

# Jeffco Partners for Interfaith Action

## *Jefferson County, CO*



The purpose of religion," Bahá'u'lláh states "...is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife."

Imagine having to flee from war in your homeland and, after spending months in a refugee camp, coming to the United States to face a future without security, shelter or community. Such was the case for Farah Noor, his wife Samia Obeid and their six children: Abdul Fatah (15), Abdul Rahman (12), Masud (9), Najma (5), Anas (3) and Faud (2). They had fled their native Somalia and had lived in Kenya as refugees until they came to the United States in 2000. Halfway around the world, in Jefferson County, Colorado, they found friends and family they never knew they had.

### Key Themes

- Interfaith action
- Finding attainable entry-point to development

### Key Outcomes

- Participatory learning
- Unity



For more information, please visit  
[www.jeffcointerfaith.org](http://www.jeffcointerfaith.org)

### Beginnings

The Noor family are the latest to have benefited from the kindness and courage of a group of volunteers committed to using spiritual principles to solve community problems. The Jeffco Partners for Interfaith Action (JPIA) is a coalition of faith communities founded in 1998. During a meeting of the local Interfaith Council, it was decided that instead of merely having talks and prayer gatherings to demonstrate the ability of different congregations—Jewish, Christian, Unitarian and Bahá'í—to "get along," they should engage together in some form of action to strengthen their community.

The mission of this interfaith group became one of working together on projects that meet needs in Jefferson County, Colorado. The initial goal of JPIA was to sponsor a Habitat for Humanity home in one community within the county boundaries. The group has now built eight homes and made a commitment to sponsor two more homes in the next two years.

Consultation is integral to JPIA's work and success. The steering committee is made up of representatives from 15 different religious congregations; their role is to mobilize their respective communities to fulfill common goals. Fundraising is a major objective: each house Jeffco builds costs \$55,000—a ten-year mutual commitment of more than a half-million dollars.

Jeffco members also consult on ways to make sure that there are enough people assisting with the building of the houses, since Jeffco's work is done between Wednesday and Saturday, during what for most volunteers



*Faith in action produces tangible benefits for everyone.*

is their work week. Another challenge is integrating the families who take possession of Jeffco homes into the community in which they will live, a factor of special importance since many times these new arrivals are the first minority families ever to move into these neighborhoods.

### Getting Support

Early in the process it became apparent that it was essential to engender the support of the neighborhood where the house was being built. In Arvada, CO, where the Noor's new home is being built, a meeting was held which resulted in a number of community members volunteering to work on the house and to provide food and refreshments.

The JPIA have found that building these houses creates awareness in the community as to the challenges families can face. Participants also feel the joy of being able to help a particular family whom they come to know.

“This has been great for the Bahá'í community...since it has shown that Bahá'ís are concerned with the welfare of the entire community.”

— Richard Hutchins, Bahá'í Representative to Jeffco Partners

### Building Homes, Building Community

Jeffco feels that its members are helping to build a community based on cooperation, reciprocity and genuine concern for others. They see these efforts as a powerful expression of unified action. There is no single act that creates this atmosphere; instead, each participant offers what they can—expertise, food, prayers, concern—and it is this multitude of individual actions that forms a strong, united community.

The Noor family expressed their sense of this reality in these words: “We can't put into words how glad we are for this chance. Thank you for fulfilling the duty God lays on all of us to help each other. God bless you.”

# Parent University

*Savannah, GA*



In 1998, racial strife was tearing the Savannah, Georgia school system apart. Suspicion between parents and school officials ran deep, to the extent that parents had filed lawsuits against Savannah teachers alleging that they had abused minority students. Prejudice and distrust seemed firmly entrenched.

Michael O'Neal was a member of Savannah's Human Relations Commission when these events took place. He realized that something had to be done to build bridges between parents and schools in order to help the community resolve its difficulties.

It soon became clear that a lasting solution would have to involve parents more deeply in the lives of their children and in the school system. Parents also needed enhanced skills in parenting, in supporting their children's education and in career-related areas. Moreover, Mr. O'Neal realized there were others in the community—including businesses, hospitals and churches—who wanted to help and who recognized they could also benefit from the same programs that would increase parents' capacities.

Using the principle of consultation, Parent University was able to open the door to all of these potential partners in the larger community.

Unfortunately, Mr. O'Neal's affiliation with the Bahá'í Faith and his local prominence as a regular speaker about the Faith on TV and radio were a problem for some potential allies. At a meeting with the school board, he was asked bluntly: "Are you going to use the university to teach your religion?"

Mr. O'Neal reflected on this question, and says he came to see the importance of explicitly separating an attempt to propagate the Faith from the service goals of the organization. While no secret is made of the fact that the project is based on the Bahá'í teachings, using it as a promotion vehicle for the Faith would have made it impossible to achieve the kind of broad-based support that addressing the community's problems requires. Parent University has therefore been careful to focus on service—to parents, to children, to families and to the community.

Formally established in 2000 as a volunteer, nonprofit organization bridging the community with schools and industry organizations, the University's objectives today are four-fold: to maximize student learning, to enable parents to teach one another, to involve the family in the learning process as a whole unit and to provide nurturing support and guidance so families can realize their own success. "Parents go where they feel welcome," Mr. O'Neal says. "They stay where there is love and acceptance."

## Key Themes

- Coalition-building
- Clear assessment of need

## Key Outcomes

- Moral development
- Consultation
- Participatory learning



For more information, please visit  
[www.theparentuniversity.com/  
 georgia.html](http://www.theparentuniversity.com/georgia.html)



*Parents and children both celebrate their shared commitment to learning.*

To meet these aims, Parent University offers classes on a broad range of topics, from technical skills development to cultural diversity training. Course titles include “Developing Your Child’s Character: Learn techniques to teach respect, integrity, trust and honesty” and “Multicultural Issues I – Appreciating diversities in all cultures.” Parents are trained to help their children do their homework and take tests, as well as to contribute positively to their schools’ social environments.

### Organic Growth

Consultation continues to inform every aspect of Parent University’s work. Ongoing efforts to include other non-profit organizations and local businesses have paid off: a wide range of such organizations provide facilities, money, faculty and other types of support.

Consultation is also the method by which the board of directors makes the plans that define and expand the University’s operations. “When the board consults and forms an action plan,” Mr. O’Neal explains, “the plan is carried out with full support of all members. If situations arise or it becomes apparent that this was not the correct course of action to take then they consult and can change their course of action....This has allowed them to be strong yet flexible and provided more direction and unity for the group.”

Since Parent University’s inception, nearly 1,000 adults have participated in its programs, which have

evolved to meet students’ needs. By reflecting and consulting on the University’s projects and plans, participants are able to identify and address new challenges and new opportunities.

Recently, the school entered into discussions with the Children’s Theatre Company, the New York-based, Bahá’í-inspired program profiled elsewhere in this report, with a view toward replicating aspects of that program in Savannah. The prospective addition of this program came about organically. University staff realized that children were not being engaged while their parents were in class. Now, the children spend that time memorizing passages from spiritual and other inspirational sources and learning how to bring these texts to life through performance arts.

Parent University has made a significant impact on its community in just a few short years. Parents work within the school system and collaborate with faculty to ensure the quality and breadth of the schools’ curricula. In a 2003 interview for “Savannah Now,” Mr. O’Neal said, “I think you’ll find a different attitude among these parents toward schools.... Schools were

*“...you feel you are not alone. All parents come together.”*

once enemy territory where they entered only when their kids were in trouble. Not anymore. They’re committed to their children’s education.”

One appreciative parent wrote: “Parent University aside from my religion has been an inspiration to me. Being a single mom working, trying to provide for my daughter, it has been somewhat hard trying to make it. You always feel that you are alone. Being a part of Parent University you feel that you are not alone. All parents come together. We have classes with instructors who are familiar with our situations to give us information to cope with our problems. We get to discuss ideas that will help us get through the days. This program has created a loving and family relationship with all parents that attend. There is something there for everyone.”

# The Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI)

*Houck, AZ*



In 1985, the Native American Bahá'í Institute stood at a crossroads. The project had expanded significantly since its inception eight years previously, but the same growth which had added to the institute's capabilities also threatened to take it in a direction its founders hadn't anticipated. The participants needed to agree on a vision, and they knew that the very nature of the initiative and its future role in the community were at stake.

The skies in Navajoland seem to go on forever. The desert has a grandeur and a harsh, expansive beauty that lifts the visitor's sight to the horizon. "When the Navajos were first created four mountains and four rivers were pointed out to us, inside of which we should live, that was to be our country and was given to us by the first woman of the Navajo tribe," Navajo Chief Barboncito said to General Sherman in 1868.

Colonel Kit Carson had rounded up the Navajos in 1863 and forced them to move to a reservation on the banks of the Pecos River called Bosque Redondo, but the Navajos were struggling in their new home and wanted to return to their ancestral lands. In 1868, General Sherman and Chief Barboncito negotiated a treaty between the U.S. government and the Navajo Tribe which allowed the Navajos back onto the reservation where they live today.

The mandate for Bahá'í teaching work in the Americas comes from *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Son of Bahá'u'lláh, penned in 1916 and 1917, not long after release from His years of imprisonment in Palestine. In this series of letters He makes special mention of the Native Americans: "Likewise, these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world."

One of the turning points for the Bahá'í Faith in Navajoland took place at the Pine Springs Unity Conference in 1962, when more than three hundred Navajos declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. In the ensuing years, however, teaching and consolidation efforts seemed to stagnate.

In 1977, about thirty Navajo Bahá'ís established the Navajo Bahá'í Institute to provide a meeting place suited to the unique needs and cultural background of the Navajo people, where they could learn about the Bahá'í Faith and foster their Bahá'í identity. The Institute's focus was the Navajo population, but it was open to all peoples and its founders intended it eventually to serve many tribes. This intention was evident in its two name changes: first to the "Southwest," and then to the "Native American" Bahá'í Institute (NABI).

## Key Themes

- Youth focus
- Persistence

## Key Outcomes

- Justice
- Moral development
- Organic growth



For more information, please email [nabi@usbnc.org](mailto:nabi@usbnc.org)

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and individual Bahá'ís from other areas of the country contributed substantially to the institute's development. A \$40,000 piece of property was purchased, \$100,000 was invested in facilities and professional educators were hired to manage the Institute's administration. These achievements increased NABI's institutional capacity, but they also played a role in the confusion which NABI had to deal with in 1985.

NABI's co-administrators at that time, Jeff and Helen Kiely, explained the dilemma in a report written in September, 1985: "The physical nature of the Institute was intended by the project's initiators to arise out of the consultation, expertise and labor of the Navajo friends, as an evidence and symbol of a new strength, self-reliance and independence born of the Navajos' faith in the Promised One." Finding the best use for this outside assistance required a process of consultation, and the consultation took some time to produce its results.

Consultations on NABI's future took place among local Bahá'ís and local and national Bahá'í institutions. In the end, it was decided that NABI would be supported and guided by the National Spiritual Assembly, but its development would be primarily grassroots-driven. It would respond to, and draw its strength from, the local population it was meant to serve.

In order to avoid over-extending or scattering its energies the Institute would focus its attention on its primary reason for existence: the expressed need of the Navajo Bahá'ís for a Bahá'í learning place geared toward their own culture. The name, however, remained the Native American Bahá'í Institute, in recognition of the hope that it would grow to serve neighboring tribes, particularly the nearby Hopi, and serve as a model which could possibly be replicated elsewhere.

The process that NABI went through parallels the strategy for growth the Bahá'í International Community outlines in "...for the betterment of the world." Within this process, a community perceives a need and has the desire to address it; a simple set of actions is developed that can be managed by the community itself; participants achieve success, gain experience and increase their capacity to make and implement decisions that support their spiritual and material progress; and local



*NABI is building toward the future by focusing on young people.*

action "gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action."

In 1998, NABI was declared a training institute by the National Spiritual Assembly, and Alice and Jerry Bathke were appointed its co-administrators. NABI's emphasis on training human resources and responding to the needs of the surrounding population allowed it to develop its capacities in a sustainable way and to increase its services in alignment with local requirements.

**“These young people are the future. You have to concentrate on them.”**

The challenges were unique and enormous, but so were the opportunities. The region served by NABI covers 16,000 square miles (the reservation is 24,000 square miles), which is larger than 26 U.S. states and includes 110 Navajo and five Hopi communities in Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. Twelve non-native communities are immediately adjacent to the Navajo nation and are sometimes reached by NABI activities. The nearest major metropolitan centers—Albuquerque, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Tucson, Salt Lake City—are hundreds of miles away.

There are more than a quarter of a million people on the Navajo reservation, the majority of them youth (80 percent were under the age of 24 in 2000). The older population is primarily Navajo-speaking, while the younger generations mostly speak English. Literacy is limited, the unemployment level fluctuates seasonally, with officially reported rates of between 44 and nearly 70 percent, while 80 percent of the people live in sub-standard housing, which means that they lack amenities such as running water and electricity. Infant mortality is high and life expectancy is low. In the face of these difficulties, the local people have proven themselves to be highly adaptable, resourceful and practical.

NABI is housed on a forty-acre campus. By 1999, the Institute had nine permanent staff members, seven of them full-time and two of them part-time. They were connected to the rest of the world by dirt roads and had no reliable land-based telephone lines.

They also lacked consistent email and Internet access.

Despite this relative isolation, the development of NABI's capacity was evident in 1995, when the National Spiritual Assembly approved a new mandate for the institute which included attention to the spiritual, social and economic development of the Bahá'í and other communities in the region. Then, at the end of 1997, a new phase in the institute's development began, when it was made a regional training institute.

This process of organic and gradual systematization, which brought with it higher levels of organizational complexity, streamlined NABI's communications with other Bahá'í agencies, according to its co-administrators, and added to its effectiveness. “Our curriculum, offered on campus and in the community, is aimed at the individual, the institution and the community,” NABI reported in 2000. “It includes the Ruhi sequence, Navajo Learning Circles, teacher training, travel teacher training, personal skills development, the Core Curriculum sequence, LSA development modules, the SED sequence and protocols training.” Its primary audiences, in order of priority, were Navajos, other Native Americans, non-natives and Bahá'í pioneers in the region and regional institutions.

### **Loving Care and a Focus on Young People**

“Loving care for, and service to, the people served by the Institute has been a hallmark of the approach of the administrators and staff at NABI,” says Nancy Davis, director of the National Spiritual Assembly's Education and Schools Office. “Early on, NABI determined to adjust its focus away from providing programs on campus toward outreach and delivery of programs into the community.”

What this has meant, in practical terms, was described by Mrs. Bathke: “With the kind of population you have on the reservation,” she says, “with more than 80 per cent under the age of 24, you have to think about the young people—children and youth.”

Mrs. Bathke tells of going to visit a Bahá'í woman, a mother with three children. “She said to me, ‘Focus

your energies on my children. I have nothing. What do I have to offer them? [The Institute] has everything to offer them. Focus on them.' That was very powerful, and it started me thinking."

"Some of the older Bahá'ís, and older people on the reservation," relates a NABI staff member, "say the same thing: when we die, who will be left? You can't teach old dogs new tricks. These young people are the future. You have to concentrate on them."

NABI decided it had to go to the camps, a local term used to describe the clusters of homes where the extended family lives. "You might be talking there with

There is a place for older people, too, and for the elders, those people who have cultural knowledge, who can pass along the language, which is disappearing among young people, and share a rich, living legacy of history and ceremony.

NABI staff say they are delighted that some of these older people are making a contribution to the Institute and to the learning of the young people. Elders teach rug weaving, the Moccasin Game and how to understand the Navajo clan structure: more than 100 extended family relationships that, traditionally, are the first thing one member of the Navajo nation learns about another when they meet, and the telling of which requires knowledge of the Navajo language.

NABI holds two Youth Academies each year, timed in June and December to take advantage of school vacations. A staff member: "After the youth have been home and done their family things for the holidays, they are wondering how to put their time to the best use. We used to see them come here to visit and realized they had time and wanted to use it productively. So now we have the Academy, and the December one carries through New Year's so they have an alternative to the other kinds of activities on the reservation." Elders take an active part in these Academies, as well.

NABI staff affirm that the Ruhi Courses, which involve a sequence of lessons about the spiritual life and the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and which are carried out as group tutorials, "have given the young people a lot of confidence. The group work has also given them social skills, has taught them about service. Some of these kids, you'd think they would be the last ones to do it, but they have memorized passages from the [Bahá'í] writings. They interact with their peers from the cities, and now they have more confidence in themselves to do that.

"We had a visitor a little while back, and when he saw the youth serving the elders at mealtime, he was amazed, pleasantly surprised. 'I never would have expected that in a million years!' he said. But that's how it's going here."

*Group work has given the young people confidence and social skills.*

four or five adults, and there might be twenty kids playing around outside," an Institute member relates. "After we realized this was the case, and that we needed to reach these young people, we've started going to the camps with all the classes and devotions and training courses."

Given the size of the reservation, this approach involves much more work. NABI feels it is absolutely essential, however, and expects to continue and expand along the same lines. Nearly everything the Institute does now is viewed through a single lens: How does a program or activity reach the youth? How does it help them?





During 2004, NABI adapted courses, designed to enhance participants' parenting skills, to make the classes more useful in a reservation setting. NABI staff have given workshops based on these new courses at two "chapter houses," similar to town halls, and expect to give more such workshops in additional chapters during 2005.

### Planning, Evaluation and Impact

NABI is also engaged in systematic planning and evaluation. In 2000-2001 the Institute developed five strategic goals: to systematically expand the audiences served by NABI; to explore a redefinition of NABI's role in relation to other Bahá'í agencies and institutions and increase its collaboration with these entities; to expand its training and education of children, youth and families; to reduce its subsidy from the National Bahá'í Fund; and to increase the systematization of its training of human resources. For each of these goals, NABI developed specific strategies, identified the people who would be responsible for carrying them out and the resources they would need and established target dates for their completion.

The National Spiritual Assembly reevaluated NABI's role again in 2002, based on analyses by the administrators, the Regional Bahá'í Council for the Western States—an executive committee with coordination responsibility for Bahá'í activities in a multi-state area—and other institutions. The National Spiritual Assembly observed that NABI had made "enormous progress" in its functions and asked it to begin reporting directly to the National Spiritual Assembly while continuing to collaborate with the Regional Bahá'í Council. Later that year, NABI was placed under the supervision of the National Assembly's Education and Schools Office.

NABI is funded by the National Spiritual Assembly, and supplements its income with bookstore sales and tuition. Currently, in 2004, its projects are implemented by National Assembly staff members, including NABI's co-administrators, in consultation with an Advisory Committee, the Education and

Schools Office, the western Regional Bahá'í Council and the Auxiliary Board, an advisory body that works with individuals and Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies.

"The development of the Institute has progressed in a true spirit of learning, with plenty of experimentation and flexibility, responding to feedback from friends and active participation of the Advisory Committee," Ms. Davis says. She explains: "In addition to the core activities [children's classes, devotional gatherings and study circles], successful activities have included serving a weekly community dinner, which is combined with devotions in the prayer Hogan; an event to honor pioneers whose service to the reservation over the years has been key to the growth of the community (this event reinvigorated these souls, many of whom provided essential human resources for activities in their communities); participation in Tribal fairs and events, arts workshops; after school tutorials; offering parenting courses to the public at large; providing a source of clean water and showers for people in the community; and subsidizing the expenses of Navajo Bahá'ís for Institute-related travel throughout the western region, as well as in Mexico and China, as a means of broadening the experience of the Navajo friends."

The results are impressive. In 1999, the most recent year for which data are available, NABI's programs served nearly 10,000 individuals. Close to 2,000 received formal training, 6,000 participated in informal community development programs and 2,000 attended travel-teaching programs. Among the people trained that year were 29 Core Curriculum teachers, five Core Curriculum trainers, 18 Ruhi tutors, 16 Navajo Learning Circle facilitators, 18 Social and Economic Development Trainers and two Youth Empowerment Trainers.

"NABI's plans are essentially to continue the process," says Ms. Davis, "multiplying human resources through the institute process and continuing to build and strengthen relationships with the community."

# Health for Humanity

*Wilmette, IL*



Health for Humanity (HH) is an organization that partners with local institutions to help communities around the world build the capacity to meet their own health needs. It was founded in 1992 by two doctors, wife and husband team May Khadem and Richard Czerniejewski.

“When my husband and I first married, we knew we wanted to use our skills abroad,” recalls Dr. Khadem, an ophthalmologist. “We thought we could do this as pioneers [Bahá’ís who move to serve the Faith in a new location]. We ended up going as pioneers to Grenada, a country of over 200,000 people. There, we became familiar with health development. We learned many lessons. Our experiences there taught us what good can be done if done in the right way. The experience changed us—we realized that we could not go back to business as usual back in the States.”

They were eventually pulled back to the U.S. by personal obligations but they remained eager to find ways to apply their skills abroad. Drs. Khadem and Czerniejewski began to evaluate their situation to determine how they could proceed. An opportunity seemed to emerge when Dr. Khadem heard about something which fired her imagination: blindness prevention.

“I remember attending one women’s conference,” Dr. Khadem explains, “and heard a talk by a woman physician on blindness prevention. I became so excited about her work because it was similar to what we had been doing and wanted to do again. I spoke to her afterwards and told her, ‘Whatever you need, I’ll do.’ I left her with my number. As well, I wrote maybe 50 letters to other physicians.” At this point in her story, Dr. Khadem pauses. “Not one person answered my letters,” she says in a more subdued tone. “Not even the woman from the conference. I learned I was knocking on the wrong door.”

## Albania

One of the couple’s inspirations had been the October 20, 1983 letter from the Universal House of Justice, the supreme Bahá’í administrative body, to Bahá’ís everywhere, which encouraged Bahá’ís to embrace the cause of social and economic development. Ready to apply that letter’s directives, Drs. Khadem and Czerniejewski established an initiative called the Bahá’í Association for Health Advocacy (BAHA), met with the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States (the national governing council for U.S. Bahá’ís) for guidance and began consulting with a number of their physician friends who would ultimately play a significant role in Health for Humanity’s growth.

### Key Themes

- Power of individual initiative
- Growing complexity
- Science and spirituality combined

### Key Outcomes

- Participatory learning
- Organic growth



For more information, please visit  
[www.healthforhumanity.org](http://www.healthforhumanity.org)



### Founding Principles

Founded on Bahá'í-inspired beliefs, Health for Humanity incorporates into all projects these principles:

- Respect for all participants as members of one global family with emphasis on gender equality.
- Recognition of the essential nobility of all human beings best manifested through service to humanity.
- Search for truth and application of solutions through collective decision making and consensus building.
- Continuous improvement of systems by focusing on learning.

### Vision Statement

The goals of Health for Humanity are to:

- Continually discover and offer effective models for health development;
- Work through partnerships that are reciprocal, culturally sensitive, and growth promoting;
- Provide service opportunities for members which are both fulfilling and capacity-building;
- Incorporate into all projects HH's fundamental principles.

### Mission Statement

- Health for Humanity, a volunteer-based organization, strengthens capacities for health development by applying universal moral principles and scientific strategies.
- Health for Humanity is a health development organization established in 1992 and inspired by the principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

At the time, in 1991, they were also planning to return to Grenada for a short-term volunteer initiative to bring medical supplies and equipment to the country. Then they got the phone call that changed their lives; the trip to Grenada never materialized.

Just days before they were to depart, a call came from a doctor they were supposed to meet in Grenada.

Their friend was calling from Haifa, Israel, at the Bahá'í World Center, and said: "Don't go to Grenada. Go to Albania."

"Albania!" Dr. Khadem says. "I knew very little about this part of the world. I knew they had been under Communist rule. I knew the government there had fallen and they were completely separated from the world."

Very quickly, they made arrangements for a trip to Albania. "We had to start somewhere," Dr. Khadem recalls. "Each of us was assigned specific jobs to do.... Mine was to get the visas and medical supplies. Richard's job was to recruit the team. He was able to pull together a variety of specialists—a teacher, a businessman, an agriculturalist and others. We rendezvoused at the airport and arranged for an interpreter. That's how the eye project was born."

Upon their arrival, the project team realized they were unprepared for the reality on the ground. "They had nothing," Dr. Khadem says. "No books, no materials. No infrastructure. We had to start from scratch."

Drs. Khadem and Czerniejewski began setting up the project using the experience they had gained in Grenada. "For two years, we worked on nothing but improving the conditions there. We applied for every grant we could. In total, we raised \$300,000, including in-kind contributions. It was absolutely amazing."

This initiative led to the birth of Health for Humanity, incorporated on March 13, 1992 with a board of directors of five members elected during a special meeting at which twenty people were present. The first official board meeting was held in the Cornerstone Room of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois on the Bahá'í New Year, March 21, 1992.

### A Bahá'í-Inspired Model

The Bahá'í view of development, the Bahá'í International Community explains in the statement "*...for the betterment of the world,*" is "a global enterprise whose purpose is to bring prosperity to all peoples, an enterprise which must pursue its aim in the context of the emergence of a world civilization."



Guyana immunization clinic.

Health for Humanity supports this endeavor by systematically applying Bahá'í principles to raising the quality of human life. This application takes the form of multiple strategies:

**“Empowerment** means relinquishing control to honor the relationship,” says Dr. Khadem. When communities are empowered, they can increase their capacities to meet their own needs and reduce their dependence on outside support.

**Nurturing and simplicity**, to HH, means that the organization (a) nurtures initiatives developed at the grassroots with local partners taking the lead, and (b) begins projects simply and modestly, with the gradual development of complexity evolving as experience is gained and lessons are learned.

**Support for personal investment** is essential to the long-term success of any social and economic development project, say HH staff. “They have to do it themselves,” Dr. Khadem explains. “That’s the key! If they are not fully invested, there will be no short-term results. It’s like a marriage. The fruits of your partnership and labor come years into the future.”

**Spiritual and technical training** need to be pursued in tandem. Technical training is insufficient to

meet HH’s objectives, staff say; for communities to develop holistically and with dignity, Bahá'í principle mandates that science be combined with spiritual purpose and a moral and ethical foundation.

**Diversity** of thought, skills and culture, both within the HH network and among partnering organizations, is encouraged and expected. HH welcomes everyone who is interested in furthering its mission and vision because it is “imperative that we have individuals of

“It’s like a marriage. The fruits of your partnership and labor come years into the future.”

diverse background, training, orientation, viewpoint and skills,” according to the organization’s *Policy & Procedure Guidelines*.

**Being responsible stewards** of resources means HH is vigilant about how its services are offered. For example, explains HH’s *Policy & Procedure Guidelines*, the organization is cautious about “offering ready-made solutions in search of the appropriate problems.” A significant safeguard is how HH works with local partners in assisting them to develop their own vision for the future and then collaborating with them to attain that vision. Each environment has its unique problems, issues, resources and culture. HH focuses on its core objectives and competencies and doesn’t try to be all things to all people; for example, it is not a relief organization and does not have the resources to become involved in relief efforts.

**Projects are not called by the name of the person who initiated them.** Rather, in keeping with the principle of detachment, projects are referenced by the country or community they serve.

**A spiritually uplifting community experience** should provide the context for members’ service. Projects will usually be difficult, but volunteers can find strength by building relationships and finding inspiration in their own faith. In a situation of mutual support

and spiritual striving, pain or difficulty can become catalysts for growth.

*Consultation is used to discover truth.* Whether in the administrative office or in the field, members learn how to engage each other with patience, build consensus and approach new challenges with a mindset of inquiry and exploration.

### Grassroots Empowerment

#### Program Focus

Health for Humanity is a volunteer-based learning organization. Programmatically, HH was established to foster expanded capacity for health development around the world, among under-served communities, by applying universal moral principles and scientific strategies. Internally, HH defines capacity-building as strengthening HH infrastructure, improving the skills of HH members and providing opportunities for service that reinforce those skills. HH's program focus, which is still evolving after more than twelve years of activity, includes four categories:

- International Exchange
- Maternal and Child Health and Wellness
- Blindness Prevention
- HIV/AIDS Prevention and Education

*International Exchange* is the natural evolution of the large number of individual initiatives carried out in a decentralizing way under HH auspices. By organizing these efforts into a consolidated programmatic objective, the effect of the combined effort is expected to "lead to true health development instead of isolated bursts of service without the consistency and progression that development of capacity requires," in the words of Health for Humanity's *Policy & Procedure Guidelines*. Individual service becomes part of a managed, longer-term trajectory.

*Maternal and child health and wellness*, with a mainly domestic U.S. orientation (e.g. the Gap Community Project, below), provides opportunities for non-medical volunteers to serve in meaningful activities such as mentoring, teaching nutrition and financial skills and developing youth leadership.

*Blindness prevention* activities are not expected to draw the numbers of volunteers that other international exchange programs have benefited from over the years, though there are important service opportunities in this arena for those with specific technical skills.

For *HIV/AIDS prevention and education*, HH completed, in 2003, a baseline survey of youth in Guyana, and survey findings have been used in 2004 to begin the transition to educational program devel-



*HIV/AIDS education is a vital program focus.*

**Learning According to Health for Humanity**

- Health development requires long-term commitment and patience.
- Service to humanity efforts and teaching of the Bahá'í Faith must be separated to protect the integrity of the partnerships and to build trust.
- Gifts of service or equipment alone do not foster dignified reciprocal relationships conducive to mutual and authentic development.
- Individuals offering HH services need guidance to avoid creating dependencies or expectations that may not evolve.
- Successful projects naturally evolve from simple efforts and organically increase in complexity.
- Learning is not effective without evaluation.
- Service is not the same as development.
- Moral/ethical principles do not automatically find expression in practical application.
- Development in local capacity requires detachment and independence.
- "Sustainability" depends on creating local partnerships.
- Funding opportunities should not define project or program goals and priorities.

opment. HH also became affiliated during 2004 with provisional health authorities in Hunan Province of China and, in connection with this program, has entered into a collaboration agreement with the Department of Asia Studies at the University of California/Los Angeles, under which the University contributes translation services and, over time, will also find training and financial resources. HIV/AIDS is a vital program area which HH expects will offer significant opportunities for professional exchange and volunteer service in the years ahead.

**Partnerships and Collaboration**

HH projects require a minimum of three to five years of commitment, preferably longer. In all its program areas, HH fosters and relies on grassroots partnerships that promote this kind of long-term investment in building human and financial capacity.

Working through partnerships with both governmental and non-governmental institutions, HH has found that collaboration has greatly assisted in acculturating to local conditions and in protecting development efforts from misrepresentation and misinterpretation. HH's partnerships systematically incorporate universal moral and ethical principles into all project planning and activities.

HH's contribution to these grassroots partnerships consists primarily of resources and technical assistance, tailored to the specific situation and the partnering organization's own capacities. Resources offered include, but are not limited to specialized technical training, mentoring, collaboration on mutually defined and beneficial objectives, limited financial assistance, health education and program communications.

**Networks**

After several years of work, HH's board of directors was finding itself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of program possibilities. The board understood that, in order to grow and to make a meaningful contribution in addressing the broad array of health needs worldwide, it had to find a way of opening the gates to wider participation and a greater diversity of initiatives.

The board consulted with the National Spiritual Assembly, under whose auspices HH is organized; through these consultations, the network concept was born.

Today, in areas of the United States where a concentration of HH members exists, members are encouraged to meet together, select a treasurer and a Network liaison, and form a regional Network. Dues that are contributed to HH by members in a given Network's jurisdiction are split 50/50 with the regional Network.

Each Network is encouraged to develop its own conferences, projects, membership drives and fundraising activities. The national office will underwrite appropriate undertakings and will monitor activities to assure programs' compliance with applicable laws and the HH mission and guidelines. Network guidelines are provided on request through the national office.

## The Gap Community Project: Health for Humanity in Action

The Gap Community Project is a Chicago-based initiative that focuses on low-income, at-risk African-American youth, eight to twelve years of age, living on the south side of Chicago near the Chicago Bahá'í Center.

Following a decade of successful experience, project organizers recognized the need to refresh and expand their strategic focus, while broadening their funding base. They approached Health for Humanity for assistance.

In 1994, during a meeting at the Bahá'í Center, two youth were noticed fighting outside over a basketball. The Bahá'ís consulted about this and consulted with people in the neighborhood, ultimately deciding to invite neighborhood youth to participate in a paid neighborhood cleanup effort. The Gap Project came into being and has remained actively committed to the development and well-being of the neighborhood's youth ever since.

The Gap Project's main activity is a "work ethic" program centered on neighborhood cleanup. The original concept was that, by taking pride in the physical surroundings of the neighborhood, young people would learn to take greater pride in themselves. To this end, the project helps build long-term relationships between adult mentors and children and youth as a means of sharing real encouragement and support.

Participants meet once a week. A typical Project workday begins with prayers and includes work ethics (community cleanup), virtues training (such as honesty, patience, cleanliness and integrity), a unity-building activity, an encouragement activity, job skills training and financial training (the "Gap Bank").

The Gap Project has had a significant impact on the south side community. During the Project's lifetime it has served some 100 children, about one quarter of whom stayed with the Project for more than a year. Among one recent group of participants—each group averages between ten and twelve regular participants—three of the youth have graduated from high school, and two of these are scheduled to attend college; the third has been steadily employed for over three years, despite a long commute.

Project supporters have enriched their lives by serving as role models and mentors. The local community has benefited from a cleaner neighborhood and other direct services that the Project provided. Indeed, community residents view the Gap Project as a source of pride and encouragement.

As of this writing the Project is taking time out to assess its history and future prospects, and for its coordinator to do the same. The streets have changed since the Project was started; recruiting and mentoring this population have also changed, and it is with a view toward assessing these changes, and new approaches to meeting them, that the Gap Project is working with Health for Humanity.

In the meantime, Kelsey Taylor, the Project coordinator, points to the "Gap Approach" to working with children and youth, developed over years of intense involvement and activity in this challenging neighborhood:

- All children are born noble. Their needs can best be met by developing and guiding their inherent capacities rather than focusing on their perceived deficits.
- Relationships that are loving, encouraging and respectful help to unlock a child's potential.
- The Gap Project seeks to increase the child's ability to deal with life challenges and to discover the resources they need to do so.
- Gap youth recognize that they can be agents of change in their families, their communities and the greater world.



*Pride in the neighborhood enhances participants' pride in themselves.*



*Volunteers perform many different roles in development work.*

In fiscal year 2004, there were eight active HH Networks in Atlanta, GA; Chapel Hill, NC; Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Washington, DC; and Youngstown, OH.

HH Networks and projects are part of the umbrella HH organizational structure. HH and its board of directors are legally accountable for Network and project activities.

### **Membership**

Membership is available to anyone who supports the mission and vision of HH. The standard annual membership fee is \$125; students may become members for as little as \$10 per year. Members may qualify for reduced rates at HH conferences and receive membership cards. Business or institutional partnership donations are accepted, including cash donations and in-kind support.

### **Volunteers**

Most of Health for Humanity's volunteers are Bahá'ís. However, HH is open to working with members of any faith, and its *Policy & Procedure Guidelines* note that it is "eager to increase participation of under-represented groups of people." Service opportunities are

posted on Health for Humanity's website, [www.healthforhumanity.org](http://www.healthforhumanity.org), and in its newsletter, *Health for Humanity News*.

### **Organizational Development**

Fundraising is a critical component of HH's financial success, and the organization holds four primary fundraising events in the Chicago area each year. Total contributions from fundraising activities for fiscal 2004 were \$124,857, up 43 percent from the previous year.

In the next iteration of its organic growth, HH hopes to begin involving program recipients more fully in the decision-making process as principal actors in defining, analyzing and solving their own communities' problems. By involving volunteers and the beneficiaries of its services in training, equipment selection, sustainability strategies and the evaluation of program success, HH hopes that it will be able to accomplish more with its limited financial resources.

### **Looking Toward the Future**

What does Health for Humanity's future hold?

"I hope we will figure out how to do health development," Dr. Khadem says, so that Health for Humanity can "develop an improved model that others will follow."

The organization seems to be on the right track, with programs across the United States and in Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon and China.

Health for Humanity is invited to collaborate in health projects around the world precisely because it is figuring out how to "do health development," and its model is working.

Health for Humanity has not yet developed a formal system of organizational evaluation, but it is preparing to document the lessons it has learned over the past decade. Documentation and evaluation will allow for a more formalized and systematic transfer of knowledge.



In the meantime, the Health for Humanity website, the newsletter and other media are being used to preserve and communicate a steadily accumulating body of experience.

One of Dr. Khadem's biggest concerns is that Health for Humanity promote universal and inclusive cultural values, rather than fall prey to any assumption that American-style approaches are superior. This discipline is reflected even in choice of language, and the organization's focus is on cultivating new models that begin with local values and insights. The partnerships HH forms are real relationships, rooted in local understanding, volition and action, and are intended, at least in part, to safeguard the cultural processes at work in any project.

Perhaps most important, she wants to ensure that Health for Humanity is able to develop its capacity to serve humanity and sustain its best practices by expressing, through its actions, the spiritual principles that lie at the organization's heart.

Meanwhile, the board of directors has identified several areas that deserve attention in order to facilitate the organization's growth:

- Provide timely and effective professional support, including the oversight and coordination needed for projects, through the Health for Humanity Office.
- Use volunteers more effectively.
- Effectively articulate the "HH Story" to media, to increase awareness of Health for Humanity and ensure its inclusion in discussions of health development issues.
- Transition all existing HH projects into an outcomes-based model to more effectively monitor progress and achieve goals and objectives.
- Reflect on and refine the role of domestic projects, Networks and International Projects in the HH mission and determine how they contribute to organizational goals and objectives.
- Develop dependable financial income flows to keep pace with project needs.

- Continue advanced budget forecasting for 2005 and ensure compliance with the line item budget approved by the board for fiscal year 2004-05.

"We are in desperate need of resources for fundraising, marketing, public relations, communications and research," Dr. Khadem states.

By most standards, Health for Humanity has been very successful, especially considering the resources available to it. Perhaps one of the reasons the organization is not willing to rest on its laurels, however, is that in Dr. Khadem's eyes, a truly Bahá'í standard requires raising concepts of service to humanity to a new level.

When asked what Health for Humanity sees in the future of world health advancement, she says, "A new culture of service. A new style of operation. Current training, the way it is taught and carried out, is not adequate."

#### **How to contact Health for Humanity:**

For more information about Health for Humanity, to inquire about membership, to participate in volunteer opportunities or to give a donation call 847.425.7900, fax 847.425.7901, email or visit the HH website.

E-mail: [information@healthforhumanity.org](mailto:information@healthforhumanity.org)

Address: Health for Humanity  
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Wilmette, IL  
60091-2886, USA

Website: [www.healthforhumanity.org](http://www.healthforhumanity.org)

# Bahá'í Unity Center

## South DeKalb County, GA



Supporting Our Sisters (SOS) was developed three years ago out of the consultation of five young women living in metro Atlanta.

“We saw our Bahá'í peers and young Bahá'í girls struggling with unintended pregnancies, drinking and drugs, low self-esteem and other unhealthy lifestyles,” says Erica Dotson, one of the co-founders. “What could have caused their lives, that started out so much like ours, to have taken such a turn?” As these five women talked more with their friends, they concluded that a key component was the lack of opportunity in some Bahá'í communities to safely and frankly discuss the issues and challenges of sexuality, relationships and self-awareness that all young girls face.

These five friends responded to the need they had identified by establishing Supporting Our Sisters, which would create that safe environment for adolescent girls—from both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í homes—to come together and discuss the issues they encountered on a daily basis.

The program began as weekly gatherings but gradually evolved into two semiannual conferences. The conferences targeted girls between the ages of eleven and eighteen, including girls reared in Bahá'í homes as well as girls from the greater Atlanta area who heard about the program through flyers and email advertisements, from social service agencies and by word of mouth.

The conference structure was sensitive to the women's diverse learning styles and included interactive workshops which allowed the girls to explore concepts using drama exercises, the written and spoken word, visual arts and even dance. Each of the workshops was facilitated by local experts and counselors. Past workshop titles include “Recognizing Our Nobility,” “Discovering Your Creativity through Movement” and “Finding Our Authentic Voices.”

Today, SOS is going through its next growth stage. Seed funding presently comes from a private foundation, whose founder is the husband of one of the group's principals, but the organizers realize they must cultivate a broader base of support for their group to be sustainable. To do this, they are considering nonprofit incorporation and they are working on promotional and fundraising activities among metropolitan Atlanta Bahá'í communities.

“There could be more investment from the Bahá'í community,” says one of the co-administrators, “especially since the problems we see are among the Bahá'ís themselves, and this has not changed.”

### Key Themes

- Persistence
- Candor
- Action
- Reflection

### Key Outcomes

- Consultation
- Moral development
- Equality





*Wholehearted support promotes dignity and confidence.*

### History

SOS is just one of several programs and activities being carried out today at the Bahá'í Unity Center. Founded as the Family Unity Institute in 1995, this project was originally a collaborative development effort involving the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South DeKalb County, the local Bahá'í administrative council centered in Decatur, Georgia; Mottahedeh Development Services (MDS), an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly; and the Family Unity Institute board of directors. The base of operations they acquired was formerly a church and includes a large chapel space, an adjacent two-story building divided into offices and classrooms and a third, detached building occupied mainly by an indoor basketball court. The original concept was that the local Spiritual Assembly would use the devotional and office spaces, the Institute would occupy the gymnasium and one office, while the classrooms would be shared on an as-needed basis for the various programs each entity expected to carry out.

Preparing the facility for use and starting up service programs quickly became the focus of the attention and enthusiasm of Bahá'ís across the entire metro Atlanta area. Efforts to refurbish the Center brought out scores of eager volunteers and rapid progress was made, culminating in the reopening to

worship of the central chapel area, now cleaned to the bare floors, remodeled and redecorated.

Ample volunteer resources were also available to the Institute, which in short order inaugurated a series of literacy, GED, parenting, computer science and youth recreation activities. Spirits were high; worship was joyful and well-attended, reflecting the diverse tastes and cultures of the larger Atlanta Bahá'í community; and, with the aid of MDS, small grants were obtained for some of the Institute's programs. Potential seemed limitless.

Once the novelty wore off, however, problems began to surface. The financial arrangements that had made the facility's purchase possible began to be the cause of considerable friction between donors and institutions. Worship services had become so diverse and changed so much each week, in an effort to make everyone feel at home, that now no one felt comfortable; the mix was too eclectic to satisfy anyone. Disagreements among individuals began to undermine the base of volunteer support at the same time the Institute's agenda began to expand. Volunteers from wealthier suburbs felt increasingly uncomfortable coming to this economically depressed area, which also had some of greater Atlanta's highest rates of petty crime.

The local Spiritual Assembly turned to its national governing body, the National Spiritual Assembly, for help and mediation. Members of the National Assembly visited the community and met with individuals and institutions in Decatur and the surrounding areas. Solutions to the financial problems were worked out, some involving considerable sacrifice and generosity.

The local Assembly itself worked very hard on the issues that had arisen, focusing on its ability to consult, internally and with the local Bahá'ís, and deepening its relationship with the community. The Institute board became largely inactive; MDS focused its efforts elsewhere; and the local Assembly took on the central role in the work of the Bahá'í Unity Center, as it is now named.

The Assembly continued its process of experimentation and consultative evaluation, with the result

that today the community is united around its Center; there is volunteer support for outreach, devotional and facility maintenance programs; a number of new Bahá'ís have become actively involved in the life of the community; and relations with individuals and groups in the larger, surrounding community are flourishing.

Individual community members have also established programs that use the Center as their home; like SOS, these programs are aimed at meeting the needs of young men and women, Bahá'ís and neighbors alike. The progress on all these fronts, after so many years of hard work, brings considerable satisfaction to community members and their local Assembly, and they look forward to further learning in the years ahead.



### **Focal Points of Unity**

The Bahá'í Unity Center sits at the hub of a constantly shifting constellation of programs and activities. Three areas among the many seem most representative of Center's activities; these three focal points of unity have garnered the continuing support and involvement of all the Center's many users, and illustrate important fundamentals of the approach these Bahá'ís have taken.

### **Devotional Gatherings**

The availability on the premises of a large church-style hall made the offering of weekly Sunday worship a key focus of attention and effort from the very beginning.

The local Spiritual Assembly decided to experiment with various approaches, since there were so many unknowns associated with the new enterprise. Initial efforts were directed mainly at the current Bahá'í membership, though there was hope that the Center's neighbors would eventually stop in and begin to participate: the grounds were landscaped and a new sign was set out front to make the Center more inviting to passersby. Poetry readings, workshops of various kinds, different types of music and presentations—all were tried in order to see what appealed most to potential attendees.

Although the process was neither formal nor tightly structured, the local Assembly was alert to individuals' feedback. Gradually the Assembly realized that attendance among the Bahá'ís was dropping and also that the Center's neighbors did not respond favorably to such a loose and constantly changing program; it was too different from their grounding in the African-American congregational experience. Visitors would come, but few would stay or return.

The principal lesson derived from this early insight was that Sunday gatherings should be designed for the general public and not for the Bahá'ís, who had numerous other opportunities for fellowship. "We are near some of the largest megachurches in America," says one Assembly member; "We have to share the message with the people who pass by us, and we have had to find a way to welcome them that gives them a real alternative to that other experience." While including some new elements, the Bahá'ís realized these devotions had to be familiar and comfortable, similar in important respects to visitors' church background and retaining a small-congregation feel.

The decision to redirect the focus of the devotional gatherings was controversial for some Bahá'ís: "Too church-like," some said; "We want the devotions for ourselves," said others.

The local Assembly used the consultation portion of the Nineteen Day Feast—the periodic gathering in which local Bahá'ís pray, discuss community activities and socialize—to work through these issues and build

agreement. While there are still occasional concerns expressed, and the local Assembly is open to having the topic raised if individuals wish to do so, there is a sense of a milestone having been passed: “We realized we couldn’t go back,” says an Assembly member who has been associated with the Center since its inception. “We have this Center now and the life of

“There had to be spirit, there had to be fun. We had to feel we were making progress.”

the community has changed permanently. People mostly understand that now, and the new members feel comfortable with the way things are going.”

With further experimentation and regular evaluation of results by the Spiritual Assembly and by the community collectively at the Feast, a structure has evolved that appears to be effective. Community members report that the addition of a choir has helped greatly to create an appealing spirit. Each reading, each song and the occasional bit of Bahá’í jargon are all carefully introduced to the audience by a “master of ceremonies” so that no one feels left out. Children participate in every phase of Sunday services. Individuals who wish to offer a talk during services are directed to a committee, created by the Assembly in order to screen and train speakers; the same committee has trained five masters of ceremonies, among whom rotates the responsibility for each week’s devotional.

Policy guidelines have been worked out and published so there is a common reference point for what has been found most useful in terms of dress, the kinds of activities that can be held in the facility, and related issues, a direct response to some early surprises that showed the local Assembly “you can’t assume anything,” as one member says.

The local Spiritual Assembly measures success by numbers of regular visitors, the diversity of the attendees, and the numbers of visitors who enroll in the Bahá’í Faith. By all of these criteria, the devotional

gatherings are doing well. Attendance usually fills the hall and is proportionately about 80 percent Bahá’ís and 20 percent neighbors and visitors.

The participants are so diverse that a reporter from a regional newspaper, after attending services in September, 2004, exclaimed to some Bahá’ís, “This was a remarkable experience. It seemed like there was one of everything there: black, white, Persian, American, old and young, new members and old ones—I’ve never seen anything like it!” In the first two weeks of September, twelve new believers were welcomed into the Bahá’í community.

### **Property Development and Maintenance**

In the spring of 2003, when Sonya Bennett was hired by the Spiritual Assembly as the Bahá’í Unity Center’s property manager, she faced a number of difficulties.

The facility needed a lot of work, she discovered, yet budget and volunteer resources were limited and there seemed to be a lack of enthusiasm for doing any of the necessary tasks. “At one Feast,” she recalls, “I can still remember someone standing up and saying, ‘I wish you wouldn’t always keep asking for volunteers; it makes us all feel bad.’” The more she observed and thought about what she saw, the more she realized that when people did volunteer to work, they didn’t seem to have any fun, and she noticed that men almost never came to help, or if they did, they didn’t come back, so there were some tasks that were simply beyond the physical strength of the women who sometimes did show up. “There had to be spirit,” she concluded, “and there had to be fun, some good socializing, and we had to feel we were making progress. There had to be unity on the property if this was ever going to work.”

From that realization, the Tuesday devotionals and maintenance get-togethers were born. Every Tuesday, between ten and twenty volunteers—Ms. Bennett hasn’t stopped advising the Feast attendees how many are needed each week—arrive in the mid-morning for 30 minutes of exercise, courtesy of a local Bahá’í who is an aerobics coach; 30 minutes of prayers;

and consultation about the most important tasks the group needs to accomplish that day. Usually Ms. Bennett will bring a list of suggestions, but the consultation is open, and sometimes she will hold off on making her own recommendations to see what emerges. "Everyone has to have a voice," she says of this approach; "that's the only way people are going to really buy in to the activities."

When the work begins, the tasks are divided among teams of three or four people: "When we just divided up and assigned one person to each task, nobody had any fun. Now, with these little teams, the joking and socializing that start in the morning continue and the work goes much faster." There's a lunch break—"healthy gourmet" food prepared by the participants—and then work continues through the afternoon.

Attendance is diverse. There are now men among the helpers, and members of two neighborhood groups, the Guyana Association and the Leslie Estates Neighborhood Association, both of which sometimes rent the Center for their own activities, have also become regular Tuesday volunteers. They had started off just visiting, according to Ms. Bennett, but very soon got involved in the devotions and the day's work. In mid-September, one of them asked to enroll in the Bahá'í Faith because "she felt the love and unity among us all and, knew that flowed from the Teachings of the Faith and the consultation process we use in our work."

For her part, Ms. Bennett attests, "This is the most happiness I've experienced in years."

### Programs

The Bahá'í Unity Center's extensive program offerings, originally held under the auspices of the Family Unity Institute in the mid-90's, have been distilled down to three individual initiatives that are loosely supervised by the local Spiritual Assembly. Supporting Our Sisters, mentioned above, is primarily directed at meeting the needs of girls and young women. The "Umoja Souljahs" is for area youth, boys and girls alike, and stresses recreation, leadership and moral education,

study of the Bahá'í writings and mentoring; on average, between twelve and fifteen young people participate.

The third program is a computer lab, an individual initiative designed to nurture skills which local youth need to pass a qualifying technical exam that, in turn, makes it possible for them to apply for an array of computer-related jobs.



*Unity and joy can be expressed through movement and dance.*

### Role of the Local Spiritual Assembly

The role of the local Spiritual Assembly has evolved over time, just as the scope of the activities that revolve around the Family Unity Center has changed.

During the Center's first years, the energies of the Assembly were devoted to making the transition, and helping others to do so, from a community that had traditionally met in private homes to one that now owned a substantial facility. This transformation was not always easy. Discomfort about the manner and speed with which the Center was being incorporated into the community's life, divergent ideas about program offerings and concerns about finances came to a head in a highly contentious meeting about one year after the property was purchased.

This meeting was hosted by the local Spiritual Assembly and intended to be an open, town hall-style

discussion. According to reports, a vocal minority who were opposed to the Assembly's still-tentative ideas about the Center took control of the proceedings and refused to let other participants express thoughts that they disagreed with or proceed with the intended agenda. New Bahá'ís who attended said later that the meeting made them extremely uncomfortable. Assembly members who tried during the meeting to reconcile the opposing points of view felt that their efforts were blocked.

The local Spiritual Assembly responded to this tense meeting by consulting. First, the Assembly weighed the various comments and complaints that had been raised with the recognition that everyone at the meeting had sincerely thought they were doing the right thing. The community members who had expressed such vocal opposition had been motivated by a real desire to see the Center have a greater influence in people's lives. Some of them had made significant commitments of time and money, and some of them were finding the pace of change disquieting.

Part of the issue, as the Assembly saw it, was also a lack of clarity about the authority of the institution of the Spiritual Assembly itself, from which flowed its ability to make decisions with the expectation of the community's wholehearted support—support which would help to quickly reveal the decisions' relative merits.

The Assembly responded by compiling extracts from the Bahá'í writings on the consultative process and the station and purpose of elected Bahá'í institutions, devoting the next several Nineteen Day Feast consultations to a shared exploration of these materials. The community's knowledge increased and new ideas surfaced which the Assembly later pursued with diligence and evident respect.

The Assembly's thoughtful and loving response to what was obviously a difficult issue made a profound impact on the community. People realized that the Assembly welcomed concerns that were raised with both frankness and respect, and that this approach was ultimately the most effective.

The result of the ongoing consultations was that most of the community agreed to give a good-faith trial to the courses of action which were eventually proposed. Significantly, the newest members of the community, who had been confused in the beginning between the spiritually invigorating atmosphere of the devotional gatherings and the contentious tone of the previous general consultation, were reaffirmed and reassured in their newfound Faith.

The picture that emerges from interviews today is of a local Spiritual Assembly that is alert and open to new ideas and information, which it treats forthrightly and on a timely basis, and on which it conscientiously reports at each Feast. The institution's rigor in this matter appears to have created an overall atmosphere of safety and trust. "Consultation," one long-time Assembly member asserts, "means that Bahá'u'lláh gave everyone a voice. We all have a voice. And we are quite different, quite diverse."

This environment has made it easy for individuals to step forward to make their own contributions, whether in service and outreach programs, in sharing responsibility for the Center facility, or in supporting such pivotal activities as the weekly worship. The local Assembly is more directly involved in some aspects of this work than others, but there is the sense that it represents a solid resource for support and wisdom should individuals involved in the various programs require its assistance.

One indication of this mutual respect came after a breakfast that the Assembly hosted for the local Bahá'ís and their friends. The Assembly had told its guests that the breakfast was a gift to the community and they shouldn't bother to clean up once the meal was over. An elderly couple who had recently joined the Faith, however, went away and came back a short time later wearing work clothes. Approaching a member of the Assembly, they said, "We want to thank you for the breakfast, and we heard what you said about not cleaning up, and we appreciate it, but we want to do something. Please just tell us how we can help out."

# Tahirih Justice Center

*Falls Church, VA*



Nigerian-born Samirah\* and her mother fled to the United States shortly after her father died unexpectedly at a very young age. His family, of Nigerian Urhobo ethnicity, threatened to perform female genital mutilation (FGM) on Samirah, a practice which her father had opposed. Unable to protect her four year-old daughter from her husband's family, and facing extreme persecution herself at their hands, Samirah's mother arrived in the United States seeking political asylum for herself and her daughter.

Shortly after they arrived in the metropolitan Washington, DC area, Samirah's mother was referred to the Tahirih Justice Center in hopes that the Center could provide Samirah with pro bono legal assistance. During the immigration trial, Samirah, only four years old at the time, courageously testified on her own behalf, and was granted asylum by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) on March 5, 2002. Standing on a chair to reach the counter in her local INS office, Samirah smiled shyly as she signed her name to the documents granting her legal resident status. INS personnel, looking on, clapped for Samirah.

Following Samirah's success, her mother also obtained political asylum with the pro bono assistance of the Center's legal staff, thereby escaping abuse, and possibly death, at the hands of her deceased husband's family.

The UN reports that two million African women and girls are forced to undergo FGM each year, while an additional 12.5 million women are living under a system of gender apartheid or are killed by family relatives for violating their "family's honor." More than 50,000 women and children from Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe are brought to the United States each year under false pretense, where they are forced to work as laborers, servants or prostitutes.

## Tahirih Justice Center Programs

The Tahirih Justice Center (TJC) was created to come to the aid of women and girls facing these dire circumstances. Registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 1997, the Tahirih Justice Center takes a holistic approach to assisting its clients, realizing that "the attainment of freedom from persecution under the law is only the first step in helping women realize the attainment of justice and well-being in their lives."

### Key Themes

- Power of the individual
- Coalition-building
- Reliance on faith

### Key Outcomes

- Justice
- Equality
- Consultation
- Participatory learning



For more information, please visit  
[www.tahirih.org](http://www.tahirih.org)

\* Samirah's name has been changed to protect her identity.



### Founding Principles

The Tahirih Justice Center is founded on the belief that the achievement of full equality between women and men is necessary for society to progress. Tahirih works toward legal and social justice for women and girls as a critical step in making this equality a reality.

### Mission Statement

The mission of the Tahirih Justice Center is to enable women and girls who face gender-based violence to access justice.

### The Center's Organization

Permanent Members  
Board of Directors  
Board of Advisors  
Staff  
Volunteers

The Center's holistic approach involves three key areas of service:

- Legal Advocacy
- Outreach and Education
- Public Policy and Advocacy

The Center provides pro bono *legal advocacy* and representation in order to secure the right of women to live in a free and safe society and to protect them from human rights abuses. The Center takes on cases strategically, both in order provide direct service to women and girls in need, as well as to further larger objectives designed to "transform policies, develop regulations and set precedent so that systemic change will ensure the long-term protection of women from violence."

The Center receives approximately 50 phone calls per week from potential clients requesting assistance. These calls come from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. With a success rate of more than 98 percent of its cases, by 2004 the Center had assisted more than 5,000 women and girls since open-

ing its doors. To date, none of the Center's clients has been forced to leave the United States.

The increase in the volume of calls the Center receives every day, compared to the limited human resources available to meet its growing needs, has been a source of concern to the Center's staff and board of directors. In order not to turn away these cries for help, the Center has developed strategic relationships with area law firms such as Arnold & Porter, Covington & Burling, Hogan & Horton and Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering to help represent some of the Center's clients. These and many other firms enable the Center to help more and more clients.

Through the Center's *outreach and education* program, its clients are provided with medical assistance, post-traumatic psychological care and social services. These services enable women to learn skills, accumulate knowledge and feel supported during the months it takes their legal cases to find resolution. Volunteers from local medical practices, social service organizations that work with immigrant populations and psychiatrists familiar with traumatic abuse are among the many groups that help the Center's clients. Additionally, the Center gives training for police, domestic violence shelters and social service agencies, and also serves as an expert resource for interested media outlets.

The Center believes that changing the current legal environment is essential to providing women with protection from violence under the law. As a result, the Center's *public policy advocacy* program seeks to influence policy-making and thus create an environment that favors the protection of its clients.

To this end, for example, the Center supported the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by holding meetings with Congressional representatives, participating in coalition meetings and organizing press conferences. The Center also lobbied the U.S. Department of Justice for legal relief for the victims of trafficking. The Center was interviewed extensively by the National Institute of Justice and met with government agencies and coalitions of immigrant rights

organizations as part of an effort which led to the implementation of a new visa category for women who are victims of trafficking.

In 2002, the Tahirih Justice Center began pioneering work against the mail order bride industry, a network of businesses that provide a service to men seeking to marry “traditional wives.” It has become apparent that an increasing number of women have been paired with abusive men. In launching its “Campaign to End Exploitation by International Marriage Brokers,” the Center and its pro bono legal attorneys are proposing federal legislation aimed at regulating this multibillion dollar industry and requiring that records of the potential husband’s criminal background and marital history be provided to brides, that agencies which provide this service be made accountable and that litigation services be made available to women needing protection.

### Organic Growth

The Center’s structure and capacities have evolved organically. As a result of winning a landmark asylum case in 1997, one that set national precedent, changed U.S. asylum law and opened the country’s doors to women seeking protection from gender-based persecution, Layli Miller-Muro, then a recent law school graduate, was flooded with requests for

assistance from other women fleeing similar persecution. The need was obvious from these requests.

After careful deliberation and consultation with professors, legal advocates, family, mentors and friends, Ms. Miller-Muro set out to incorporate a Bahá’í-inspired, nonprofit organization capable of meeting the needs of a larger number of women. The new organization’s approach would be based on the concept that the advancement of civilization is predicated on the realization, in action, of the equality of women and men.

Named after Tahirih, a renowned Bahá’í poetess and martyred champion of women’s rights in mid-19th century Iran, the Tahirih Justice Center became a reality through the support and donations of office space, equipment and volunteer services from local Bahá’ís and others residing in the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Unique among legal advocacy and service organizations in Washington, the Center’s growth has been borne on the shoulders of dedicated volunteers who, with Ms. Miller-Muro, worked to implement the vision for the Center.

In the beginning, the majority of TJC’s volunteers were under the age of 30 and maintained full-time professions outside of their work for the Center. Their energy, dedication and creative drive helped the Center realize its potential during the years that followed.

Structurally, the Center has developed a system of three interlocking circles of decision-making and guidance. These circles consist of a body of five “permanent members” whose membership remains constant for life or unless one member resigns; a board of directors whose membership is decided by the permanent members; and a board of advisors invited by the board of directors to provide professional and strategic support.

The core of the Center’s organizational structure is the board of directors, currently comprised of three Bahá’ís and six non-Bahá’ís. Through the years, the makeup of the board has fluctuated in its Bahá’í to non-Bahá’í ratio, yet the board continues to maintain its vision of unity in action. Meeting monthly, the board’s main aim is to consult about the Center’s strategic



“The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment.”

— ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

needs, direction and future goals, and to guide the fundraising efforts that are the lifeblood of the Center’s activities.

For the first time since its inception, the board elected a non-Bahá’í woman to the office of chairperson in 2002. A senior partner at the Law Offices of Arnold & Porter, Leslie Nickel has achieved a dynamic balance between the spirit of the Bahá’í Faith, which animates the Center’s organizational philosophy, and a vision of how to run a growing legal services practice. Once composed of members mostly in their late 20’s, the board is now made up of individuals with between ten and twenty years of professional experience. It is felt that the board, and the organization it exists to grow and protect, are at a new stage in their evolution.

When asked how the Center implemented a distinctively Bahá’í approach to social and economic development, Layli Miller-Muro, the Center’s executive director since 2001, cited consultation as the key to effective decision-making. Specifically, the board has consulted about refining both its internal and external operations.

Internally, Ms. Miller-Muro mentioned that the board of directors and its executive management team, comprised of the board’s elected officers, consulted and reflected on the processes by which organizations develop the institutional capacity required to meet the needs of their clients, staff and surrounding communities.

Very early in its development, the Center’s board began to hold annual facilitated retreats for strategic planning purposes. Ms. Miller-Muro explains that “both board members and staff used the retreats as an opportunity to engage in the process of reflection, feedback and evaluation” of the Center’s programs and policies. Through this process of reflection and evaluation, the board has grown in its capacity to incubate sound organizational policies, operational approaches and external strategies.

Externally, Ms. Miller-Muro reports that the Center has been challenged through the years to define clearly what TJC’s core values are. As a Bahá’í-inspired organization, TJC has had to achieve a balance between advocating on behalf of the women it serves through its public policy program and maintaining a nonpartisan stance in the increasingly divided political milieu of Washington. The Center’s nonpartisan approach is frequently tested when it works alongside organizations that stand on one side or the other of the political fence.

Collaboration with other organizations has also led to another challenge: the need to decide what to do when its accomplishments are erroneously attributed to partner organizations. In this type of situation, the Center is faced with the question of whether to correct the error.

Rather than confront a sister organization in order to receive credit, the Center has determined that it

must continue to exemplify its policy of acting in a spirit of service. Ms. Miller-Muro has felt from the beginning that the Center's success should be measured in the way it affects the lives of its clients rather than the attention it generates.

When asked to point out significant trends in TJC's current work, Ms. Miller-Muro responds that the staff has developed exponentially in their capacity to manage more complex activities and perform at a high level of competence. Although the staff is relatively young, in comparison to the Center's sister organizations, their professionalism has gained the respect of the legal and public policy community. Ms. Miller-Muro notes, for example, that funding organizations the Center used to call to set up interviews now call the TJC to learn about new organizations to which they should consider providing grants.

In the same vein, Ms. Miller-Muro observes that the Center is being noticed for its measured approach to developing its stance on issues of policy, legal reform and advocacy. Many organizations in the highly politicized capital environment are quick to take positions the myriad issues which are the subject of legislative debate. By contrast, Ms. Miller-Muro points out, the Center is careful about the positions it takes and arrives at its conclusions through a process of reflection and analysis. It would rather err on the side of caution than express an opinion which is contrary to the teachings of the Faith or other religions, or which in the long run might harm the Center's clients.

In Ms. Nickel's view, TJC is emerging from a consolidation stage. The departure of its previous director of



*Ensuring women's happiness and safety is worth the effort.*

legal programs in early 2004 highlighted the Center's need to rationalize its structure, codify its processes and organize and properly store its records using current technologies. This process is nearly complete, Ms. Nickel says, and opens the way for the next developmental stage. Fundraising will, in her view, require focused attention if the Center's programs are to continue to evolve and expand; registering with government organizations and increasing efforts to secure grant funding are some of the approaches to be studied.

In addition, she says, there may be new programmatic areas in which the Center may wish to become active. "We expect to spend a good part of fiscal 2005," Ms. Nickel affirms, "looking again at the needs of our clients, reflecting on our programs and assessing whether there are new areas of law the Center will

### **A Client's Gratitude Expressed**

*"Thank you for your help, your support, and your unfailing devotion in obtaining my asylum. Thanks to you I can sleep without fear. Thanks to all your staff for your humanitarian support to help justice triumph in favor of women and girls throughout the world who are victims of rape, genital mutilation, domestic violence, etc. May God Bless you all!"*

need to work in, in order to address unmet needs of current and future clients.”

### Reflection and Analysis

Inspired by the Bahá'í writings, the Center has adopted processes by which it brings itself to account on a routine basis. Several times throughout the year the Center performs as many as six specially designed, comprehensive evaluations of its work.

The Center's Operational Manual states: “the Center relies upon the daily process of consultation amongst Board members and staff members to constantly evaluate its programs, performance and achievements.” By applying the tool of consultation, the Center is able to ensure that staff, the board of directors, and volunteers are able to put into practice the lessons culled from the evaluation processes.

One example of the power of consultation emerged from the board of directors' recent consideration of a question that is fundamental to the Center's operations: What does it mean to be “Bahá'í-inspired,” and what impact does this reality have on the organization's daily routine? The Center's staff, which includes agnostics and members of various faiths, were increasingly demonstrating a lack of clarity regarding the Center's spiritual foundation. Eventually the matter became so apparent that the board decided it had to take action.

Bahá'ís were a minority on the board and they were uncertain about the impact any decision on this subject might have on the integrity of TJC's Bahá'í foundation. As the consultation unfolded, however, the board, led by its non-Bahá'í members, encouraged the Center's executive leadership to implement a stronger position on matters of Bahá'í principle and make the Center's grounding in Bahá'í concepts more explicit within the organization's business practices and policies. Dawn Browning, a longtime board member, says this encouragement provided a fresh perspective and a forward-thinking approach to the future of TJC's operations.

One change which resulted from the board's encouragement relates to the practice of exemption from work for Bahá'í holy days. The Center's leadership decided that the Center would close for business each year in observance of Naw-Rúz, the Bahá'í New Year, as a reminder of the Center's Bahá'í roots.

The Center's Operational Manual codifies other board policies evidencing the resolve to remain true to core Bahá'í values and guiding principles. “We decided,” says board chair Ms. Nickel, “to be up front and transparent with current staff and prospective new employees about the Center's inspiration in Bahá'í teachings. The board wants to make clear this is a tradition we intend to preserve.”

The board encouraged a stronger stance on matters of Bahá'í principle and identity.

Employment candidates, for example, are told that prayers are said at the beginning of most meetings; that institutionally TJC is rigorously non-partisan on issues with political dimensions; and that the Center does not purchase alcohol with its funds for Center events, though staff are free to do so if they choose. A brochure elaborating these and similar points is included in the candidate's packet of materials.

### A Guiding Hand

During all the stages of growth the Center has traversed, a guiding hand has been ever-present and has enabled the Center to move forward in meeting the many needs of its clients. Non-Bahá'í staff and board members have often commented on the obvious presence of a “divine hand.” One staff member proclaimed that she had “never been with an organization where so many miracles occur.” A sister organization remarked, during a collaborative effort to assist the Center on a high-profile case, that TJC has more than its fair share of luck.

**To Be Bahá'í-Inspired**

- The Bahá'í Faith prohibits the consumption of alcohol by individual believers. While this position is not imposed on individuals affiliated with the Center, the Center does not use its funds to provide alcohol.
- The Center does not take a position on abortion.
- The Center sees men as part of the solution to the problems its clients face and consciously encourages the participation of men at every stage.
- The Center does not subscribe to any political viewpoint or agenda, and does not participate in partisan political debates.
- The Center values the perspectives of all, thus the religious as well as non-religious views of all may be freely expressed.

The case in question involved a Ms. Kharimi, a prominent Afghan journalist who had been forced to flee Afghanistan because of her outspoken opposition to the Taliban, and who had had to leave her family behind. With a refugee identification and resettlement process that was painfully slow and no processing center in neighboring Pakistan, Ms. Karimi feared her family would have to wait months, in life-threatening circumstances, before they could flee to the United States.

The only thing that seemed to work in the Karimi family's favor was that the Taliban's leaders did not know where they were. This seemed to be about to change when friends of the family, in the face of threats from the regime, promised to reveal their whereabouts.

The Center responded on a Friday afternoon with a vigorous campaign to mobilize support for Ms. Karimi's family. Within a short time the Center had gained the government's attention and was working with high-level staff at the Department of State, the White House and INS. By Monday, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had joined the effort. Within days, through these agencies' coordi-

nated efforts, officials were dispatched to bring Ms. Karimi's family to the United States.

Like many of the initiatives the Tahirih Justice Center is involved in, this case was about more than the crisis facing one family. The Karimis' plight seemed to tap into a widespread sentiment among the people who work with refugees that there was a need to better coordinate and streamline the resettlement process, and as a result the repercussions of this and similar cases potentially will be felt by many thousands of people.

In its study of the Karimi case, the Tahirih Justice Center reports that "a high-ranking official at the State Department...conveyed to the Center's staff that never before in her career had she seen her agency so completely unified over one issue. It was unprecedented." The official added, "I don't know what happened, but all the stars were in the right place."

The stars guiding the Center seem to have been aligned from the beginning. To many of the people who have helped guide the Center through its successes—influencing national policy, building an organization able to meet the growing needs of the populations it serves, cultivating relationships with international media, distinguishing itself in the legal and policy arena for integrity and professionalism—the key to the Center's development lies not just in their own dedication, hard work and energy, but to the power of consultation and the mysteries of divine intervention.



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