

SGI-USA FAMILY YOUTH FESTIVALS CELEBRATING VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE ACROSS FLORIDA

From one end of the state to the other, 2,300 SGI-USA Florida members and friends celebrated Victory Over Violence through music, dance, drama and dialogue. Separated into their various locations, 300 youth planned, designed and produced celebrations that reflected the character of their area. The areas represented were Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Palm Beach and Weston.

“We made a conscious decision to allow members to create their own activities to produce their Family Youth Festivals,” said Becky Jacobs, Florida Region women’s leader. “This way, activities will more easily connect with the local districts and continue into the future.”

Each area also had its own struggles to produce a successful activity. The most important was to find and encourage youth to participate. It was not unusual for area leaders who announced the proposed festivals to turn around in their planning meetings and find not a single youth in the room. But many telephone calls, visits and kick-off activities later, plans began to emerge. Youth also emerged.

Not only did school age and up members become active in preparing their festivals but the event also uncovered a number of capable leaders who would become instrumental in making their activities towering achievements that would serve as powerful encouragement.

For example, in Suncoast Area, which covers most of South Florida’s popular beaches, a young woman who had recently arrived from Italy became the focal point of the local festival, traveling regularly from the neighboring county to inspire the 30 participants. Some 200 people attended the event that emphasized the talents of the performers on stage at the Miami Dade Community College’s International campus.

Ft. Lauderdale Area chose to make their festival a celebration of life with food, reggae, dance and joy. “The focus of our youth activities was to study Buddhism,” explained Jeff Liu, young men’s area leader. “Through preparing for the festival, many of our members had great experiences and gained a deeper understanding of why we practice Buddhism.”

Meanwhile in Orlando, SGI-USA members took over Disney’s House of Blues to produce the Orlando Area Family Youth Festival attended by 300 people. While jazz, original drama and dance entranced the audience, they were reminded about the impact of violence and the important message about dialogue the SGI is spreading to end it. Nissa Askins courageously told her story about her pain when her grandparents were murdered. She offered appreciation to all the members who supported her family throughout her ordeal and sounded a call for action to declare victory over violence.

In Jacksonville, weeks of preparation resulted in performances, activities, food and fun at the Mandarin Community Club for an audience of nearly 300, including 69 guests. Down to the wire, a warm bowl of pork soup greeted participants as they made their final preparations and prayed to beat a 90 percent rain prediction. Their prayers answered, they began a joyous day of outdoor games and skits that illustrated the importance of overcoming the tendency toward violence.

The many festivals afforded an opportunity to interact with sympathetic organizations and activists in the community. A partnership with the Non-Violence Project attracted Hervey Marcelin, a motivational speaker, to several of the South Florida festivals. He

spoke about his descent into violence and crime and how he was able to regain his orientation by connecting to what he referred to as the three screens of parental, teacher and community authority. Once in prison for his mistakes, today he is a husband and father, and engaged in speaking to school kids on how to avoid the same suffering.

At the Palm Beach Family Festival, UNICEF manned one of several organization booths and provided the keynote speaker, Dr. Ruth Selman, who is the American Montessori Society's representative to the United Nations. She spoke on the inspiring topic of "Creating a Culture of Peace." "I'm excited by the youth," she said. "It's important to work together and for families to want for all children what they would want for their own."

In Weston, performers debuted their creative abilities, with everyone taking breaks to play lawn games that illustrated principles of Buddhist practice.

Governmental officials were quick to recognize the value of these great events. Ileana-Ross Letinan, a U.S. congresswoman representing South Florida, wrote a letter applauding the SGI's efforts to overcome violence. A proclamation was issued to the Suncoast Area by the mayor of Miami. Florida Governor Jeb Bush recognized Tampa's Festival and the principles of eliminating violence that supported it.

Perhaps it was a coincidence that the final chapter of the Florida's Family Youth Festivals ended just three days before the New York Trade Center bombing, but there was no doubt that the foundation of a lasting youth organization was in place that could support peace, culture and education.

—*P. Alecia Cox-Wilkins, Alonzo Davis, Jim Dreisbach, Carol Eyo, Olabisi Fowler, Susan Horwitz, Sharon Kaplan, Laurie Tanner, Shirley White and Jaki Young-Griffin contributed to this article.*