

## EXPERIENCE—DEBORAH LYONS, FORT KNOX, KY. WHAT MY MOTHER GAVE ME

**After suffering the loss of both her parents, Deborah Lyons uses Buddhism to stay strong and full of hope.**

When I was 18, I lost my father to a heart attack. My mother, my brother and I were left to face the world by ourselves. This was the first time I had to face the death of someone so close to me.

Over the next year, my mother began attending SGI-USA meetings and not long thereafter, joined. Up until this time, I was brought up to believe in God and that any other belief would surely send me to Hell. So when I witnessed my mother's change of faith, I not only thought she was being brainwashed, I was sure we were all damned for eternity. Nevertheless, my mother continued to practice Buddhism faithfully.

Then, almost overnight, she became sick. The doctors told us that she had advanced cancer in both lungs; there was nothing that could be done. The cancer had spread too far for too long.

Still, with all of her hair gone and her body swollen, she continued to chant in front of the Gohonzon. A lot of people I didn't know began coming over continuously to chant for my mother. I found myself chanting and praying to God at the same time.

I remember very vividly when she became so sick that we had to put her in the hospital. At one point, I was looking at her wonderful face and crying. She asked me, "Daughter, why do you cry?" I said, "I'm afraid." She smiled, hugged me and told me she loved me. She said that I should not be afraid because she was not afraid. All she asked of me was to always be there for my brother no matter what happened.

When she died, she was so at peace; she looked like she had just taken a nap.

Unfortunately, I did not deal with her death very well. Less than a year later, I found myself in a marriage that was going nowhere fast. My brother was struggling as well. I was drinking and using drugs, and my husband, an alcoholic, was sometimes violent. Life for me and my two sons was a continual hell. I learned the hard way that you cannot acquire true happiness from someone else.

After two years, my sons and I finally left to begin life anew, moving to a domestic violence shelter. It was hard, but we managed. It was shortly after this that I met Michael. Slowly, but surely, we became very close. He accepted me and my two boys, Aaron and Timothy, without hesitation, even introducing us to his family.

Shortly thereafter, Michael and I had a baby girl, Angel, and decided to get married. I was happy and scared at the same time. Throughout this period, I was still in contact with members in my mother's district. They were always there for me with constant encouragement and support. It was also the district members who suggested that I receive the Gohonzon. My practice was tentative at best, yet I still had my mother's altar, so I somewhat reluctantly agreed.

However, I continued going to church; I thought it would be good for my spiritual well-being. But after going a few times, I didn't feel the fulfillment or happiness that I needed. While there, I found myself chanting inside for change.

Nichiren Daishonin wrote: "If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and

death you have endured since time without beginning and to attain without fail unsurpassed enlightenment in this lifetime, you must perceive the mystic truth that is originally inherent in all living beings. This truth is Myoho-rence-kyo” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 3). I knew this was a truth I could not find anywhere except in the Daishonin’s Buddhism. I decided to stop being an observer and try the practice for real.

Although I only did the practice occasionally, for a short while was happy. Then things started to get difficult.

I had been suffering from severe depression off and on since I was 16, and it started to come back again. On top of this, our family was going through rough financial times. With our backs up against the wall and no other options, I began to take my practice more seriously. I started attending meetings regularly and doing gongyo more often. I was continually encouraged by other members in the chapter never to lose hope. No matter what the situation, they never abandoned me. I cannot begin to thank them enough for their love and support.

Michael had been wanting to change jobs so I asked members of Fort Knox Chapter if they would chant with me. Soon my husband found a job closer to home that he enjoys, and now we both have fulfilling jobs and good benefits. When looking for a dependable family car, Michael said to me, “If we do end up getting this car, I will believe your chanting is working.” I continued to chant and receive support from fellow members. Within the week, we ended up with a nice car at a good price. Michael now chants every day.

Throughout my practice, so many obstacles have arisen, be it losing my mother, surviving my first marriage or struggling to support my children. Yet, through it all, things have continued improving. SGI President Ikeda once wrote: “Having problems, making mistakes or feeling regrets is only natural. What’s important is to be undefeated by them. In the midst of worries and struggles, always look forward and advance” (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, p. 15). With the support of fellow SGI-USA members and President Ikeda’s guidance, I have been able to carry on in the face of difficulties. I now have a consistent practice, am involved in district activities and our home is open for various meetings. My brother has begun chanting and seeing his life change as well.

When I saw my mother slowly dying, I was afraid. But because of what she gave me, I can construct a better life. A life where every challenge is an opportunity to grow and not a promise of defeat.

What my mother gave me is something I hope I can give to my children: strong faith and peace of mind. Buddhism has brought joy and happiness to my family, and I will do my best to share this gift with others.