Contributing to people of character

Celebrating “a vision of peace,” Soka University of America, also Viejo, had its third annual gala attracting diverse local support and raising in excess of $1 million for the Buddhist-inspired institution of learning.

The evening featured Grammy-nominated and Tony Award-winning composer Duncan Sheik, who entertained the crowd of citizens from Newport-Mesa and all over Southern California including major donors Ititu and Fumiko Nishino, Yasuko and Akemi Saiho, Aya-ko Fujii, Stephen Goldner, Carl and Matilda Buck, Chuan Chuan Chuen, Don English, Jim and Sheila Peterson and Steve Chi Kong Lee and Judy Chao Di Chow.

Sheik is best known for his Tony Award-winning composition for the Broadway musical “Spring Awakening” which was honored as Best Musical at the 61st annual Tony Awards.

Special guest performer Steven Sater joined Sheik, along with television star Patrick Duffy who returned for the third year as master of ceremonies.

The evening was co-chaired by Joan May and Dita Shempeke.

“We’re looking forward to the magic that happens each year when donors and guests interact with the students that benefit from their generosity,” offered May prior to the evening festivities.

Proceeds from the $1 million night will provide scholarships. Soka founder Daisaku Ikeda commented, “The ultimate goal of a Soka education is to foster people of character who continuously strive for greater good — that of peace.”

University President Daniel Habuki added, “Soka is extremely fortunate to be supported by those who recognize and understand the importance of an education based on the principles of peace, human rights and the sanctity of life. Their contributions open the door for many students who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to come from around the world to participate in Soka’s unique educational experience.”

Enjoying dinner and the performance were additional donors of significance including Terry and Guy Mitchell, Bill and Joy Wilkins, Jack Toan representing Wells Fargo Bank, Len Bendo, Saito Conners, Ingrid Yin-Yin Han and Dr. Cheng-Jen Chang, Kyoko Kraft, and other corporate donors Coldwell Banker Real Estate, CitiSmith Barney, The Ray Charles Foundation, SoCal Edison, and more.

Soka University opened in O.C. in 2001 and has graduated three classes.

Students come from some 30 nations worldwide. Accredited in 2005, Soka grinds have gone on to Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Stanford, Columbia, NYU, UC Berkeley, UCI and USC for graduate study. Check out Soka at www.soka.edu.

THE CROWD runs Thursdays and Saturdays.

SUPPORT FOR SOKA: Emmett Amos and Gall Thomas.

RAISING $1 MILLION: Leroi Ashley, Beverly Jermyn and Patrick Duffy.

UNIVERSITY LEADERS: President and Mrs. Danny Habuki, Deborah DiCesare and Steven Seegmiller.

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SUPER CHAIRS: Co-chair Joan May, Duncan Sheik, co-chair Dita Shempeke and Steven Sater.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Linda and Luis Nieves.