

Ruhi Hiebert imprisoned and tortured over her beliefs

By Jeff Dickinson

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Going to church is a freedom that many people in the United States take for granted. When you're a child, going to church to see all of your little friends is a great way to spend part of a weekend morning. But as we mature into adults, putting our religion into practice and attending church regularly often become more difficult.

It's sometimes easy to justify sleeping in on the weekend and not getting out of bed at 7 a.m. to get ready for church. After all, you worked hard all week and deserve a day to sleep late, right?

Well, religion is something that Madison resident Ruhi Hiebert doesn't take for granted. Hiebert has seen her family torn apart because they refused to compromise their beliefs in the Baha'i Faith. Hiebert is from Iran, a country in which many Baha'is are persecuted because their beliefs are considered heretical to the Muslims.

Hiebert's great grandfather and grandfather were shot in the legs and then

hanged because of their belief in the Baha'i Faith. Hiebert's parents had their crops confiscated and their house burned for the same reason. Hiebert was accused of being unclean by teachers while growing up in Iran and was even forced to sit in separate classrooms from the Muslim children.

But that was only the beginning of tests which she would face because of her unyielding belief in the Baha'i Faith.

Hiebert was arrested on Feb. 6, 1982 for the first time at the age of 24. She was stopped by Iranian police and pulled from her automobile. After being blindfolded, the police took Hiebert to a remote spot and stood her up against a tree. Still blindfolded, Hiebert heard the trigger of the officer's revolver click. She thought her life was over.

The police were simply trying to cause Hiebert to deny her Baha'i Faith, but all she did was continue to pray. After the police took Hiebert to Seppah prison, she was thrown into a 15-by-21-foot cell which was occupied by 30 other women. Then came her interrogation and beatings.

Hiebert was beaten on the soles of her

feet with a wire cable. Guards told her if she denounced the Baha'i Faith and told them the names of other Bahai's, they would discontinue the beatings. She continued to pray and the guards continued the beatings. Hiebert was beaten a total of 74 times before she was returned to her cell.

After being transferred to another prison and spending a week there, Hiebert was mysteriously released. However, eight months later she was arrested at her parents' home, along with her friend. They were taken to Seppah prison that night. Hiebert spent nine weeks at Seppah and Adelabad prisons before being mysteriously released again.

But just three days after being released, the police came looking for Hiebert again. This time she and her family managed to flee from their home and elude the police. But they decided that Hiebert, her sister and her mother must somehow leave the oppression of Iran. The three women hiked for 11 months to Pakistan.

"We had no food or supplies on our

trip," Mrs. Hiebert said. "We had to sleep out in the freezing cold and we depended on help from others to survive. But it wasn't as bad as the persecution we went through while we were in Iran."

Hiebert, her sister and her mother finally made it to Canada, where she had to go to the University of Guelph outside of Toronto. The only problem was that Hiebert had already earned a degree while in Iran, but it wasn't recognized in Canada or the U.S. So she had to go through four years of information she had already learned.

But it still wasn't anything compared to what she had been through while being persecuted because of her belief in the Baha'i Faith.

And how did Hiebert hold true to the Baha'i beliefs through all of the turmoil in Iran? How did she manage to keep a grasp on her faith when one word would have ended all of the torture and persecution?

"When you're faced with that kind of situation, it means you would deny your own existence if you denied your reli-

gion," Mrs. Hiebert explained. "My belief is not something that is separated from my life; it is one and the same. But nobody could answer how they would react until the moment comes."

Hiebert's maiden name is Ruhi Jahanpour. She met Darren Hiebert at a Baha'i conference in Canada last year, and they married 14 months ago. Darren is a computer designer who embraced the Baha'i Faith almost five years ago.

"I'd had an interest in religion for a number of years," Darren explained, "but I'd never really found one that I felt was the true one. They were all relatively the same. But the essential principal of the Baha'i faith is unity of mankind and religions."

The Founder of the Baha'i Faith is Bahau'llah, a Persian nobleman. Bahai's believe that he was the latest in a line of messengers from God that includes Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammed. The main theme of the Baha'i Faith is unity. Bahai's believe that there is only one God and that all humanity is one race, destined to live in peace and harmony.

Although Ruhi Hiebert, her sister and her mother escaped the oppression the Bahai's suffer in Iran, her father wasn't as fortunate. She said her father has been on the run for almost 15 years and is still trying to leave Iran and come to this country. But he had been facing an uphill battle.

"My father has had to run from place to place, hiding from the authorities," she explained. "I don't know if he will ever get out of Iran. I get to talk to him every once in a while, but I know my mother is lonely without him."

Hiebert's mother and sister are still living in Canada.