.

Three months later, I moved out of my girlfriend's place, realizing that we were just together because it was comfortable. I started being true to myself, being honest about my sexuality. Before I became a Buddhist, I really had no hope of a happy life.

One reason I found Buddhism attractive was because it emphasized absolute equality. There were no rules or tenets against being gay. It was the first and only philosophy I had found that encouraged me to accept myself and taught me that I am pure just as I am.

SGI President Ikeda has been an endless source of encouragement for me: "Just as cherry, plum, peach and damson blossoms all possess their own unique qualities, each person is unique. We cannot become someone else. The important thing is that we live true to ourselves and cause the great flower of our lives to blossom. ... The Buddhist way of life is to grow each day, accomplishing more today than yesterday and more tomorrow than today" (*Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 1, p. 109).

Through constant struggle and challenging myself every day to chant as much as possible, I was able to break free of my cycle of depression and suicidal thoughts. But this did not happen overnight, and I constantly had to remember to never give up. I also realized that suicide is a very selfish act, and I could never cause my brother the anguish of having both his father and brother commit suicide.

As I said, I believe I have a genetic predisposition to depression and have decided to take responsibility to change my family karma. "Buddhism is the supreme medicine," President Ikeda writes. "The Daishonin says that the benefit of faith extends to the 'preceding seven generations and the seven generations that follow'" (*Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 139).

For some time now, I have been chanting for my family's health and well-being—especially my parents'. I wrote a vow as follows: "I am relentlessly showing actual proof

of my amazing Buddha life! Through my compassion I have completely transformed every family member's karma — spiritually, physically and materially.”

Through chanting, not only have I transformed my own depression, I have made a determination to create great change in my family. Already my mother's health has turned around.

I feel so fortunate to be part of the SGI-USA. If I hadn't started chanting when I did, I would not be alive today to know what a beautiful and exciting adventure life is.