

**SGI-USA FAMILY YOUTH FESTIVALS
TRUE HEROES EMERGE FROM NORTHEAST FESTIVAL
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What is a true hero?" This was the compelling question that propelled the SGI-USA Northeastern Zone Family Youth Festival, titled "Heroes of Life, Champions of Humanity," held July 14 at the Theater at Madison Square Garden in New York City. More than 1,000 Northeastern Zone youth members and friends from New York, New Jersey and New England presented two electrifying performances, and more than 10,000 SGI members and their guests filled the theater to cheer on the youthful performers.

Certificates of honorary citizenship signed by Virginia Fields, president of the Borough of Manhattan, were awarded to SGI President and Mrs. Ikeda. They were the first such honors given in the borough's history.

During the performance, ten fictional superheroes searched through the real world to find what it means to be a true hero. Through a series of 12 scenes, they journeyed through different cultures and environments, encountering the obstacles that young people face today. With an explosion of music and creativity that bridged hip-hop dance, African dance, step dance, modern dance, orchestral performance, singing and rap, the festival created a modern tapes-try of culture and art.

Gradually the scenes expanded from America to a global scale, with a passionate and moving dance based on the life of assassinated advocate against child labor, Iqbal Masih. When the "Pyramids of Humanity" emerged, formed by a gymnastics team, the stage was transformed to create the "Rhythm of Peace." The chorus and the orchestra beautifully accented the performers throughout the show, charging them with energy and vitality. While three teenage members shared their essays about the heroes in their family, modern dancers entered behind them and emphasized their stories with dramatic flair. At each show, a Boys and Girls Group chorus brought cheers and shouts of joy from the audience. At the conclusion of each performance, audience members and performers sang "Ode to Joy" together as the youth orchestra played.

Eleven-year old modern dancer Maya Ono noted: "The audience was amazing. We could feel their support all the time." Cynthia McCole, a Boston member, commented, "Today's performance gave me confidence that the youth are ready to carry the banner of the SGI-USA forward!"

For weeks, youth members and friends throughout the Northeast chanted and poured all their energy into creating original performances. Men's and women's division members supplied countless meals for performers, sewed costumes and provided transportation for rehearsals.

The day before the festival, the young performers rehearsed well into the night at a local high school in temperatures exceeding 95 degrees. Despite the heat and long hours, they united and determined to perform their best. SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima encouraged the youth, proclaiming, "Let's change the history of our movement through this festival!"

Hours before the festival, as lines formed around the theater, young men in blue shirts appeared on every corner, holding signs, directing sidewalk traffic and answering questions. The welcoming committee presented live music and costumed dancers, who flowed onto the city streets, causing passers-by to pause and wonder aloud, "What's going

on in there?”

In his closing speech, Dean Lawrence Carter of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College called the festival an “outpouring of joy and creativity.” Emphasizing spirituality, empathy and nonviolence, he urged those concerned about improving the world to “be the change you wish to see.”

While hundreds of SGI-USA youth had a great festival experience, so did about 10 percent of the performers who were members’ friends. They and their families were able to learn more about the SGI and President Ikeda.

The festival participants learned that those who struggle to improve themselves in their daily lives are all true heroes. Alphonzo Terrell, 18, a Brass Band leader from Boston, noted, “Because of this festival, we learned to unite and become a community.” Hip-hop dancer Jason Horton, 16, added, “If we can do this, we can do anything.”