

EXPERIENCE—LARRY JONES, FORT SMITH, ARK. USING PRAYER TO WIN

Larry Jones learns the power of chanting for his students with determination.

Five years after I started practicing Buddhism, I began teaching in my hometown of Fort Smith, at Northside High School and have continued for the last 25 years. By the mid-1980s I took on the assignments of teaching Advanced Placement classes and coaching the school's academic Quiz Bowl competition team.

I found both activities exciting because they gave me more than just a calendar to complete.

The AP classes involved getting students ready to take a College Board exam at the end of the year. The Quiz Bowl competition involved preparing students for tournaments where they would answer questions with difficulty levels approaching college graduate curriculum. Each year, both programs measured the success of our efforts in an immediate sense by pass/fail and win/loss.

However, when competing, I did not wish to teach students merely how to defeat others. The challenge was to inspire students to develop themselves to the best of their own abilities and measure that against an ultimate standard of excellence. I would often share passages from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and SGI President Ikeda's guidance to inspire them.

At different times of the year, the time commitment would be so consuming that I would worry about not being able to attend many SGI-USA meetings. I was reassured by several of my leaders that I should consider my commitments to the school programs as my arena where I can fight for kosen-rufu and fulfill my mission. My job in education was not competing with my time for SGI-USA activities, but rather the avenue to demonstrate actual proof and spread the humanistic ideals of our faith.

Since we've started the Quiz Bowl program, we have won eight state championships and numerous other regional titles. It was after our first state win and visit to the national tournament in Chicago in 1988, that I completely rethought my approach to teaching. I realized how much more could be learned if teachers would be willing to put out the effort and trust the capabilities of students.

I revamped my lecture classes and initiated a thorough Quiz Bowl training program starting at the first of the year rather than waiting until spring. I realized that a nationally competitive team could not be built in one year; it takes at least three. I also learned the value of older team members setting the right example.

I have been very fortunate that my wife, Aida, is completely supportive. My son, Neil, who grew up watching Quiz Bowl teams train over the years at our house, eventually played on the team, helping us to place eighth nationwide.

In 1993, our school won the national tournament. While it was clearly due to our training and preparation, it was also due to the enthusiasm of a few devoted team members. Once they were gone, it was difficult to build a team with their same commitment. I believe this was due to my complacency in expecting future members to be automatically as dedicated. I had to learn what it meant to seek out and build capable people and keep the legacy alive.

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Fortunately, there were some very enthusiastic students each of the following years, who took to heart the dream of being champions. I would share the statement of Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox who was known to say that he trained so hard because he wanted folks to someday say of him “there goes the best there ever was.”

In 1999, having worked harder than ever before, we placed second in the state competition. After raising such a united and dedicated group, I was deeply disappointed, but we were still eligible for entering the national tournament. It was at this time that I received an e-mail from the Memphis Community Center with guidance on the power of chanting. It came at a perfect time. It was not just that I wanted a victory; I wanted these students to be rewarded.

The guidance was perfectly suited for the challenge before us. It read: “We are not asking the Gohonzon or the Mystic Law or some Buddha to grant our wishes. Such an attitude places us in a subservient position, relying on powers outside ourselves for an answer. Buddhist prayers are an expression of our own innermost determination that ‘I will make this happen.’” Another passage stated, “Chanting with confidence is a conscious effort to overcome our tendency to doubt or worry, in order to make our prayers more effective. Confidence, in many respects, is synonymous with and an expression of our faith.”

Armed with this type of prayer our team that year was able to place fifth nationally. Younger team members began immediately attacking the next year with profound scholarship and last year we won the state and were sixth in the nation. Again I had chanted intensely with the type of prayer to “overcome the tendency to doubt or worry” and “I will make this happen.” We lost to the team that won first by just one-and-a-half questions.

Starting again this year, the next generation of Varsity players, inspired by the examples set by the former senior members, firmly determined to win the state and national finals. I was determined to use the correct attitude of prayer to bring home this victory. I was often moved to tears when I saw the dedication to the goal and legacy that these students exhibited. The older alumni also felt that their dream was still alive in this year’s lineup.

Each of the final days of the national tournament, I was beset with thoughts of doubt and compromise that I fought back with prayer. I worried at times about the impression we left with the teams we beat so badly, but then was later touched when they came to us and said that they would root for us against the final opponents because when we played them, we showed them respect. I could feel the confidence of my prayer as each final game unfolded. Even when scores were very close I was confident we would win. Under pressure, our team seemed unable to forget anything or make a mistake. And, indeed, the students left the tournament this year as National Champions.

Over the years, I have come to deeply appreciate how much happiness and opportunity has come my way as a result of my Buddhist practice. It has helped me find a sense of mission and been the enthusiastic drive behind not just my teaching but my role in the community and my family.

This latest Quiz Bowl championship was not only a victory for the current students, but also to former students, one of which said of this year’s team, “There goes Ted Williams!”