

Life Stories

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Baha'i was thankful for religious freedom

Parvin Jahanpour missed native Iran but made good life

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For Parvin Jahanpour, religious expression wasn't something to take for granted.

To worship as she chose, Jahanpour escaped her homeland of Iran for Canada, a country where she didn't speak the language and knew no one. In a matter of a few years, Jahanpour, who died Jan. 18, had learned English, gone to college and gotten a good job at a university in her new home. She made a network of close friends and always opened her home to those who wanted to study her Baha'i faith.

Jahanpour always missed her native country, said her sister, Ruhi Hiebert, but was thankful to practice her religious beliefs without persecution.

"It meant so much to her, to all of us, just being free," Hiebert said. Her sister died in Hiebert's Madison home after a four-year battle with breast cancer. Jahanpour moved here several months ago, as her illness worsened, to be with her sister and her family.

The sisters, along with their



mother, escaped Iran in 1982, three years after the Islamic Revolution. The fundamentalist government began to arrest and even execute Baha'i, and Hiebert was among those imprisoned and beaten during that time.

Jahanpour, a chemist by degree, had an important job working on a water system project in Tehran at the time of the revolution and hoped to escape the wrath of the new government, her sister said.

Hiebert was in prison the day her sister, father and mother came to say Jahanpour had lost her job because of her religion. The family soon decided it had to escape Iran, as word came that Hiebert was to be arrested for a third time. By that time, the government had confiscated the family's home, money and orchards.

Their father had to stay behind, but the two sisters and their mother fled for Pakistan with a guide and another family. They were given refugee sta-

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Ruhi Hiebert
Sister of Parvin Jahanpour

tus in Canada and arrived in the middle of winter without coats. They knew little English, so, despite their college education, the sisters went to work in a factory. They quickly got student loans to attend Guelph University in Ontario.

Jahanpour went on to work at the university in the archives and then at the registry office as a schedule coordinator. She was known for her ability to keep up with information and get problems solved, Hiebert said.

The university flew the flag at half-staff in Jahanpour's honor after her death.

She was also known for her big smile and a keen sense of fashion. She loved to shop, and her beloved niece, Samineh Hiebert, loved to go with her.

When she was diagnosed with cancer four years ago, Jahanpour was determined to beat it, her sister said.

She had a home, a nice life, a big circle of friends and was devoted to taking care of her mother. She began treatment



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Parvin Jahanpour died Jan. 18.

in Canada, visiting Alabama often. When her Canadian doctors told her they could do nothing more for her, Jahanpour came here for chemotherapy and radiation, which gave her enough time to go on a pilgrimage to Haifa, Israel, last June.

In the end, the sisters talked a lot about their faith and their belief that this life prepares them for the next. Hiebert sat with her sister as she died, another moment in which her big sister was able to teach her something.

"This life is so short," Hiebert said. "One breath separates us from the next world."