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SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1994

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

City Times



Times photo — SCOTT KEELER

Ruhiyyih Jahanapour Heibert says she was tortured when she refused to deny her faith.

Faith helped numb the pain of torture

■ Beaten on the feet with wire cables, she was told to deny her Baha'i faith. She never did. Now she shares her faith with others.

By **SHARON KIRBY LAMM**
Times Staff Writer

Ruhiyyih (pronounced Ruhi) Jahanapour Heibert sat Thursday evening on a red plush sofa in a comfortable Largo home, her petite sandal-clad feet resting on an oriental rug.

She told a small group gathered there about her imprisonment and torture 11 years ago in Iran. She went to prison because she refused to give up her faith,

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which is Baha'i.

"In prison, there was no sofa," she said. "There were no refreshments like we have here."

Then only 20, she was imprisoned twice — once alone, and the second time with other Baha'i women. Some of the women were executed. Some were tortured. Mrs. Heibert was strapped to a bed and the soles of her feet were beaten with wire cables, she said.

"To me, that was the most painful and beautiful experience. When they beat you, you were blindfolded. You could hear the sound of the lash while they asked you if you were a Baha'i, and if you

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IF YOU GO

■ Ruhiiyyih Jahanapour Heibert, an Iranian Baha'i who was imprisoned for her faith, will speak during a gathering beginning at 5 p.m., with a casual supper from 6:30 to 7:30 tonight at the Baha'i Center, 676 Second Ave. S, St. Petersburg. The public is invited. Bring lawn chairs. For information, call 894-5791.

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were going to deny your faith.

"Your body gets so tense because you don't know when (the beating) is going to start. Then they begin hitting your feet, and your feet start to get numb, but they know this, so they stop for a while and then start again."

Mrs. Heibert, now married and living in Madison, Ala., has traveled to 30 countries during the past few years, speaking about her experiences to groups at schools, colleges, churches and other locations.

She will speak again this evening at the St. Petersburg Baha'i Center.

Mrs. Heibert said her beating was "very, very painful. You ask yourself why do they do this to me? You think, it is because of my faith. Do you go through that pain, or deny your faith?"

"That's the moment of decision. You can't go through that pain again, but you don't want to deny your faith. You start saying prayers, and make connection with a divine power."

She said it was prayer that gave her the strength to endure the torture without denying her Baha'i faith. "You get such a spiritual power that you don't feel that physical pain anymore," she said. "That spiritual power is within us, not outside."

After she was released from prison the second time, and escaped from her native Iran with her mother and sister, they went to Pakistan and then to Canada, where she met her husband at a Baha'i conference. The two are

ABOUT BAHAI

■ The Baha'i faith is a worldwide religion that began in 1863 in what is now Iraq. Adherents believe that God sent several prophets to teach mankind, including Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muhammed, and the latest prophet, Baha'ullah, who founded the faith.

expecting their first child in a few months. Mrs. Heibert also has earned a master's degree in chemistry.

Both her grandfather and great-grandfather were executed for their faith, she said, and she grew up in a Baha'i family. Her father remains behind in Iran, and the family corresponds with him through letters, she said.

Imprisoned with Mrs. Heibert was a 16-year-old Iranian girl who was later to become the youngest to be executed for her faith. Her story is told in a video, *Mona*, which Mrs. Heibert carries with her and shows during her presentations.

After her escape from Iran, she received many requests to tell her story, she said. "Each of us (Baha'is) takes it as our own responsibility and privilege to talk about our faith," she said. "I would like to contribute to the community."

She especially enjoys speaking to young people, she said. "I feel the future is in the hands of our younger generation, but they have lost their hope. I would like to tell them there is hope. Baha'is believe that peace is inevitable."