

HONORING OUR PIONEERS—KAZUE ELLIOT, LOS ANGELES ACHIEVING HAPPINESS WITH A LIFELONG CHALLENGING SPIRIT

Kazue Elliot shares some of her experiences after 45 years of practice: her family's introduction to the Soka Gakkai, meetings with second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda and learning the importance of reaching out to the community.

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I joined the Soka Gakkai in August 1954. I was visiting a friend when a Soka Gakkai member, Mr. Ishi-zuka, came to talk to my friend about Buddhism. I said to him, "If it's such a great religion, why don't you ask my mother to practice?" And that was the beginning.

At that time, my mother had a very serious paralysis due to a brain hemorrhage. I was a nurse at the time and I knew her case was hopeless. I had become a nurse to help support my financially struggling family.

When I got home that evening, I was surprised that Mr. Ishizuka was there talking to my mother. He was a person of pure heart who simply wanted to tell others about Buddhism, unconcerned with any self-interest.

That same night, after talking to Mr. Ishizuka, my mother managed to get into a taxicab and go to a discussion meeting. She took a bus on her way home, without any help from others. When she returned home, to my surprise, she was walking around in front of me. Shortly after this, we received the Gohonzon. Soon my mother's condition improved even more and my sister who was disabled was able to enjoy a normal life as well. My family's actual proof deepened my faith in the practice, and I did a lot of *shakubuku*—introducing others to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I found out later that Mr. Ishizuka, to whom we owe so much, could not read or write. He learned how to do gongyo through listening to others do it. Mr. Ishizuka was nicknamed a *mannen hanchō*, or permanent group leader, as he remained forever in the same position in the organization. He was a true treasure of our organization.

My mother, my sister and I were surrounded by members who were warm and sincere like Mr. Ishizuka. They taught us first of all to practice with a pure heart, the most important thing in faith.

On hot summer days, my mother used to send me out to get ice cubes so that we could offer cold ice water to the Gohonzon. On cold winter days, she placed a portable brazier in front of the altar and said, "Gohonzon, please keep yourself warm."

One day, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Having seen me so downhearted when I got home from the hospital, my mother simply said, "Chant daimoku." Her faith in the Gohonzon gave me a bright ray of hope and I was eventually able to overcome the illness.

Before coming to the United States, I was able to attend some of the famous Q-and-A meetings with second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. While attending one of the meetings, my group leader pushed me into raising my hand to ask a question. To my surprise, the moderator called on me. Timidly, I said: "I've just gotten married and I am going to America soon. What should I do to introduce Americans to Buddhism?"

The guidance I received from President Toda at that time has remained a treasure

throughout my life. “Instead of saying something difficult,” he said, “make sure to teach the greatness of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.”

President Toda’s guidance never failed to convey his earnest determination to use Buddhism to save others. I feel the same determination from SGI President Ikeda whenever I see him. They are indeed inseparable; a great example of the oneness of mentor and disciple.

I believe that this sincere, warm and caring heart to save people is the SGI’s eternal core, something we must never lose.

We are now embarking on the Century of Hope, the Century of Women and the Century of America. I want to express my appreciation for President Ikeda’s deep consideration for us at this special time. For my part, I’m determined to reach further out into the community.

The Golden Stage Group—SGI-USA members who are 60 and older—is proud of its “lifelong challenging” spirit. It took me eight years to graduate from high school in the United States, and by then I was 47 years old. It took me 10 years to be accredited as a flower arrangement instructor and 15 years to be accredited as a tea ceremony instructor. I am presently in charge of a monthly tea ceremony class at the SGI-USA’s Los Angeles Friendship Center. I began these activities not merely as hobbies, but as cultural activities for the kosen-rufu movement. Through these activities I have made many friends and done my best to expand the general public’s understanding of the SGI.

The Golden Stage Group is one of the treasures of the SGI-USA. Every time I meet pioneer members across the country, I cannot help but be deeply moved because I know the personal history of each one’s struggle. I believe that every one of them has paved a path for kosen-rufu, overcoming obstacle after obstacle.

I believe leaders must not regress, full of complaints and jealousy. Haughty and arrogant leaders who cannot support the growth of others are problems for the SGI organization. We must become people full of appreciation and courage so that we are able to support every single member.

At the beginning of every year, President Ikeda says he is going to fight 10 times harder than before, 100 times harder than before. This has always been such an inspiration to me. President Ikeda is 73 years old, the same age as first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi was when he passed away. And yet, President Ikeda is still vigorously leading our movement with the force of a lion. He is indeed our eternal model for practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism, showing us how to live with a lifelong challenging spirit.