

*John Hessel,  
New York City, 1970*



After a politically charged year of college in my home state, California, I needed a new perspective on life. My father suggested a semester in Madrid, Spain. They had a course for foreigners, and my Spanish was adequate, and it was cheap. In Madrid, I had lots of free time, read many spiritual books, and determined that I would not return to Los Angeles until I had found meaning for my life. I knew that it would involve a spiritual group, because I was too selfish and did not have the strength to live a disciplined life on my own.

The three-month course finished in December 1970, so I hitchhiked to London with two new friends. Sterling was from New York and Maureen from Chicago, but she had relatives in London. It was a lonely Christmas Eve when I met Kevin Brabazon, and we chatted over coffee. He said he belonged to a spiritual community, which I thought was very cool, but he had to get back to Trafalgar Square to meet up with others to sing Christmas carols, which seemed really square. Puzzled but curious, I invited Maureen and we went to the center, and Kevin read the Divine Principle to us.

Within a few days we both committed ourselves and traveled to New York to join the church there. The small apartment on 160th street in Manhattan held about 10 members. In 1973 I was told there would be a blessing coming up after a couple of years, but I was only 21 – too young at that time. Maureen went and was blessed with Walter Gottesman. Most of my friends were blessed as 1,800-couples in 1975 and went all over the world as missionaries, while I stayed home. I really felt left out. The providence had passed me by.

In 1972 Philip Burley, our church leader, started a fundraising

team. He asked me to lead the team of eight people, selling candles that were made in the garage, and using a van driven to New York City. It was a gamble. We quit our jobs and set off on this new experiment. Phillip said “if this works, you will get the glory, and if it doesn’t, I’ll get the blame.” We raised a total of almost \$100 combined (not each) the first day, but it got better daily.

Shortly afterwards, Philip found a property in Westchester County, New York called “Belvedere,” and it looked like heaven on earth! Unification Church Headquarters launched a national campaign to purchase the property, and we set up candle making in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Miss Young Oon Kim made an offer to the Broughman family [owners of the Belvedere estate], and they accepted. We suddenly had a huge financial challenge far bigger than anyone had ever imagined. Two MFT teams were set up, one on the west coast with Marc Lee and an east-coast team with 11 members and me. We had two vans and two trailers. We parked at camp grounds where we slept either in the sister’s trailer or the brother’s trailer. We enjoyed waking up to the beauty of nature, which helped to inspire us for the day of fundraising. The campaign was successful, and we purchased Belvedere.

I was in New York when the first 12 Japanese brothers came to our center. They were older and wiser than us, but we did not recognize it at the time due to the language barrier. As more Japanese arrived, MFT teams were created and eventually there were a number of Japanese teams headed by Mr. Shimba, and American teams, headed by me. A competition was set up, and we were humbled by their greater faith and skill. As a result, Father assigned me to work under Mr. Takeru Kamiyama and a combined fundraising effort was established. I learned a great deal from him, including that an attitude of absolute faith was key.

One night at “J House” in the corner of Belvedere, I woke to see a rifle pointed at me. The voice in the near-dark said “get the money.” Fundraising collections were kept there, and we held quite a bit of

cash. As this guy turned to wake others, I thought “this is my only chance,” so I jumped him, and we wrestled and tumbled down the wood stairs as we fought. The gun fired, putting a hole in the ceiling. He had a partner, and I got a beating, but I surprised them with more resistance than they expected from a church group. I yelled out to the sisters watching, “Don’t worry, the guards are coming” which scared the robbers enough to make a quick exit – so quick in fact that one of them dropped his wallet, which led to their arrest and conviction. My blood was everywhere, including on a blood-stained “pledge” scroll hanging on the wall. On the Sunday after I was released from the hospital, Father signed that pledge with the words “your day of victory,” and said that I had some destiny with financial work, and shook my hand on the holy rock at Belvedere.

I was blessed to Tokie Oda in 1982 and now have four wonderful children, three of whom are blessed. I am deeply grateful to True Parents for the rich and meaningful life I have enjoyed. I have had the honor to work under Mr. Neil Salonen, Mr Kamiyama, Hyun Jin Nim, and now, Mr. Furuta. I am grateful to In Jin Nim and the Lovin’ Life Ministry, which we love to attend. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for a blessed life!