

## EXPERIENCE—JUNKO SIGMON AND JENNIFER OBIDAH, ATLANTA LEARNING THE VALUE OF APPRECIATION

**After suffering the loss of a loved one, Junko Sigmon befriends fellow member Jennifer Obidah — and they learn the value of appreciation from each other.**

**Junko Sigmon:** In 1995, I lost my son, Bobby. He was 19 years old. At first, I didn't feel like living anymore. I struggled a great deal with his death, but through chanting and reading SGI President Ikeda's guidance, I resolved that I would not be defeated. I would make it my mission to become a person who encourages others.

Before every meeting, I would chant for such an opportunity. I challenged myself to smile at every person at the meeting and tried to think of what I could do or say to encourage him or her. When they left the meeting, my wish was that they were glad they came, and that they were encouraged to fight against whatever difficulties they were facing.

I made this determination not only because of the encouragement I received from President Ikeda, but because of the support I received from the leaders and members during my most difficult time. I wanted to give something back. I would pray, "Give me the chance to say one word to someone that will encourage him or her." It was during this time that I met Jennifer.

**Jennifer Obidah:** I came to Peachtree District after the geographical reorganization of the SGI-USA in Atlanta. I had been in Atlanta for over a year, one of the most difficult years of my Buddhist practice. I did not feel as though I fit in and felt at odds with my leaders. Unlike the past, I would leave every meeting feeling uptight and angry. I was discouraged, except when I attended the Peachtree District meetings. I felt more at home there than anywhere else, but I was still reluctant to get close to anyone in the district.

There was a little Japanese woman who, after every meeting, would talk to me. She just talked. I would say hi, and she would begin to give me guidance as if I asked her something. At first, I politely listened, but then I would get annoyed because she just kept talking. This woman was Junko.

**Junko:** When I saw Jennifer, I could see that she was not happy, and sometimes she even seemed angry. I decided that I would talk to her, but when I tried to have a conversation with her, she did not really appreciate it. She seemed to think that no one understood her. I would speak and she would nod politely but I could see that she was not really listening. This made me feel even more that I wanted to talk to her.

After a while, I began to feel that she didn't like me, so I started to chant for her. However, the more I chanted about her, the more things arose that I wanted to talk to her about. It didn't matter to me whether she liked me or not, I just wanted to talk to her.

**Jennifer:** Junko never gave up. I knew that I was not encouraging her to talk to me. In fact, I was hoping that she would stop, but short of being rude, I could not stop her.

Then at one meeting, I learned that we were born on the same day, June 18. That intrigued me so much that I began to be nicer to her. I started to appreciate that she was

never deterred by my attitude and always had an encouraging word for me.

These exchanges between Junko and me continued for about six months. Then in December, our district decided that we would give presents to each other. All the names of the district members were placed in a bag and the name that you picked out was the person to whom you gave a gift. Oddly enough, I picked Junko's name. By this time, I felt such a strong sense of gratitude toward her for caring so much about me, I wanted to give something back.

I like making gifts and wanted to make one for Junko. I made a card and a plaque with a quote from President Ikeda that reads, "Sometimes a single kind word can change a person's whole attitude." This quote said everything I felt about Junko's efforts to encourage me. It takes a person with courage to talk to someone, even when they can see that that person really doesn't want to talk to them. Through her actions, Junko taught me what real courage is about.

**Junko:** I was very surprised when Jennifer picked my name, and shocked when I later read the quote on the plaque. I consider those gifts to be treasures. I also felt that this was proof that my determination was working. I appreciated Jennifer giving me the chance to grow in my practice.

After a while, Jennifer's whole attitude changed. She was happier. She volunteered more in the meetings, started to study more and extended herself in the organization. I enjoyed seeing her grow. Two years later, Jennifer joined the women's division, and soon after, she became the district leader.

**Jennifer:** I was in awe of the responsibility of a district leader, but the district supported the decision and I determined to do my best. My first goal was to visit every member of the district. Not surprisingly, Junko was the first one I visited.

From the moment I walked in, Junko's home was like a sanctuary. It felt so comfortable, like I had been visiting her for years. I sat at her kitchen counter as she cooked for me, and we talked and laughed like dear old friends.

Before I left we did evening gongyo together. As we entered her Gohonzon room, she pulled out the card and plaque that I had given her two years earlier. That was the first time she told me about her determination and what the quote meant to her.

**Junko:** Jennifer's gifts, and her friendship, are my treasures because they represent something I learned from my son. Bobby taught me how to appreciate life. I appreciate others, my challenges and my victories. With this appreciation, together with the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and my friends in the SGI, I am encouraged every day.