

Lifestyle

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Ruhiyyih Heibert endured prison in Iran

A Madison resident's life is quiet and peaceful compared to what it was in Iran where she was imprisoned twice because of her religious belief.

Ruhiyyih Heibert's refusal to give up her faith, Baha'i, led to torture and her exile from Iran where many of her friends including a cellmate were executed.

Baha'is, who have no clergy, follow the teachings of Baha'u'llah, a 19th century Persian nobleman. He preached equality of the sexes, racial harmony and that all religions, including Islam, are progressive steps in a continuing pattern of divine revelation.

This pattern, since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, resulted in 192 Baha'is being executed, 700 imprisoned and 50,000 including Rubiyyih and her family fleeing the country.

A goal of Ayatollah Khomeini was to eradicate Baha'ism in the land of its birth whether through forced recantations or executions.

Mrs. Heibert said, "Persecution of the Baha'is is not new. In 1910 my mother's father and grandfather were first shot in the legs and then hanged because they were Baha'is. My grandfather did not die immediately so they put some sticks under his feet and burned him.

"When my parents were first married, their crops were confiscated and their house was burned. My older sister, Parvin, and brother, Soheil, and I grew up during the Shah's rule. The situation wasn't as bad as it was later, but we didn't have a nice time then either.

"The other children called us bastards (because of the religion). They wouldn't let us drink from the water taps in school and the teachers made us sit in a separate place in the classroom. They said we were unclean."

Their religion followed the teachings of Mohammed, who died in 632

and was believed to be the last prophet who would ever live.

After being placed in prison twice for a few months, she was released and was not at home when government authorities came to her house to take her to jail again. She and her entire family left home and never returned. She was 21 when she fled to Canada and had lived there for nine years before marrying Darren Heibert, a Madison apartment dweller, in September of 1993. They recently purchased a residence on Inwood Trail.

Heibert was born in Canada and lived there for two years before the family moved to California. Heibert transferred from Thousand Oaks, Calif., to Rastek in Huntsville about a year ago. Heibert has been a resident of Madison since first moving to Alabama. He is a software computer designer.

They married in Toronto, Canada. They had met at a Baha'i conference in Montreal three months before marrying.

In Canada, the Iran native studied chemistry, later worked as a chemist, and in a library at the University of Guelph near Toronto. She also traveled to 30 different countries for the Baha'i faith and was a traveling teacher in which she spoke at various schools and colleges. She has granted some 300 interviews and was featured in People magazine.

She said, "I was almost 21, studying chemistry at the University of Shiraz when the revolution took place. Soon after I graduated, all Baha'is were prohibited from going to school. I taught for only a few months before I was dismissed. No one in my family was allowed to work and my father's gas station was confiscated. Around that time the House of the Bab, the most holy Baha'i site in Iran, was vandalized and later completely de-

stroyed. They also destroyed our local cemetery and desecrated the graves.

"The first time I was arrested was Feb. 6, 1982. As part of my service to the Baha'i community, I was going to visit a family who had relatives in prison. Because I had a car, the local assembly asked me also to visit Baha'is who were in prison to try to find out how they were. I had to pose as a member of their families. Soon I was being followed frequently by revolutionary guards.

"One day a guard stopped me, showed me his identification and his pistol and told me to stand against the wall. I was forced into a car, blindfolded and taken to a building where I was kept for a few hours. Then the guard took me outside and told me to stand against a tree. I heard his gun click and I thought now they are going to kill me. At once I started to pray, but he just wanted to break my spirit. This went on for an hour before he took me to Seppah prison.

"There they finally removed my blindfold and put me in a cell about 15 feet by 21 feet. It had very small windows near the ceiling, but they were covered all the time. About 30 women were locked in the cell, though at other times there were as many as 100 and it would be too crowded even to sleep. People often ask if I spoke out against the government or did something else to attract their attention, but I never did. My religion forbids it.

"Three days later I had my first interrogation. When I told the interrogator we believe in the equality of men and women, he became very angry. He accused me of lying and said I was teaching spying and that our leaders were working for other countries. He screamed, 'I will kill you and all Baha'is.' The interroga-

tion lasted for an entire day, from 8 in the morning to 10 at night.

"I heard from other prisoners that the beatings took place in the basement. The next day I was led blindfolded down steps and they tied me to a bed and started beating me on the soles of my feet with a wire cable. After a few lashes they stopped to ask if I was a Baha'i and if I would convert and tell them the names of other Baha'is."

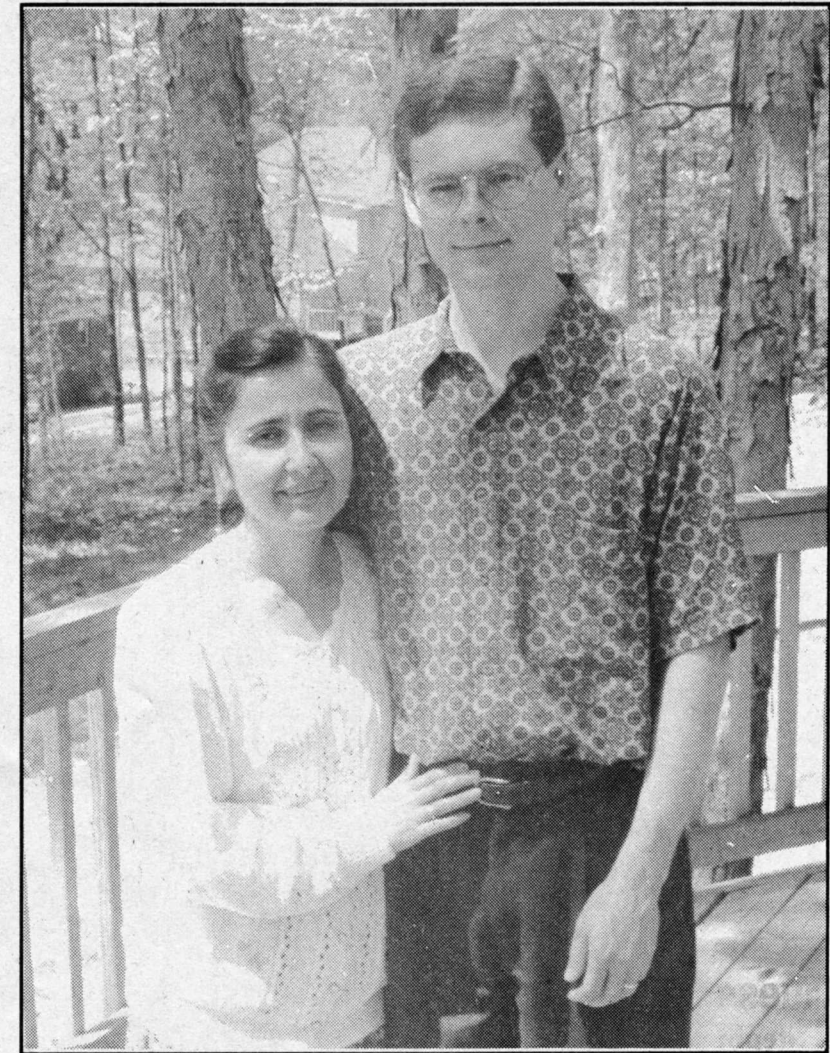
Mrs. Heibert said, "The lashes were so painful, but I didn't want to show them I felt pain. So I started to pray. Thinking about being a Baha'i made me so strong, but after 20 or 25 lashes, I fainted. When I came to, they started again. They said they gave a total of 74 lashes. Then they forced me to walk on my injured feet back to my cell where the other prisoners washed my feet with water and put ointment on them. It was a month before I could walk without pain.

She said the food was bad - mostly watery soup - and that there were mice and cockroaches in the prison.

After being released from prison the first time, she was arrested eight months later at her home. She said, "A friend, Shirin, was staying with us and she was arrested, too. That night in Seppah Prison, there were about nine Baha'i women, but others kept arriving. Finally we were 21. We knew each other. They called us the Army of Deniers because they thought we were denying Islam. The youngest was named Mona."

"After six weeks we were transferred to Adelabad prison and put in with thieves, prostitutes and prisoners condemned to die. I was there three weeks when, for reasons I still don't understand, they let me go."

Three days later, guards came to get her but she was not at home. Her



Ruhiyyih and her husband, Darren, at home in Madison

parents slipped out a side door after they heard guards knocking on the front door. They never went back to the house which was confiscated by government officials.

She said, "Three months after my sister, my mother and I escaped, we heard on the radio about the hanging of 10 Baha'i women and six men in Shiraz. Shirin and Mona were among them. I felt so empty, as if I had lost my heart. I couldn't talk for several hours. I couldn't even cry. I knew that if I had stayed, I would have been killed, too. I miss them, but I am so

proud and happy that they died without recanting their faith."

The three chose to go to Canada because it was the easiest to enter.

The Heiberts like living in Madison. She said, "The life here is simple. The people are friendly and warm. It is very easy to talk with people here."

Mrs. Heibert said, "I am not sure if I can ever go back to Iran. I would love to because it is my native country. But I lost many friends and just remembering these things is so painful. If I went back, maybe I couldn't bear it."