

## EXPERIENCE—KIMBERLY STRONG-FULLER, CHICAGO NOW I KNOW THAT I CAN DO THE WORK

**Determined to prove that she could become an engineer, Kimberly Strong-Fuller uses her practice to lead her to victory.**

When I was 5, my mother joined the SGI. I remember very clearly being involved in the Junior Pioneers — predecessor to today's Boys and Girls Group — at an early age. By the time I was 16, I distanced myself from the organization and eventually stopped practicing. In 1994, I returned to the organization and received the Gohonzon, but my participation was inconsistent. As I began to experience difficult challenges and obstacles, I determined to practice harder and participate more.

One of my goals was to become a licensed stationary engineer, working with high and low pressure boilers. I thought it would be difficult to break into this field, and as I explored it more, I realized just how difficult. Most licensed stationary engineers are men, and to move ahead you need to know someone and have some general engineering background. I was a woman with no contacts and no experience. But the work interested me and I wanted to prove I could do it as well as any man. So I began to study.

One of the first things that is required is to pass a licensing examination. I joined an engineer association for assistance with the exam. I also volunteered for internships, the best way to get experience. I did the research, the legwork and whatever I could to learn more. I was determined to win, whatever the cost.

The first time I took the test, I failed. I told myself that it was okay, and I needed to study more. The second time, I failed again. I took a deep breath, and resolved to try once again. After I failed the test for a third time, I started a study group with five others. The fourth time, I knew in my heart that I had passed, but received correspondence telling me I hadn't. I also found out that all of the men in our group had passed, and all the women had failed.

I began to think that it wasn't just me; women were not moving ahead. Out of frustration, I began writing letters to various officials for their support but got no response. To say I was frustrated and negative would be an understatement.

During this period, however, I constantly received encouragement and reassurance from leaders and friends in the SGI-USA. One of the members, an engineer himself, made it his mission to get me through this ordeal. He would call me and read quotes from the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism*. I would listen, giving him as little encouragement as possible, but he never gave up. Though I didn't realize it at the time, his generosity was making me stronger and more determined to win.

The sixth time I took the test, I failed again. Afterward, I did not want to chant. Buddhism was not for me, I thought. But again, I was given encouragement about the importance of consistency in my practice and sticking through to the end.

One day, after a long day at work, it all hit me. I was frustrated with my current work situation, with failing the exam six times in a row, and with not feeling in control of my life. I was crying uncontrollably. I went to the Gohonzon and chanted with the demand that I see actual proof. From that point on, I began chanting two hours a day and consistently doing morning and evening gongyo.

My other motivation was my 12-year-old daughter, Shavonne. The last thing I wanted was for her to see her mother giving up on her dreams. I do everything I can to be a good role model, and I was not about to let her down now. Failure was not an option. I was going to take the exam and I was going to pass.

On March 31, after chanting two hours that morning with a friend, I took my licensing examination for the seventh time. I walked out of there knowing I passed. Not in a cocky or arrogant way but with complete confidence. Less than one month later, I found out that I got a score of 91. Just as I had prayed, I became a licensed stationary engineer in the City of Chicago.

Buddhism is win or lose, and I won. SGI President Ikeda has said the 21st century is the Century of Women. I plan to help prove this to be true.

In a recent speech at Soka University in Japan, President Ikeda read a poem that said: “Absolutely never give up! / While sharing profound exchange / With new acquaintances, While surmounting the wild flames / Of chaos and disarray, Decisively seize victory / With voices raised in song / infused with hope— As heroes of learning, As champions of philosophy!” (May 25 *World Tribune*, p. 4). Doing my best to grow and share my experiences with others, I will do everything I can to live up to President Ikeda’s words.

Now that I am licensed, I am actively seeking a position with the State of Illinois. Every time I see an opening, I apply and continually check on my status with each office.

My goal is to be the first African American stationary engineer to hold the position of commissioner of the Water Department of the City of Chicago. I know this will not be easy, but with the Gohonzon, President Ikeda’s guidance and my friends and family, this goal is not impossible. It’s something I can work for and win.