

Living Gardens

An Oral History of Members of the Bahá'í Faith

Akriti Poudel

Acknowledgments

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Stories Featured

Karen Darling - 65, works with small children, from California but lives on the East Coast.

Kasha Akrami - Early 20s, student and coding-lover, from Colorado but attending Stanford University.

Mahmudul Hak - 50s, teacher and author, from Karachi but sharing the history of and residing in Bangladesh.

June - 18, incoming freshman, Tanzanian-American from Virginia moving to Seoul to attend Yonsei University.

Nisa Far - Late 20s, Dental Student and Colorado-native who spent time in San Diego.

Keona Blanks - 19, Human Rights Activist at Stanford, from Hawaii but moving to Japan for the fall.

1970 National Bahá'í Convention in Paraguay.



The National Community joyfully welcomed the arrival of two new pioneer families from the United States: Clyde and Pauline Johnson, and Moses and Lucinda Edwards and their child Johana.

Karen Darling

"In the Garden of Thy Heart, Plant Naught but the Rose of Love"

When I was 8 years old, I dreamt that something would happen to me in November of my 19th year on this planet.

When I was about three years old, my mother had a mental breakdown. My siblings, Regina, Kevin, Greg, and I lived in suburban Los Angeles at the time; and while I do not recall what happened during that time vividly, it was a time period that would go on to shape my life in ways I couldn't imagine. My mother was in the hospital at the time, so my brothers lived at my maternal grandparents' house while my sister Regina and I were cared for by my paternal grandparents. Despite barely remembering any of the events that occurred at the time, I remember that when my mother came home from the hospital it was the scariest moment of my life. When she came home, she would seat all of my siblings and I down, and tell us the same story. Since I was so young, I believed the story--and it mortified me. My mother told us that our family was special, that Christ would return, that my family would go around to every capital of the world sharing the news of the return of Christ and that soon, the world would end.

This belief kept my family away from society, and societal exclusion increased the amount of fear inside of me. My family was the “sick family”--we were not allowed to visit the homes of others and we were not allowed to invite others to our own home. At some point in fourth grade, I remember my entire world stopped moving for a second, and I realized: nobody else knows we are all going to be dead, I’m the only one who knows. It was the most grim and lonely feeling in the entire world. When I was around 12 years old, my family moved and I started having doubts about the validity of what my mother had said. When I moved, I also skipped a grade and became even closer to my sister than I had been before. We tackled high school together but went our separate ways when she went to UCLA and I went to Humboldt State.

My roommate at Humboldt State, Marianne, was unlike anybody I’d ever met. She was the first Bahá’í I thought I’d ever met. She and I would argue constantly about the Bahá’í faith, and I thought that her worldview was far too positive to actually believe in. Who knew, that years later, I would have that same worldview that I was once so opposed to.

After my 6 months at Humboldt State, I moved back to Los Angeles at 18, married my high school sweetheart, and was absolutely miserable. I got pregnant right away, and my worries started spiraling in October as I gave birth to my daughter. The next month was November of my 19th year--and I was still certain that something was going to happen to me. The only possibility I could really think of was death itself. I panicked and wrote my sister a letter just in case I was actually going to perish within the next month.

To my surprise, I ended up surviving, and the only thing that changed in my life was an anniversary gift I received from my old college roommate, Marianne. Marianne had sent me *God Loves Laughter* by William Sears. This book came to me at a difficult time in my life, and so I saw it as a sign to look for more books like it. I searched the library for books by Bahá’u’lláh, but only found very heavy texts that were quite overwhelming. I called Marianne and asked her what I should do, and she suggested I look in the phonebook to find a Bahá’í community nearby. I found a community in Glendale, California, and decided to attend a fireside. I finally was able to find some digestible reading, and for six months, I read. After those six months, I decided it was time to declare that I was a Bahá’í. I had nobody to go with me to the local Bahá’í center, so I dragged Regina along. I walked into the local Bahá’í center and abruptly stated: “I want to become a Bahá’í”. Unfortunately, the committee of the center was in a meeting at the time, so Regina and I had to wait until they were finished. During this time, Regina tried to convince me to flee, but I refused. I knew this was something I wanted to do, something I had to do.

I don’t remember most of the questions that the committee asked when I decided to declare, but I do remember one question that really took me aback: “do you know that Bahá’u’lláh is the return of Christ?”

It was a question I had never even considered before, yet this idea was lingering at the back of my mind for years. This idea that had once been a sign of fear in my life for so long, no longer was. “I believe he is who he says he is”, I stated, “if he says he is the return of Christ, that means he is.”

Regina declared 6 months later, got married, and moved to China. Life had moved so quickly during that time, that my sister and I did not have the opportunity to dive deep into our faith

together. It wasn't until years later when Regina and I were driving to an education conference in Lou Helen, a 6-hour drive from where I was living, that I asked "isn't it funny how we both became Bahá'ís?"

Regina suddenly said, "wait, did I forget to tell you about my conversation with grandma?"

"What conversation?"

"When I first went to China, I visited Grandma to say goodbye. As soon as I walked in she asked 'are you and Karen still that religion?', I nodded and grandma said 'you two and Lucinda'."

I was profusely confused, "who's Lucinda?"

"Lucinda, the woman who was our grandmother's housekeeper. She came over almost every day. That's why every time I heard a Bahá'í quote I felt like I had heard it before, remember? It was because Lucinda had said it to me all of those years before. I remember asking Lucinda why her hand was darker than mine then, and she told me that 'we are the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch'".

In a time of chaos in our lives, Lucinda provided us a refugee we couldn't even acknowledge at the time. Lucinda had instilled the seeds of the faith to us years ago, and I only wish she could see what her small efforts had brought upon my sister and I today.



ABDUL BAHÁ AT LELAND STANFORD JR. UNIVERSITY
PALO ALTO, CAL. OCTOBER 8, 1912.

Kasha Akrami

“Let the Bahá’í youth by the power of the Cause they espouse be the shining example for their companions.”

One thing I’ve observed about many Bahá’í students in the United States that leave home for college is that many of them either tend to affirm the faith or divert away from it when they leave. At Stanford, there’s actually a pretty big history of the Bahá’í faith on campus, since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had visited and spoken there years ago. His image is still pretty vivid on campus, but most of the Bahá’í students on campus are actually in graduate school.

During my time as an undergraduate student, I decided to take time to discover myself and personally take a break from the faith. I was not too involved in the faith until another Bahá’í undergraduate student came to the school this year, and I once again started attending devotionals from time to time. I like the fact that I was able to take a break, actually, as the faith really focuses on an individual connection to God. I think I was able to hone in more on what that means to me.

Bahá’ís that are our age are a lot more involved in politics, and a lot more politically active. Which is crazy to think about because 20 years ago, Bahá’ís would have never done that; but I think that points to the fact that the faith is very flexible to change. Some things, however, are more difficult to change. But that’s why the independent investigation of truth is so important. People interpret things in completely different ways as well, so the perception of big ideas really does vary generationally. It’s still a very very young religion, meaning that inherently it does emphasize youth and new perspectives. Other religions really emphasize seniority, but the Bahá’í faith has a huge emphasis on youth--which is so important as it actually leads to change.

I think youth, and all people, of course, can get really hung up on various aspects of the faith. I think we can tend to get stuck on these ideas and struggle to grapple with them as changes

in our daily lives. While I was having a conversation with my friend once, I was reminded that the core takeaway from the Bahá'í faith is that you accept that religion is presented in the manifestations of God and that Bahá'u'lláh is the most recent manifestation of God. Everything else: laws, principles, and all, are merely added on. The belief of Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent manifestation of God is the most important belief. That is not to say that the other aspects are less important, but rather it helps remind what we should be focusing on as we think about faith.

In today's day and time, most people our age are not only thinking about religion, but also about politics, work, and lifestyle.

I am so grateful that I was raised in the Bahá'í faith. It is an extreme privilege to have this upbringing because you are taught to love all human beings regardless of who they may be. The beauty of it is that my upbringing means that I don't focus on the race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status of other individuals. In today's world, it's not only the appropriate thing to do but the right thing to do.

Sure, there is a lot of debate surrounding aspects of the Bahá'í faith. But there are debates in every religion, that is inevitable. Do you know what the biggest Christian debate used to be? The question of how many angels can fit on the pin of a needle. And while that may seem like a minuscule problem, it was still an issue big enough at the time to cause a debate.

The structure of the Bahá'í faith in itself really allows for change and understanding, and really avoids bigger problems that we may see in other religious structures. But it does seem like sometimes, the faith can feel quite isolated, it can feel like an echo-chamber. If you don't break out of that insulation, there is no room for growth. The faith leaves us with the tools to achieve what all want today: to treat others with kindness and to be treated with kindness ourselves. But as many answers, as it provides, it leaves as many questions that don't always have clear answers.



Mahmudul Hak

"Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."

I had actually heard about the faith long before I chose to become a Bahá'í. Karachi actually has one of the oldest Bahá'í communities in South Asia, and many Bahá'í families own small tea shops there. So I knew a lot of people that were a part of the faith, but it always felt like something distant that wasn't a part of my own community, so I stayed away from it. When I was younger, I was generally further away from spirituality in general. I paid less and less attention to religion throughout my teenage years and just did my own thing. The only thing that brought spirituality back to me was reading.

I loved reading, and I loved visiting local bookstores. Around my younger years (when I worked at a bank), I read a Bahá'í book from a Karachi bookstore, and the book really ignited my interest in the faith. What struck me the most was the concept of progressive revelation. Being surrounded by so many different religions, cultures, and languages, I felt that progressive revelation was a concept that made the world around me make more sense. I became interested in the faith, but due to familial matters, I had to quickly pack up at this time and move to Bangladesh.

Although I was ethnically Bengali, I had always lived in Pakistan and felt like I had moved to a place I didn't quite understand; literally as well—I couldn't even really speak Bangla. But once I settled down, I did what I always did, and went to a small bookshop in Dhaka. There, I found the same title that I had read in Karachi, and it felt like a sign. So I went to the local Bahá'í center, read, discussed, and in 1987 I declared that I was a Bahá'í.

The Bahá'í community in Bangladesh is pretty small, but it has been around for a while. In fact, there was even a recorded Bengali Bahá'í in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lifetime. For a lot of Bengali Bahá'ís, however, their journey started in Burma. Lots of Bangladeshis would travel to Burma for work and would find themselves engrossed in the large Bahá'í communities there. When Pakistan and India separated, a lot of these migrant workers came back and spread the faith in Bangladesh. The partition caused so much mass migration that a lot of non-Hindus (such as Bahá'ís/Muslims), were forced to relocate over to Dhaka. This was especially prevalent with Bahá'ís with Muslim backgrounds in India. This was due to the fact that many of them were born with Muslim names, and at the time of partition, the argument "I am not Muslim even though my name is" wouldn't do. That's how the Bangladeshi Bahá'í community came to where it is now.

I am the author of the first Bangladeshi-Bahá'í history book. My book is an official resource for university students at the University of Dhaka, and many students have written their Master's thesis on the topic of the Bahá'í faith in Bangladesh. I think it is something important to consider, as the faith in South Asia is so easily overlooked. I can only hope to do more research and writing about the Bahá'í faith here in Dhaka and surrounding areas in the future.



June

“Be not grieved if thou performest it thyself alone. Let God be all-sufficient for thee. Commune intimately with His Spirit, and be thou of the thankful.”

I just graduated from high school--I had the “pandemic high school graduation”. My real name is Rebecca, but I go by June. I grew up in Minnesota, and I consider it my home, but for the past eight years, I have lived in Virginia. My family is Tanzanian, but we moved here so my parents could go to graduate school.

My year abroad was a long year away from my family, but it was also a year filled with amazing experiences. I changed a lot that year, and I think a part of it was because I had so many more responsibilities. I went to South Korea on a scholarship that I had to do research for, so keeping up with that was a bit difficult.

Before I left, I was having my “existential crisis year” (in terms of the faith at least). I didn’t know exactly what I did or didn’t believe in, but I still tagged along to all the Bahá’í events with my family.

Halfway through my experience in Korea, I was feeling really homesick. My dad sent me a package during this time, and it was filled with tablets that he had printed out. I had generally felt overwhelmed by these types of heavy writings--but this time it was different. This time, when I read these tablets, I actually understood and felt what they were saying. I forgot which tablet I read, but I remember it was actually about being away from home and away from family. Being homesick is

difficult and grueling--but I think the tablets helped me strengthen my relationship with God and reminded me that I wasn't alone. It really gave me a new perspective on the faith.

My parents met at the Bahá'í center in Tanzania. Tanzania has a big Bahá'í population and has lots of Bahá'í institutions as well. I think there are daycares and a primary school among many things, so the faith is definitely ingrained into many institutions.

During my crisis phase, I was not enjoying life very much. I was thinking a lot about how the writings always claim that God will be there to guide you, but I did not feel that guidance in my life whatsoever. I didn't know what I was doing, and a lot of things in my life felt quite purposeless. I think I was really frustrated because people would tell me that I had a "greater purpose in life" -- but I didn't know what purpose was. Every day felt the exact same then, and nothing felt like it mattered.

Even when life seems pointless almost everything happens for a reason, and each thing that happens is just setting you up for the next thing that will come about. Don't be hung up on those downsides, because things will always come up better later on.

One important lesson I've learned is to not base your values on the opinions of others.

I always think of that common quote everybody has a sticker of: "I have no room for prejudice in my heart". I think that everybody, including myself, who has a sticker like that sometimes forgets that our actions may not align with that idea completely. At the end of the day, I'm imperfect and I am a human being--so that prejudice may still unknowingly manifest itself in me. Because of this, I have to remind myself to check myself often. I think as I've gotten older, I've realized that people that are a part of my life, people that I love and are important to me, are also imperfect. I think just that thought alone makes me feel better about it all.

I used to always wonder why we used to hear examples about 'Abdu'l-Bahá only, but we'd never hear examples about Bahá'u'lláh--the promised one. But now I've realized that it's because Bahá'u'lláh told us to learn from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and not himself. Bahá'u'lláh, too, was imperfect before his revelation. He did not want to be an example merely because he was the messenger. That thought helps me a lot as well. It reminds me that Bahá'u'lláh, too, was a human being.

but despite this, they always came together in a shared space and really thought about how they were going to serve their community. Junior youth are really able to see things that we can't, and I think because of that serving them has really given me a lot of peace.

I also read a lot, studied a lot, but mostly, I discovered the faith in practice. This (independent investigation of faith) is a long-term process, and I'm still going through it today. But I think making service the center of my life for a while was really transformative in that it shaped all the decisions I made in the future because I thought about things in a completely different way.

San Diego is a completely different story: there, you are able to see how more youth means more impact. They have a lot of youth, a lot of people serving, and their framework of the faith definitely comes through with service. They are really doing deep work there, not just serving but asking questions like how do we build relationships, or connect with people? It is such a welcoming community that I was able to plug right in because my own experiences were already helpful to the questions they were attempting to answer. The age and culture diversity is also one of the most impressive things about San Diego, and the way that it is expressed is so cool. They really have an outward orientation: they are constantly teaching others, inviting friends, there is a really strong pattern of teaching there.

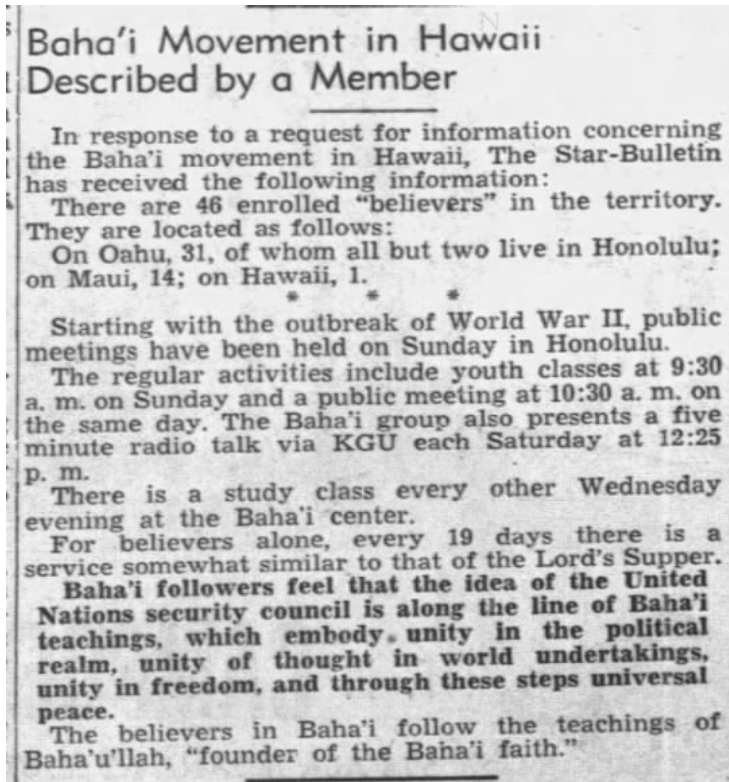
Something that I really appreciate about the faith is that there is such an emphasis on youth, and the opinions of youth genuinely feel like they matter. When you look at any big movement in society, it's usually youth-led--and I think that says a lot about the way the faith is aiming to change the world.

There is a lot of divisiveness in our country. We haven't heard each other with humility. The faith really allows us to respond to these pressing issues of systemic racism and hate towards the LGBTQ+ community. Bahá'ís are ways looking to find the root of injustice, but doing it while remembering to preserve the oneness of humanity. In times like these, it's important to remember that every single person is a soul from God, that we shouldn't say we don't say color, but we should appreciate what different people of color bring to the table. I think America is going through an identity crisis--we are constantly praised for our diversity but we don't have the tools to handle it, and to try and repair something that is already broken is futile. The primary role of Bahá'ís is to protect people who are being prejudiced against, so we have to constantly remember to check our own prejudice in the process. I think a lot of these problems have to do with spiritual illnesses, but we can't do away with spiritual illnesses if we don't have spiritual remedies.

I think that If I wasn't a Bahá'í, I would be very overwhelmed and not equipped to respond to these challenges that we are facing right now. If anything, this time should just bring an increased awareness of oneness, an increased awareness that every human being is worthy of life. That means that if black trans individuals are being killed, they too need to be as worthy as anybody else--every murder should have the same response. I think this time is showing more than ever that laws aren't enough--we need to tap into the spiritual roots of problems because material roots just don't work. And while it seems difficult because the systems we have in place are hundreds of years old, it can actually happen quite quickly.

I think that all humans struggle, we are living in a world with struggles itself. We each have our own tests, but I think the overall goal is to elevate and build our souls for the next life. I think

something we should try to avoid, however, is that judgment. How can I know my friend is struggling if they are afraid to tell me something because they think I'll judge them? Everybody falls short, but the most important thinking is helping each other through it. The most important thing is to be self-aware, instead of looking at what other people are doing. It's time to stop looking towards other Bahá'ís and our relationships with them, and it's time to start looking at our own relationships with the Covenant and God.



Keona Blanks

"My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee."

My mom's side is from Japan, and my dad's side is from America, but I have spent my whole life in Hawaii.

I really want to dedicate my life to the service of humanity, and for me, that's the biggest takeaway from the faith. I think compared to a lot of other people my age, I know what I want in life already—at least in terms of a spiritual, value-based level. I am really passionate about human rights, specifically in relation to Law and Policy, and my goal is to keep working on this for the rest of my life.

The students at Stanford understand the problems with the world and what they should do; yet, they don't really do anything. I think the lack of action is something in itself that really bothers me.

Going to college was really different. I didn't have my own personal spiritual life before, but once I was in the setting where I was alone and without my family or community that is the only choice I really had. It was uncomfortable at times as well, I remember first moving in and being too afraid to tell my roommate, "I have to pray, can you not talk?"

I also think peer pressure is very difficult to deal with, but eventually, I figured my way around it. I think that independent investigation of truth and reality is extremely important, and I

think that's what being in a college environment has really taught me. In high school, I was really involved in service—but it wasn't necessarily out of my own choice. I enjoyed it, of course, but it was more so what I was doing with my family and community than a personal choice. I remember I even had a crush on a boy one time so I went to a junior youth meeting, and once I was there, I just kept going to them.

I loved living in Hawaii. Everybody is so loving, and it is so diverse. I attended normal public schools for my entire life, which pushed me to grapple with the quality of education I was getting. I often felt that by not being on the mainland, I was missing out on high-quality education.

Another thing that's brought some perspective into my life is judgment. Many human beings, Bahá'ís included, can be quite judgmental of others: their words, their actions, any flaw that they may see.

At Young Adults Weekend in February, we discussed how even 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that he was not a perfect Bahá'í.

I once told a Baha'i individual a small lie one time, it wasn't anything major, but when I told this person that it was a lie the person ended our relationship. This built-up facade of love was completely shattered, over one human imperfection. The more that these situations exist in society, the more averse you can become to being a spiritual human being because you associate spirituality with this idea of judgment, of shame, of broken relationships.

For a long time, my mother would always tell me to choose a career that would help people, but a while ago, I didn't want to help people at all. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I thought the idea of helping people in general just wasn't for me.

Junior year, I realized I was always doing service. Perhaps almost by habit even, but eventually it really gained a lot of value in my life. I was receiving signs from everywhere that maybe I was meant to serve—even the Myers-Briggs test said I am geared towards helping others. I remember thinking it was ridiculous then, but it was right—and it was accurate in regards to what I have become. My senior year I became really invested in environmental science, climate change, and environmental injustice—which is the inequity that comes up as a result of climate change. And while I'm not too fond of the actual science aspect, I do think that this is something I want to pursue for years to come (with service and human rights attached, of course).

I think that being a Baha'i in this time has really affirmed my choice to go into justice. In the Bahá'í lens, we have always seen that the current systems don't work. Others are finally seeing that too, and working to dismantle those very systems—building something more just and equitable in the process.

Since studying in the mainland, I've actually learned so much more about how corrupt American systems actually can be. In Hawaii, racism and inequality exist, but it is definitely not at the threshold of the mainland. For me, "diversity" was incredible, but it was normal. In fact, diversity should be normal, and it's odd to see how in the mainland it's not, it's something that the states here are still striving to achieve.

