

My cousin pressed her head against my shoulder. “Will I ever see my dad again?” We had grown up like sisters, yet I had no idea how to comfort her. Before now, we had never directly experienced the prejudices our family had faced in Iran. My uncle, a naturalized American citizen, had returned to Iran to aid his widowed mother. The Iranian government wanted to confiscate his mother’s home since Baha’is cannot inherit property. To pressure my uncle’s family to cede the property, the government blocked my uncle’s return to America. The next two months, my extended family spent every night together, praying. During this time, I connected with my family’s values of faith and perseverance and gained a deeper appreciation for my freedoms.

For four generations, my family has practiced the Baha’i Faith, an independent world religion based on teachings of equality, peace, and service. Because of the persecution Baha’is have faced, my family has been uprooted multiple times. My maternal great-grandmother fled to Iran from Russia to escape the Soviet crackdown on religious groups. Her husband spent ten years in a Siberian work camp before reuniting with his family. Decades later, my mother’s generation faced turmoil after the Iranian revolution. Under the new government, Baha’is were imprisoned without cause and were barred from jobs and universities. My grandparents sent my mother, who was seventeen at the time, to America. My father, who had come to America for educational purposes prior to the revolution, could not safely return. Years would pass before my grandparents could escape.

My parents met in the United States, where they had both studied engineering while learning English. I was born in a small Texas suburb and grew up speaking Farsi. When I struggled, my

parents would relate how they educated themselves despite their difficulties both monetarily and linguistically. My father would encourage me to work hard, often lamenting, “In Iran, Baha’is aren’t allowed into universities anymore”. I realized my family had provided me with an opportunity to flourish in a country that valued religious freedom and education.

On road trips, my father would play cassette tapes of scientific lectures. He would emphasize the importance our faith placed on the advancement of science to serve others. Through the years, his monologues would spark my passion for science. This passion motivated me to enroll at The Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (TAMS), a boarding school at the University of North Texas (UNT). There, I sought the opportunity to conduct research and joined a neuroscience laboratory, where I worked to elucidate the medical relevance of primary neuronal cilia. Many times, my experiments wouldn’t work, and I learned to constantly iterate. I relied on the perseverance my parents had instilled in me to overcome my frustrations. Ultimately, for my work, I was named a Siemens Westinghouse Technology Competition Semifinalist and a Goldwater Scholar.

After graduating from TAMS, I enrolled at Rice University to study bioengineering. Since Baha’is in Iran cannot attend university, I was determined to educate myself and to practice my faith. I taught a virtues-oriented Sunday school class at the Houston Baha’i center. Every Sunday, my five-year-olds would eagerly bounce in their seats, wanting to share what virtues that had practiced the prior week. Because of my faith’s emphasis on world-encompassing service, I became interested in how technology could impact underserved communities. With Rice’s Beyond Traditional Borders, I worked to address the lack of healthcare tools in the

developing world. To deal with a resource-limited environment, our engineering team produced the diagnostic lab-in-a-backpack, which contained modified medical tools that could run on a solar-powered rechargeable battery. Our triumph over the project's constraints was highlighted when I met with the physicians who successfully used our product in Sub-Saharan Africa and Honduras. Through this project, I became drawn to medicine as a means of service.

At Stanford Medical School, my past experiences have culminated into the creation of multiple initiatives close to my heart. As a first year, I became involved in scientific research, with a particular interest in studying the clinical genetics of understudied populations. My work generated scientific publications on newly discovered genetic risk factors for anticoagulant sensitivity in African Americans. Furthermore, this work led to a Howard Hughes Medical Fellowship and my matriculation into the joint MD/Ph.D. program. As a MD/Ph.D. student, I became the lead researcher of the Iranian Genomes Project, which received \$250,000 from the PARS Community Foundation, a Persian Philanthropic Institute. The Iranian Genomes Project is the first project that aims to study Iranian ancestry through whole genome sequencing. Middle Eastern populations have not been studied by other whole genome sequencing projects, such as the global 1000 Genomes Consortium. Developing and running this project has allowed me to give back to the Iranian community through scientific and educational presentations, including a poster at the American Society of Human Genetics. However, through all this, my father's words have stuck with me: "In Iran, Baha'is aren't allowed into universities anymore." My leadership in the Iranian Genomes Project or even my status as a graduate student would have been impossible in Iran. To raise awareness on these issues, I joined the Education Under Fire campaign, a global dialogue surrounding the Iranian government's policy of expelling Baha'is from universities and cracking down on any efforts Baha'is have made to self-educate. My team

organized a documentary screening and panel discussion on the Stanford campus attended by over 250 individuals. But more importantly, I met with medical school's Dean of Admissions and advocated for his support, which resulted in his writing a public letter of support for the underground Baha'i University, the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education.

My ability to learn and serve the community draws from my family's strength and tenacity.

After my uncle was allowed to leave Iran, I realized that everything I do and hope to do would be impossible in Iran. Because of that realization, I am determined to develop and defend my educational and religious opportunities through service, perseverance, and faith.