

Religion

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Alan Warren/
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Ruhiyyih Hiebert is sharing her story of persecution in order to bring awareness to the killing and torture of Baha'is by Muslim leaders in her homeland of Iran. She has traveled to more than 30 countries and 1,000 cities as a type of ambassador for the International Baha'i Center.

REFUSING TO

DENY HER *faith*

Ruhiyyih Hiebert survived to tell the story of Baha'i persecution in Iran.

By **YVONNE WHITE**
Times Religion Editor

MADISON — She never knew when it would happen. Sometimes it was every day, often more than once.

The pain was excruciating as lash after lash tore the flesh from her tiny body day after day for months at a time. Once she lost so much blood, her cell mates feared she was dead.

One friend, Shirin, was not so lucky. She was hung because she refused to deny her faith.

Ruhiyyih Hiebert isn't certain why she was spared and so many fellow Baha'is in her native country of Iran were not.

But she is certain God wants her to share her story of persecution to bring awareness to the killing and torture of Baha'is by Muslim leaders in her homeland. She has traveled to more than 30 countries and 1,000 cities as a type of ambassador for the International Baha'i Center.

"This is something I feel I must do," said Mrs. Hiebert, who lives in Madison and is a member of the Madison Baha'i community of faith. "I want people to know that Baha'is continue to be persecuted in Persia (the ancient name of Iran) with over 200 people killed since the Islamic Revolution in 1979."

The Baha'is have been persecuted there for more than a century, but especially since the rise of the Muslim government.

"Whenever I speak it's like the first time I ever told my story. It's very inspiring to me and I do believe God had a purpose for me to bring it to the attention of the

nations about the suffering and persecution of the Baha'is in Persia, especially since it has recently started back."

Next week, Baha'is around the world will celebrate their new year, Naw-Ruz, which occurs on the spring equinox, usually March 21. It will conclude the Baha'i 19-day fast during the month of Ala', in which Baha'is around the world rise before dawn to pray and meditate before beginning their daily fast, which is broken at sunset each day.

Mrs. Hiebert moved to Madison after marrying Darren Hiebert, whom she met at a Baha'i conference in Montreal in 1993. She was living about an hour from Toronto, Canada, and it only took three months of long-distance telephone calls to help them decide to tie the knot.

She was familiar with the Huntsville area, having spoken here on several occasions. The couple now has a 14-month-old daughter, Samineh. Hiebert, who works for SIRSI Corporation, moved here in 1987 from his home in Southern California. Mrs. Hiebert still travels some, but has cut back her schedule to stay home with their daughter.

Mrs. Hiebert, 33, was born in Shiraz, Iran, into a sixth-generation family of Baha'is. She had one older brother, who was later killed by a drunken driver in the United States, and one older sister, who lives in Canada with their mother.

Bahai's have constantly been harassed by Muslim leaders in Iran, who would suddenly show up at their door and arrest whoever was on the list, or confiscate whatever they wanted, said Mrs. Hiebert.

"They called us unclean infidels and untouchables,"

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she said. "You never knew who they would arrest or kill and no one feels safe and secure, even in their own homes."

Each time the guards came to beat her, they would say they wouldn't do it if she would just deny her faith. But she refused, knowing she would more than likely be whipped.

The first time Mrs. Hiebert was arrested and taken to prison was when she was walking along the street with her family and she was singled out by a revolutionary guard, who took her to a waiting car with six other guards. She was alone the first time she was imprisoned.

Each time the guards came to beat her, they would say they wouldn't do it if she would just deny her faith. But she refused, knowing she would more than likely be whipped.

"The worst part was that they would tie you to the bed and blindfold you, so you weren't sure where they were standing," she said. "Then you would hear them swinging the whip in the air, and they would say if I don't deny my faith,

they would beat me. You would get so tense waiting for the whip to strike that your whole body would jump when it did. They would strike you up to 74 times, but I'm not sure why the number 74."

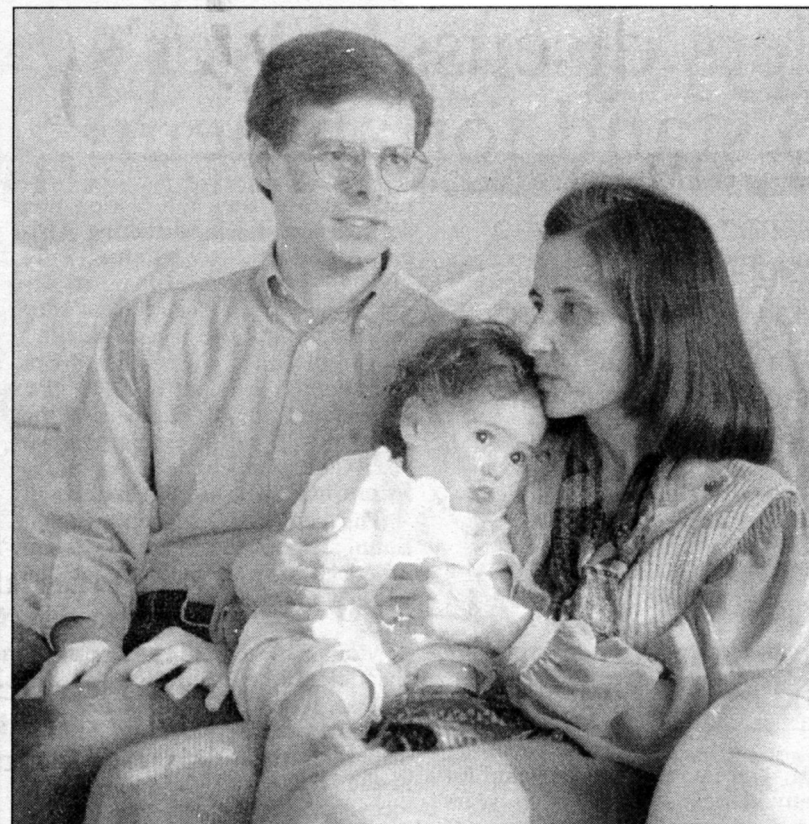
But Mrs. Hiebert never entertained thoughts of denying her faith.

"You get to the point by saying, 'Why am I here? You make a choice ...to go through the physical pain or deny your faith. Although being tortured was such a painful experience, it was also one of the most beautiful experiences I've ever felt. I would say my prayers and by doing so, I would gain such spiritual power that I didn't feel the physical pain. I needed another power beyond my physical power just to tolerate it.'"

The second time she was arrested, Mrs. Hiebert was in her home with her friend who was later killed. Each person was placed in a separate room and interrogated by the guards. During that time, her father even offered the guards tea, but they refused it because they considered Baha'is unclean. They confiscated all Baha'i books and materials from the home, in addition to the Koran, the Islamic Holy Book.

"Baha'is embrace all religions and we believe in Islam, which is why we had the Koran," said Mrs. Hiebert.

The second imprisonment for



Alan Warren/Huntsville Times

Darren Hiebert, Ruhyyih Hiebert and their 14-month old daughter, Samineh.

Mrs. Hiebert lasted several months, but, unlike the first when she was alone, she was placed in a cell with other women, including her friend, who happened to be visiting Mrs. Hiebert at her home when they were arrested.

"While in prison, we had to eat with our hands because they wouldn't give us a fork or knife, and we had to eat from separate plates, cups and blankets from the Muslims," said Mrs. Hiebert. "They mostly insulted our faith, but sometimes it was personal. But almost always it was followed by an insult to our faith. The food was not good, and we could have nothing to read or to write with, so we just sat around sharing our stories and laughing and talking. The prisons here are nothing compared to what they were in Iran."

On the third time the authorities came searching for Mrs. Hiebert, she was fortunately not home. The

revolutionary guards entered one door while her parents escaped through another door. Soon the family realized they had better leave their homeland if they hoped to live, so they left everything behind and set out on foot for Pakistan.

They walked or hitched rides for seven days to the Pakistani border, being helped by other Baha'is and even sympathetic Muslims. Not having a visa, they had to spend 11 months there before finally immigrating to Canada when Mrs. Hiebert was 21.

Mrs. Hiebert said Baha'is believe life is to be cherished and enjoyed and that they should take care of their health. She said there is no place for racism or hatred for anyone, even their enemies, and certainly no true Baha'i would commit any kind of suicidal act in the name of the Baha'i faith. But most of all, she said Baha'is are to be true to their faith.

"If Baha'is have a choice of denying their faith or giving up their life, you give up your life," she said. "If I deny my faith, there is nothing left."

Baha'i faith has history of suffering

The Baha'i faith was founded in the mid-19th century and is second only to Christianity in its geographic boundaries, with more than 2,100 ethnic, racial and tribal groups in 232 countries, according to the Baha'i International Community.

It has more than 5 million followers who adhere to the teachings of Baha'u'llah, a Persian nobleman who claimed to be a new messenger from God. He lived in Tehran, but gave up his kingdom for a life of persecution and deprivation.

Baha'u'llah's central message was one of unity, teaching that only one God exists. He said that all of the world's religions have been stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity.

Bahai's have long been persecuted. One Baha'i forebear was executed in Persia in 1850 for his teachings.

Baha'is will celebrate their new year, Naw-Rus, on the Spring Equinox, which usually occurs on March 21. It is a time of joyous celebration to mark the end of the month of fasting, Ala'.

The significance of the daytime fast (abstinence from food and drink between sunrise and sunset) is for a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, a time to make necessary readjustments in one's inner life, and to refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces in a person's soul. It is a symbolic act, and a reminder of abstinence from selfish and carnal desires.

The period of fasting ordained by Baha'u'llah is among his laws for the spiritual regeneration of mankind. Its purpose is not to make people go hungry, but to learn detachment from the physical world and appetites of the body.

For more information on the Baha'i faith, call 416-8444, or 880-3083.