



# The McCloskey Family: Adversity Strengthens Faith

## Editor's Note:

Brian McCloskey and his mother Doris shared their family experience last May at the Raising Our Children Conference at SGI-USA's Florida Nature and Culture Center. Their story had such a huge impact on the 180-plus people attending that *Living Buddhism* was eager to publish it in this special family issue. Despite losing Brian just a few months later as explained below, Doris and Guy very much wanted their story to be published so that Brian's triumphs would encourage others.

**B**rian Daisaku McCloskey died on August 16, 2003 in Washington, D.C. as the result of injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident. His mother talked with him over the last year about her concerns after he made the change from riding a Harley to a faster and more dangerous sport bike. He told her, "Mom, I can't live my life based on your fears. If I die riding this bike, I'll have no regrets." Brian believed that his Buddhist practice was for the purpose of accomplishing the impossible, and he made many seemingly impossible changes during his lifetime of not-quite 29 years. We miss him terribly, but cherish every moment we had with him. The death of a young believer is difficult to understand, but if people—especially his parents—were to develop doubts because of it, it would only compound the tragedy. Brian had close calls earlier in his life, but he was able to prolong his life and won over each challenge. He died young, but he was certainly victorious. Brian was wholeheartedly dedicated to the SGI and its members, contributing to world peace. We are inspired by the many deep relationships he created with all kinds of people, all over the world. His legacy is: "Dream the impossible! Do the impossible!" The "Brian Daisaku McCloskey Scholarship Fund" has been established at Soka University of America, 1 University Drive, Aliso Viejo, CA 92656.

Doris and Guy McCloskey

## Brian Daisaku McCloskey, New York

**M**y parents started practicing this Buddhism before I was born, but I have never liked the term "fortune baby." I always felt that it made life out to be easy. I had a great childhood. I never wanted for food or clothing. My parents were very supportive and I never consciously resented my parents for being away at Buddhist activities all of the time. I did, however, always have "behavior problems." By the time I was 16—when I started smoking, drinking and experimenting with drugs—I had been kicked out of two schools and was on the verge of being kicked out of a third. This was 1991; my father was being transferred to Chicago from Maryland. My family was, of course, moving with him and no one was thrilled about the move or very supportive of my father.

Once I arrived in Chicago, I began to find outlets for all of the violent anger that had been building in my life. I drank heavily and went out every night looking for a fight, hanging

out in alleys and finding other people who were doing the same. I spent the next three years in and out of jail, going to court, getting kicked out of two more schools and getting my G.E.D. One night I came home and had to wake up my father to help dress my wounds because I had been stabbed in a bar fight. I wouldn't go to the hospital because the police were certainly watching them. I had stabbed several other young men and didn't know if I had killed any of them or not. Nothing could have hurt my father more. This was how I spent my time from ages 16 to 19.

I still attended SGI activities and even volunteered support at the Chicago Culture Center. That was ironic, since that group is dedicated to protecting people—something my life ran counter to at that point. One day at the center, another young man said to me, "I saw you the other night." I asked him where, and he told me that he was eating out with some friends and they noticed a ruckus outside the

restaurant. When he looked up, he said, “Hey, that’s Brian McCloskey! He’s stomping on that guy’s head!” This was a shock to me. Prior to that, I just thought I could live two separate lives and that what I did in private would not reflect on my participation in the SGI.

Somehow, when I turned 19, I no longer wanted to have anything to do with violence. It was a strange revolution. I wasn’t chanting much, and though I was able to break free from the most violent influences in my life, I slipped much further into the self-violence of heavy drug use. That year, some high school friends from Maryland were driving through Chicago on their way back to the East Coast and asked me if I wanted to go with them. I did and when I got there, I decided to stay. At this point, I was not chanting or participating in any SGI activities. I didn’t even tell any of the Washington area SGI members that I was there, including my best friend, David Joray, who had grown up with me since we were both seven years old.

I moved in with these friends, who were dealing and using morphine, and started using it myself. I had no job, no money, hardly any contact with my family and was sleeping on the floor of a basement apartment with four other people. I finally got a job working at a sandwich shop, but it really only served as an opportunity to steal as much food, toilet paper, and money as I possibly could. Suffice it to say I was pretty unhappy, but I hadn’t hit rock bottom yet.

I remember overdosing on morphine one night, lying on the floor, very sure that I was dying. The others reacted the way heavy drug users react to anyone overdosing: they waited to see if I really was going to die. All I could think about was my mother hearing that her oldest son had died of a drug overdose, in his own vomit, on a basement floor in Maryland. The next morning I realized that I hadn’t always been this unhappy, and that at the times in my life when I was happy, I had been chanting.

I started chanting in one of the closets of the apartment so I wouldn’t disturb anyone else. David and I made contact and he invited me to a meeting at the Washington community center. I went with him. Even though I saw several people I hadn’t seen in years, they didn’t recognize me. I had been living like an animal and I looked it. I was embarrassed to tell them who I was because I didn’t want them to realize what I had become. I felt uncomfortable and imagined that everyone was staring at me in disgust. I thought, “This isn’t how I’m supposed to feel at the community center.” I was ashamed about abandoning my practice and allowing my life to become so abject. I continued to chant.

I decided at the same time to clean up and try to get a

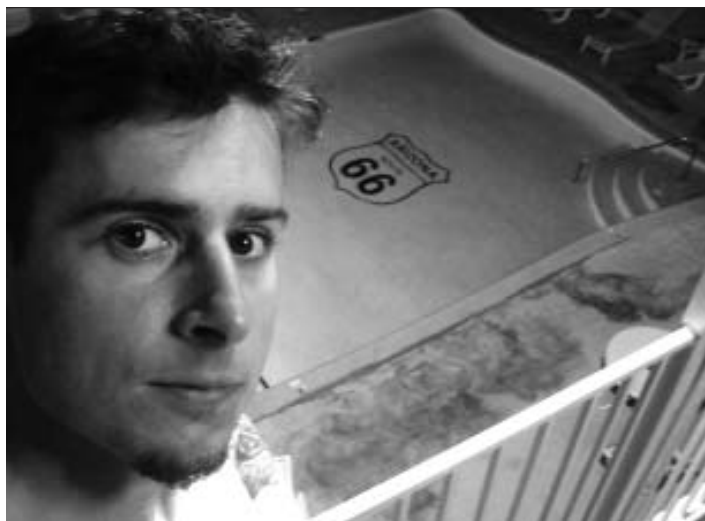


better job. Miraculously, the more I chanted, the less I wanted to do drugs. I couldn’t believe that I was experiencing so few withdrawal symptoms. My sobriety really upset my roommates, however; they no longer trusted me and looked at everything I did with suspicion. They continually pressured me to get high with them.

One night they were making a drug run and asked if I wanted to go with them. I said I wasn’t really interested. After asking me if I was really sure several times, they left. A few minutes later, I turned around and saw one of them staring through the window at me. This was rather alarming. I stepped outside to see what was going on, and as I went through the door, another was standing there and closed it. They all surrounded me. I tried to go inside, but since I was getting ready for bed, I didn’t have my keys and the door was locked. I asked them to let me back inside and they said, “Why don’t you come with us?”

At that moment I panicked. I was chanting silently to myself and didn’t know what to do. The light was on at the neighbor’s house. I made a run for it and began banging on their door. The neighbors, whom I’d never met, were alarmed and wouldn’t open the door. They kept asking me what I wanted. My roommates just stood at the edge of the light waiting to see what would happen. I told the neighbors that I was having a medical emergency and I needed them to call 911 since we didn’t have a phone. I told them I thought I was having a heart attack. When they heard that the neighbors were going to call 911, my roommates quickly got in the car and left. After I was sure they were gone, I ran away.

I had nowhere to go. I had the clothes on my back, my wallet, and six dollars. I just thought about how much I



wished I was back in Chicago and how I had absolutely no way to get there. I began suffering severe paranoid psychotic delusions. I wandered around all that night and the following day and became convinced that everyone was involved in a conspiracy, looking for me and wanting to eat me. I also believed that every person could read my mind. That night I resolved to walk back to Chicago, if that's what it took to see my family. In my deluded state, I spent my money on a knife because I thought I would need that if I was going to walk to Chicago.

I thought I might spend the night at a friend's house who lived twenty minutes away by car. The only way to get there was to pass through a rough housing development. By the time I got to the project, it was around 11:00 p.m. As I was going through the complex, I saw two figures walking toward me. They stopped and one ran to the other side of the street; then both started running toward me. I turned around and ran. They chased me into a fast food place that was closing. I bought a soda, and then asked the employees if I could help wash the dishes. I had some idea that if I volunteered to do the most menial tasks, society would lift its death sentence. They thought I was very strange and wouldn't let me help. I took this as a sign of an irrevocable death sentence and I went into the bathroom to kill myself with the knife I had bought earlier. I had some defiant feeling that I would not let someone else kill me. If it had to be done, I was going to do it myself.

I sat on the toilet and placed the knife at my sternum, prepared to plunge it into my heart. At the last moment, that seemed like it would be too painful, so I decided to cut my wrists instead. I stopped up the sink, filled it with hot water, and cut my wrists the way I had seen it done in a movie. There was a lot of blood, but it was taking a very long time. I am so sorry to have left that mess in the bathroom for someone else to clean up. I finally decided to let someone else do it. I left the bathroom and asked the employees to call the police who I was sure would take me

out somewhere and shoot me. I thought, "That's going to hurt, but at least it will be quick."

The police took me to Prince George's County Hospital where I was admitted to the emergency psychiatric unit. I was strapped to a bed and placed in a cell for observation before being allowed into the general psychiatric ward. I could not speak at this point. After I was bandaged up and had time to think, I decided that I wanted to escape; that if society would not have me, I would rather live in the woods somewhere eating grass, than die. The lock around my foot was a bit of a hindrance however, so I decided to wait for the nurse to bring my food and I would get the key from her. This didn't go so well. She screamed as I grabbed her and six orderlies ran into the tiny cell. I let go of her as soon as I saw them. I hadn't hurt her, but they wanted to teach me a lesson and they made sure to hurt me before sedating me. I fought the sedative because I thought it was a lethal injection.

This was the state I was in when my friend David walked into the room. I don't know how he found out I was there. He had gone to the hospital and told them he was my priest so that he could be admitted to see me since I couldn't have any visitors. He had brought my Buddhist prayer beads and sutra book. After asking me how I was doing, he started to chant. I could not chant with him, but seeing him there made me realize that I did not understand what was going on. Later, there was one nurse who genuinely tried to help me, and allowed me to call my parents in Chicago. I don't remember any of that conversation. I only remember how happy I was to talk to them.

In the morning I was admitted into the general population of the psychiatric ward. I was able to do my morning prayers and chant. I quickly regained my bearings. It was like waking up from a nightmare. Over the next week I was visited by many SGI members that I had grown up with and had not seen in years. I couldn't believe they would want to see me. They stayed and talked with me and brought me books and clothes. They truly cared for me. I started to realize that I might be worth caring for. Chanting was hard since I was pretty heavily sedated, but I was determined to chant morning and evening prayers. I had no idea what my parents were going through.

After a little over a week, the hospital was ready to discharge me, but my dad advised me not to leave since the nurse I grabbed had pressed charges against me for aggravated battery and the police were waiting to take me to the county jail. I continued to chant. A friend of our family, a retired county police officer, asked his brother-in-law who was still active to make the arrest. This way, he was able to take me to jail, book

me, and bail me out without ever putting me in the general population. Upper Marlboro prison has a reputation for being one of the worst in the country. My friend told me, "If you go in there, you'll die." All of these people saved my life. I returned home to Chicago a week later.

I was still so stupid, however. I thought my troubles were over, and that everything would be back to normal. I was so arrogant that only a few days afterward I was beginning to lose any sense of appreciation for the people who had saved my life. I was wretched. In the car on the way home from the airport in Chicago, I said horrible things to my mother that made her break down and cry. That is one part of this whole experience I truly regret.

The court in Maryland decided that I wasn't responsible for my actions in the psychiatric ward, but they sent me to an outpatient drug rehabilitation program in Chicago. This was a depressing experience, but I had resolved to use the Gohonzon to overcome my problems with addiction. The hospital followed a twelve-step program, and people were told over and over again that they must turn their lives over to God. I watched as they were encouraged to not take responsibility for their lives. Many of them relapsed again and again.

Because they could only view their problems as God's will and not recognize that they were the effects of causes they had made themselves, they also could not believe they had any power to change them. I talked in the groups about this and expressed the Buddhist viewpoint that only we can change our lives. They told me, "You'll see when you go right back to doing what you were doing." I thought to myself, "That's what you guys are doing, though." One of the members in our program relapsed and died shortly after I got out. I watched one young man lose more of his life from week to week. He lost his kids, his wife, his job, and soon no one in his family would have anything to do with him and he had no place to live.

After six years of hating everything to do with Chicago, I came to recognize how much I loved it. I started to realize that the most important thing to me in the world is my family and when I realized how much I cherished my fellow SGI members, I saw how much I loved living in Chicago and how much I cared for the SGI members there. My environment started to radically change. It was reflecting the changes that were taking place in my life based on my practice.

Over the next three years, I suffered from paranoid attacks, but I was determined that I would change it through my Buddhist practice. Many people encouraged me to seek medication, but I was confident that the power

of my practice to the Gohonzon could change anything. I eventually stopped drinking alcohol and coffee, stopped smoking and doing any sort of drug. I realized that the more I chanted, the fewer paranoid attacks I had. By challenging my paranoia while providing security support at the Culture Center and struggling to protect the members no matter what fears I had, I felt safe when I went home. My environment was starting to become the Buddha land. I remembered the passage from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* where he describes the Buddha land, saying that it is "where living beings enjoy themselves at ease" ("Happiness in This World," p. 681).

For the last few years I have been determined to protect the SGI members, no matter what. I chant every day for their protection and volunteered regularly at the Chicago Culture Center, and for the last two years, at the center in New York.

I also found out after quitting drugs and alcohol, that I am not a very social person. The only way I had been able to deal with people was by becoming so drunk or high that I didn't care what they thought. Around the time I was having a particularly hard time being around people, one of the young men at the Chicago center needed someone to take his volunteer shift and I said I would do it. That was a revolutionary experience for me.

I struggled to get to the center on time to let the members in and chant at least an hour before my shift for their safety. As I tried to keep a clear head amidst all the pandemonium, remain cheerful, and let everyone know how welcome they were at the center, my life changed again very drastically. I began to feel less anxiety when dealing with people, both at SGI activities and everywhere in my life. My job situation changed, and though there were still many people there who didn't like me, I was able to work with them and be productive and even happy about the opportunity.

In the summer of 2000, I took a new job and moved to New York. I started participating in the support group activities there. Again I was shocked at how much I enjoyed these activities and all of the wonderful people I would not have met otherwise. In 2001, I attended the Behind the Scenes Group Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. I was impressed yet again by the people who chose to spend their time and energy protecting the votaries of the Lotus Sutra. President Ikeda states in the July 2000 *Living Buddhism*, "There is no greater offering to the Lotus Sutra than to protect its votary" (p. 41). I believe this. I know that I owe my life to my family and to the SGI and I have promised President Ikeda that I will use my life



■ Brian, Guy, and Doris rode their Harleys together cross-country in 2002. They are pictured at Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo.

to protect them. I know I have hurt many people so much in the past. I only hope that I can help and protect many more than I hurt.

To all of the people who never gave up on me, even in the darkest hours of my life, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Even if I had by some farce survived without you, life would not have been worth living. Many times while chanting, I start crying with appreciation for a life that I can truly enjoy and I am overwhelmed with appreciation for Nichiren Daishonin, Presidents Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda, and for all of the members of my SGI family who helped me to encounter the Gohonzon and change my life. I'm not done yet.

### Guy McCloskey, Chicago

Each time I read Brian's experience I shed tears, not so much because of my memories of that tragic period in his life, but with joy and appreciation for the wonderful person he has revealed himself to be. He has helped me to learn the power of faith to transform even the most hopeless-seeming situation and what it means to change poison into medicine.

I had no idea what caused his suffering, or why he behaved the way he did. When he was in the third or fourth grade, he would go to school in the morning and we wouldn't know if he was going to come home that afternoon, or the next day, or the day after that. We lived in a lovely and friendly community, but he committed acts of vandalism and violated school rules to the point where he was subjected to mandatory expulsion for an entire calendar (not academic) year, so that he would have been two years behind his age group.

had been hurt came back with a baseball bat and broke out the windshield of our car. Brian went out seeking revenge, but those people had guns.

I sat in front of the Gohonzon, since there was no way for me to know where he had gone. During my first hour of chanting, I could only envision his dead body. I pitied his mother, and the many people who loved him, including President Ikeda, who had shared his name with our son: Brian Daisaku McCloskey. But I really felt sorry for myself as I cried and tormented myself with the nightmare vision of my son having been murdered. By the time I got into the second hour of daimoku that night, I became convinced—but definitely not confident—that he needed to survive, and that my prayers and those of his mother were the only source of hope we had. The third hour helped me to become convinced that he would survive and the fourth hour was spent trying to imagine what things would be like when this trauma had ended. That was one night, but there were many others like it. I had nowhere to go except to the Gohonzon, and I'm certain that Brian's life knew that.

He did survive. For the next several years, as he gradually began to purify his life in terms of his actions, associations, and personal habits, he became the person that other young people came to when they were dealing with similar sufferings related to drugs and gangs. His experience gave him real influence in helping them make their own choices to effect positive changes in their behavior. I am proud to see them now leading positive lives. One of them I know has become one of the most reliable support group members in the Chicago area. I believe this is one aspect of our changing poison into medicine.

Brian's childhood sufferings were not fun for any of us, but we've been able to continue our struggle together to trans-

form them into joy, exactly as the Daishonin taught. It really works! Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo can change any negative situation, and I feel so fortunate that I can observe this firsthand with my son. Although he lives and works in New York, we speak on an almost daily basis, visit one another often, and even find time to ride our Harleys together.

## Doris McCloskey, Chicago

**T**his has been the hardest experience I have ever shared. Our struggle covers years of suffering, chanting, and effort, not to mention the emotional roller coaster. Where to begin? I know that every mother who has faced her child's involvement with gangs and drugs knows the day-to-day suffering; every family member knows the fear and the pain.

I've always felt that the greatest suffering for a parent is to lose a child, and that was my constant fear. Because the life Brian had chosen was so dangerous, my anxiety level rose every time he left the house. I frequently woke in the middle of the night and could not go back to sleep without checking to see if he was at home. More times than not, he was still out. Lying in bed trying to force myself to sleep was counterproductive since I would be exhausted in the morning, unable to concentrate on work, angry, and blaming him for my suffering. The only thing that helped was to stay up and chant — either until he came home or until I could calm my fears and go back to sleep. Generally, I found myself chanting anywhere from one to three hours during the early morning hours. Still, this was not nearly as exhausting and I found I could work the next day.

My charts keeping track of the hours of chanting to overcome the problems with Brian's behavior extended more than ten years. I stopped counting at 15 million repetitions.

While chanting during one of those very long nights, I began to realize what a powerful grip that fear had on my life; as though the fear existed separate from me and I was simply observing it. I began to chant to crush this devil that had taken over my life. I lived in fear every time Brian left the house. I was gripped by the greatest fear, the greatest suffering ever imaginable for me — the loss of a child.

That night — or morning at 3:00 a.m. — I became determined to overcome this fear. As I chanted, I realized that I could not protect Brian from his karma. I chanted that my life would become strong enough to deal with any challenge — even his death, which I thought I could never survive. Gratefully, I knew that I had reached a turning point in this crisis of many years.



■ The McCloskey family from left: Doris, Vincent, Mary, Guy, and Brian.

By 4:00 a.m. Brian came home. He was covered with blood. The first drill was to check to see if he needed to go to the hospital; again, it was someone else's blood. As we stood there, face-to-face in the kitchen, I told him he was going to be a great person. He said, "Mom, look at me. I'm not a great person; I don't want to be a great person." I reminded him that I always get what I chant for. "So, get used to it." I said, "You are going to be a great person." He passed me and went up to bed.

This was not the end of the challenges, but it was the turning point for me. Not long after this experience, Brian left with friends to go back to Maryland. It did remove him from the dangers in Chicago, but I knew he would be creating new dangers for himself. Sleeping would not be any easier, and the middle of the night chanting sessions continued as I challenged my fear of losing him.

The night before Brian tried to take his own life, he called at 3:00 a.m. He was not making much sense, but we talked for about an hour. He was anxious and paranoid. Again, all I could do was chant and fight the fear. The next night, Prince George's Hospital called to tell us that Brian had been admitted to the psychiatric ward after trying to kill himself. It took over a week to discover what had taken place. Initially, we couldn't talk to Brian. When we did, he couldn't communicate to us what had happened. My immediate reaction was to get on a plane and go to Maryland, but Brian encouraged me to stay at home and chant for him since he knew they would only let me see him for an hour a day, and that it would be so much harder for me to chant while away from home. He wanted us to be in Maryland when he was released from the hospital, but there was no set date. When it did happen, it happened fast and with many complications. We found ourselves picking him up at O'Hare Airport in Chicago. Four more years of intense challenges lay ahead of all of us. Today he is a great person on the path of his noble mission for world peace. ☸