



Bahareh wears a pendant with a photo of her late husband, Arash. She is one of several Bahá'ís who have sought refuge in Charlotte.

# Persecuted, imprisoned vilified, forbidden expelled on account of their religion

## seeking refuge

A small group of Iranian refugees, once persecuted for their religious faith, have carved out a place in Charlotte. But it hasn't been easy

By Tamela Rich

Chris Edwards



She keeps the trace of her smile for most of the three hours she speaks about her life in Iran, where the police can throw a person in jail for being seen in public with a member of the opposite sex who is not a relative. About life in a theocracy that won't recognize the highest-achieving math and science student if that student is not a Muslim. About the same government that won't allow an adherent to the Bahá'í Faith to attend a state university or work for the government. About the courts that won't force an employer to pay her father's wages because he's Bahá'í. About a woman who, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, needed to marry to protect herself from being raped.

Bahareh flew into Charlotte from Turkey this January, a twenty-three-year-old widowed refugee fleeing an untenable life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. She's one of the 13,000 Iranians who seek refugee status each year. She joined fifty other Bahá'ís who have come to Charlotte from Iran with help from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in the past ten years.

It's time to meet your new neighbors.

Say "immigration" in Charlotte and people likely think "illegal immigration." Bring up *legal* immigration, and talk may turn to the green card lottery or skilled workers here on a visa. But here's another form of legal immigration: refugees fleeing persecution in their homelands.

No central agency or institution tracks the number of refugees living in Charlotte, because people are free to live wherever they choose once they land in the U.S. The 2006 census report shows Charlotte's foreign-born population, including refugees and asylum seekers, at about 14 percent of the 650,000 total. Each year, between 1,200 and 1,800 refugees settle in Charlotte.

Catholic Social Services (CSS) helps more refugees settle in Charlotte than any other organization. Since 1975, the group has aided close to 10,000 refugees. Cira Ponce, CSS's refugee resettlement office director, says Vietnamese refu-

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**A**fter her nut-brown eyes and cover-model lips, the next thing you notice about Bahareh is the rectangular photo framed in gold that she wears as a pendant. It's about the same dimensions as a commemorative postage stamp. Against a nondescript neutral background is a head-and-shoulders shot of a thin, dark-haired man in a gray, open-neck shirt. It could have been taken any time in the last forty years. He looks to be in his twenties or thirties. Somehow, you can tell he is a foreigner—if he had been photographed in America, the photographer would have coaxed some tooth out of him. But this young man's photo was taken in Iran, where, for adherents to the Bahá'í Faith, there isn't much to grin about.

Bahareh, who longs to earn a Ph.D. and teach in an Iranian university some day, wears this pendant of her husband, Arash, who was killed two days after their 2004 wedding. Does she wear it like an amulet to ward off potential suitors? To honor his memory? And what kind of life prepared this vibrant young woman to tell you her husband was killed coming home from their honeymoon, without shedding a tear or even becoming stoic?

Her religion, she says, smiling, teaches her to be happy under all circumstances.



Kim Hummel

**Parvez** lost his job as Manager of Corporate Planning for a subsidiary of the National Iranian Oil Company in 1980 for being Bahá'í. He was a member of the elected assembly (now illegal) of his state capitol, and was therefore summoned by the Revolutionary Court to recant his religion. He escaped through Pakistan in 1982 and arrived in the U.S. in 1983 with his wife and one of his daughters.

Because he refused to limit his photo shoots to same-sex gatherings, photographer **Behnam** couldn't get his license to practice from Iranian authorities. (Bahá'ís have no prohibition on the social mixing of men and women.) Behnam's wife, **Masoumeh** (bottom), left a secretarial position with a private company in Iran, and became her husband's photographic assistant when the couple sought refuge in Turkey. Soon after the couple sold Behnam's photographic equipment and made their way to Charlotte. Just three days after they arrived, they were rescued by boat from the Doral apartments off Monroe Road when they flooded.



gees and those from Somalia and the former Soviet Union have dominated the CSS caseload since 2001. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a much smaller group, has brought about 700 refugees to Charlotte in the last dozen years.

Bahá'ís leave the Islamic Republic of Iran because of the way the state enforces apostasy laws. Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are protected religious minorities. But Iranian Muslims are forbidden to adhere to any religion besides Islam. Iranian apostasy laws target Muslims who convert to Christianity, Muslim sects with beliefs outside those endorsed by the government, and Bahá'ís, whose religion emerged in 1844, some 1,200 years after Islam.

Every nineteen days, on the first day of each Bahá'í month, Bahá'ís around the world celebrate what they call Feasts, where they pray, consult about community affairs, and enjoy fellowship. Bahá'ís in Iran lost the right to observe Feast with the revolution of 1979. The worldwide faith has no clergy and is administered instead by elected assemblies, which were disbanded by governmental order in 1983. Bahá'ís are not allowed to elect leaders, organize schools, or conduct other religious activities.

It gets worse. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is a government panel that advises the president and Congress. In a report from earlier this year, the panel stated, "Since 1979, Iranian authorities have killed more than 200 Bahá'í leaders, thousands have been arrested and imprisoned, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs."

This spring the Iranian government rounded up seven Bahá'í organizers, and word of their treatment and whereabouts has not been forthcoming. It is for fear of what might happen to their relatives still living in Iran that we choose not to publish the last names or cities of origin of those interviewed for this story.

**E**llen Dubin started her career in refugee resettlement in the early 1990s as a volunteer with

the Charlotte Jewish Federation, which helped Jews from the former Soviet Union start their lives anew here. With her success, HIAS headquarters recognized Charlotte as a good place to resettle refugees. It established a Charlotte branch and made her its director.

Ask Dubin why the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society is working with Christians, Muslims, Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians, and those with no stated religious preference, and she'll say that HIAS helps Jews *and others* in need. Today, it's mostly the others. In the past ten years, 42 percent of HIAS clients come from Southeast Asia and 18 percent from Africa. Of the approximately fifty Iranians HIAS has helped settle in Charlotte, there were one Jew and two Christians, the rest Bahá'ís.

For most of the last ten years Dubin has operated out of her home and car, bringing more than 700 persecuted people out of their homelands and into Charlotte. She has stories of meeting clients and conducting business in parking lots and hotel lobbies in a hundred-mile range of Charlotte, although they usually meet in apartments and the HIAS classroom for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). This year, she and her full-time staff of four, plus three part-timers, moved into their own office space on Monroe Road, where they work to place clients in housing and provide them with a jump start for living and working in Charlotte.

According to the Commission on International Religious Freedom, things have been more difficult for Bahá'ís since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power three years ago. Bahá'ís "have been harassed, physically attacked, arrested, and imprisoned...young Bahá'í schoolchildren in primary and secondary schools increasingly have been attacked, vilified, pressured to convert to Islam, and, in some cases, expelled on account of their religion."

**F**elora arrived in Charlotte last year, receiving refugee status with her son, Nima, now fifteen, after he was repeatedly harassed in school. Felora, thirty-seven, says teach-

## What do Bahá'í Believe?

According to the official Web site of the Bahá'ís of the United States ([www.bahai.us](http://www.bahai.us)):

"The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent monotheistic religions. Founded in Iran in 1844, it now has more than 5 million adherents in 236 countries and territories. Bahá'ís come from nearly every national, ethnic, and religious background, making the Bahá'í Faith the second-most-widespread religion in the world.

"Bahá'ís view the world's major religions as a part of a single, progressive process through which God reveals His will to humanity. Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is recognized as the most recent in a line of Divine Messengers that stretches back beyond recorded time and includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, and Muhammad.

"The central theme of Baha'u'llah's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for humanity's unification into one global society. While reaffirming the core ethical principles common to all religions, Baha'u'llah also revealed new laws and teachings to lay the foundations of a global civilization. 'A new life,' Baha'u'llah declared, 'is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the Earth.' "



**Poran** lost her job as a sixth grade teacher at the time of the revolution and arrived here in 1986 after being smuggled out with her two daughters, one of whom has cerebral palsy. Almost intercepted at the Pakistani border, the threesome spent two nights in the mountains awaiting safe passage. While living in Iran, Poran was warned not to put the proceeds of her home sale in the bank because Bahá'í bank accounts were often seized by the government. In a cruel twist of fate, though, the person who vowed to keep Poran's money safe never returned it to her.

**Neda** and her father **Farshid** arrived in 2005 with Neda's mother and brother. Farshid was denied entrance to a technical institute at the time of the revolution and didn't want his children to suffer to make their lives in Iran without the benefit of education and job availability as he had to.

**Raana** came here with her husband and son in 2005 because they couldn't keep jobs in Iran. Diagnosed with metastasized breast cancer while waiting for settlement in Charlotte, her condition worsened and HIAS escalated her resettlement so that she could get American medical treatment. She was accompanied by a Turkish physician on the trip and picked up in an ambulance at the airport. Treatment continues here.



ers told Nima's classmates that Bahá'ís are unclean and made other slights against him and his faith. Classmates bullied Nima with impunity, once nearly breaking his thumb, another time throwing him into a wastewater ditch. Felora, who herself wasn't permitted to ride the bus to school as a child, explains with soft-spoken dignity that she had no choice but to take flight with Nima, leaving her husband and family behind. Today Felora works as a seamstress while Nima attends a local public high school and works in a sandwich shop.

Felora's husband owns a decal printing and production company in their home-

town. Before Felora left the country, a neighbor called complaining about his "subversive" business activities. When the government sacked the home-based business and found American flag decals, Felora's husband and her brother, who worked in the business, were detained for two days. Family members, in town for the brother's wedding, feared the groom wouldn't live to speak his marriage vows.

When the men were released, the authorities told them that under no circumstances could they make American flags in the future, no matter the terms of their business contract. Felora's husband

is trying to wind down his business to fund his flight from Iran so that he can join his family in Charlotte.

At one time, the Iranian government did not permit Bahá'í children to attend schools, but now they are targeted for education in schools with strong and imposing religious ideology. Higher education is denied to Bahá'ís as a matter of national policy. A 1991 memorandum published by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council stated, "They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

Bahareh, like thousands of other Bahá'ís, was denied the opportunity to sit for the entrance examination required for admission to Iranian universities, so she enrolled in the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), founded in 1987. It was there she met her husband, Arash, whose picture she wears today.

After Bahareh and Arash quietly married at home four years ago, they drove to the northern part of Iran to visit a Bahá'í holy site for their honeymoon. The government does not recognize Bahá'í marriage certificates, and the young couple planned to affirm their marriage before a government official after their return. They never had that opportunity. Driving along a hilly construction site, a bulldozer operator's carelessness allowed a massive boulder to smash into the driver's side of their thirty-year-old borrowed car. Arash was crushed instantly, covering the unscathed Bahareh in his remains. "When they took me to the hospital they thought I must

be injured badly," she recalls. "But when they washed me, we realized I was fine."

Because their marriage wasn't legal, the government denied Bahareh widow's benefits and the money to bury her groom. Attorneys for the construction company bullied witnesses to the accident not to testify on behalf of the young Bahá'í couple, threatening that the government would retaliate against them if they did. The family pooled its resources, prepared the body for burial, and interred him in one of the Bahá'í cemeteries that had not been desecrated in the north of the country. The government has razed or allowed the desecration of Bahá'í cemeteries and holy sites in many cities.

Dubin keeps a map of the world pinned to the wall of her modest office. She often looks at it while answering questions about her work or when she explains that the only two countries where the UNCHR certifies Iranians as refugees are Austria and Turkey. At the time of the revolution, many were smuggled out through Pakistan, but that route is now closed. Some refugees will be assigned to Canada or Australia, but most will be assigned to the United

States. The U.S. State Department vets the refugees while they wait in their gateway cities. After they arrive, the Office of Homeland Security keeps tabs on them.

Dubin emphasizes that refugees and asylum seekers are more scrupulously examined and monitored than any other group that comes to the U.S. The thorough vetting entitles them to work for an indefinite time here. That is, if they can find work.

Laleh, a twenty-eight-year-old with a master's degree in civil engineering from BIHE, is one of the lucky few who eventually found a professional job here, although it took her nearly a year. She came to the U.S. after it became clear that her degree was meaningless in Iran, where she interned at two Iranian engineering firms. When she pressed her employers to take her on the payroll, the firms said they could not employ a Bahá'í for fear of being harassed by the government.

Depressed and eager to repay her family for her education costs, Laleh decided that leaving the country was her only option.

"My father should be retired by now," she says, casting her eyes to her lap.

Recently, after a year in Charlotte subsisting on an \$8-an-hour part-time job at the airport, Laleh got a job at an engineering firm. She was a week from losing food-stamp eligibility. The day after she reported to work, her apartment was flooded by the August storm. Her firm put her up in a hotel. After working a few months, Laleh hopes to visit her sister, who arrived in Texas as a refugee in mid-July.

Laleh is fortunate. She speaks English very well. Most Farsi-speaking Bahá'ís have difficulty finding even subsistence-level jobs in Charlotte before their refugee subsidies run out. It generally takes North Carolina refugees about eight months to use up their meager benefits under the state's refugee assistance program. Single-member households earn \$181 a month. If there are two: \$236. A complex calculation determines food-stamp benefits, but it's less than \$175 per person monthly. Resettlement organizations like HIAS and CSS supplement the state program with various efforts of their own, but funds are in short supply.

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Unlike Los Angeles, which has the largest concentration of Iranians in the country, Charlotte doesn't have a critical mass of Farsi-speaking neighborhoods or businesses where refugees can earn their keep while learning English. HIAS and CSS offer basic ESL courses free to clients, as does the public school system for school-age children. CPCC offers classes free of charge through a certain proficiency level. But according to Bahareh and others, it's impossible to learn the language within the span of their initial financial support package.

Bahá'í refugees have found a toehold in the Charlotte economy by working at the airport in positions like dish washing and housekeeping where limited English proficiency isn't a barrier, but it's a tough economy, and hours are in short supply. The seventeen-year-old son of one Bahá'í family dropped out of high school to join his parents and sister at the airport so that, between the four of them on part-time wages, they could make ends meet.

Bahareh's youngest brother, seventeen-year-old Sina, started learning English while they were in Turkey awaiting resettlement and then took ESL classes at his Charlotte-Mecklenburg high school. He speaks English well enough to make sandwiches at a local Subway shop owned by a Bahá'í couple that immigrated before the revolution.

Bahareh's parents and another brother don't speak English well, although they increasingly understand what's spoken. They cannot find work. Combining Bahareh's thirty hours at the airport with Sina's wages, the two of them can't support the entire family. That's why they're leaving.

As of this writing, the family plans to relocate to Sacramento, California, where Bahareh will start the fall semester at community college and Sina will start high school. A Sacramento-based Iranian Bahá'í who they know through connections in Turkey offered to loan the family the funds to move and to help them find jobs. Bahareh called social services agencies in California and verified that the safety net there is more generous than in North Carolina. Two other Bahá'ís left Charlotte for California in July after trying their best to make ends meet for six months.

Bahareh says some of her extended family was settled in Australia and Canada, which she says provide


more support for refugees than the U.S. does. She says the extra support allows refugees to acculturate and learn the language before attempting self-sufficiency. Dubin explains America subscribes to more of an up-from-the-bootstraps mentality. "Overall, the N.C. legislature is refugee and immigrant friendly but also expects them to [find] work as quickly as possible and not be a burden on the state—just as citizens are expected to work," she says. This encouragement of early employment is tough on education-focused refugees like Bahareh, who aspires to a Ph.D. in sociology. This summer she took twelve credit hours of classes at CPCC, an impressive load for a compressed summer session.

Still, life in Charlotte beats the heck out of life in a repressive theocracy. For the first time in their lives the Iranian refugees here are free to observe the every-nineteen-days Feasts. The Charlotte Bahá'í community, which numbers roughly 300, has organized itself into quadrants, and most Feasts take place in Bahá'í homes in each quadrant, while holy days are commemorated in larger rented venues. Although most are American born, Charlotte Bahá'ís come from several countries, and the Feasts are flexible in allowing for prayers in all languages. During community consultation, Bahareh and other bilingual Bahá'ís help those who speak Farsi to participate fully.

Laleh, the engineer, still thinks of America as the land of opportunity, but knowing what her fellow Bahá'í refugees face trying to make a go of it in Charlotte, she's glad she has a good education and speaks English. If Bahareh had her wish, the U.S. and North Carolina would do a better job by its new arrivals. At the risk of sounding ungrateful for the opportunity she's been given by the United States to start her life anew, she criticizes the social policies that she believes force refugees into dead-end work before they can speak the language or navigate within their new country. She was repeatedly advised to work two or three jobs for a few years before going to college, and her family was denied some forms of monetary support because she's fluent in English and physically able to carry such a workload. But this tough-minded young woman replies, "People who go to work never go to school." And Bahareh is going to go to school. ■

Tamela Rich is a freelance writer in Charlotte.

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