



**MICHELLE
BEARDEN**

Peace-seeking Bahais suffer persecution

She seems to have been blessed with an enviable life. She's happily married to a software designer, seven months pregnant with their first child and an international speaker who has traveled to more than 30 countries.

Her name is Ruhiyyih Jahanahpour Heibert, but you can call her Ruhi. And without question, you must call her a survivor.

Ruhi is a Bahai. Her faith has no clergy. It brings together people of all nations, races, economic and religious backgrounds for one common goal: the establishment of peace throughout the world. Considering the volatile nature of humanity, that's an almost incomprehensible task.

Although the Bahai faith is a proponent of harmony, it is the target of violence in Iran, where it originated. It is that country's largest and most persecuted minority. Ruhi had the misfortune of being born in Iran, where thousands of Bahais have been executed, kicked out of their homes or exiled since the overthrow of the Shah.

It all comes down to religious differences, the cause of so much hatred in this world. Bahais follow the teachings of a 19th-century Persian nobleman, who preached equality of the sexes, racial harmony and the belief that all religions, including Islam, are progressive steps in a continuing pattern of divine revelation.

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Ruhi's refusal to give up her faith led to imprisonment and torture back in 1982, when she was a 21-year-old college student studying chemistry at the University of Shiraz. For her beliefs, she was interrogated, beaten and terrorized. She doesn't know why she finally was released, because other cell mates eventually were killed.

"If you deny your own beliefs, then you deny your own reality," she says. "Bahais are not fanatics who give up our lives for nothing. But when your only choices are your life or your faith, there really is no choice."

A year after her horrific experience, Ruhi fled to Canada. Although the Iranians won their battle against her, they did not win the war. Ruhi has been telling her story for more than a decade, in an effort to bring international attention to the annihilation of her people.

"Their goal was to completely eliminate the Bahai community. But that hasn't happened. There is too much pressure by human rights organizations, and the government must be careful," she says.

Ruhi, now 31, will tell her compelling story today at 5 p.m. at the St. Petersburg Bahai Center, 676 2nd Ave. S. After her presentation, a free supper will be served from 6:30-7:30 p.m., followed by a coffee-house block party on Seventh Street between Second and Third avenues. The program will feature performances by Bahai musical groups, storytelling and poetry reading. Refreshments will be provided; lawn chairs are recommended.

The more Ruhi travels and tells her story, the more she realizes that the world is just one country and "all mankind is its citizen." She believes that only people have the power to turn this world into a heaven — or a hell.

Today, Ruhi's faith is stronger than ever. Although such beliefs resulted in the death of family members and friends and have prevented her from returning home, she has never wavered in her spiritual convictions.

Says Ruhi: "I really believe that crisis and victory come together. It certainly has in my case. I'm hoping that my story will encourage young people to not give up hope. There is goodness in the world."

For more information about today's program, call Barbara McCord at (813) 526-2318.