

Dr. Mahnaz Aflatooni Javid



Mahnaz Aflatooni Javid was 12 when she first saw malnourished kids living in huts of old cardboard and plastic in her city of Tihrán, Iran. She promised herself that she'd never forget them. In 1999, she and two friends started Mona Foundation, which helps educate kids as a way to end global poverty. It's named for Mona Mahmudnizhad, a 17-year-old Bahá'í who taught children in Iran, but was killed for her religious beliefs in 1983. The foundation has helped over 75,000 kids and families in 18 countries!

Because her parents feared she would be prevented from going to college, Mahnaz moved to the U.S. at age 14.* She studied computer science and later earned a doctorate degree in educational leadership from Seattle University. Along with being president of Mona Foundation, she works for Avanade, recruiting new talent for roles in technology. She lives in Washington, U.S., with her husband, Shannon.

Q: What's your favorite childhood memory?

A: We visited my grandparents' house . . . They had a big, old, old, old house in Iraq, and . . . we would go there every summer . . . We put these shows together for our family . . . Every night, we had a different thing going . . . It was all about stories we were hearing on the radio and everything. We were all making it up.

Q: This issue of *Brilliant Star* is about service. Why is it important to be of service to others?

A: I think service defines who we are as human beings . . . Development is not something you read in books . . . Development only happens in service to others . . . I don't think that we actually can become who we are meant to be without service to others.



Mahnaz (age two, front row left), with her brother, sisters, and parents around 1953. She says her mother and father set an excellent example of charity and service.

Q: What was the most challenging experience for you when you were a kid, and how did you handle it?

A: We were Bahá'ís, and . . . we were targeted and pointed out and everything. But, you know, it was a way to prove yourself, and I think it became the way that [my] character . . . carried me through all the transitions later on . . . In . . . Iraq . . . we would go to the [Bahá'í] Feast, and . . . people would throw stones at us . . . We didn't let on, but it was pretty bad.

Q: Why did you leave Iran and go to the U.S. as a teenager?

A: My parents were very intent that all of us would get . . . our higher education. And there was no chance for the school . . . In Iran, [during] those times, [young men] would . . . ask for your hand when you were . . . in early high school . . . My father really hated that. So he . . . shipped us out . . . My father always wanted the girls to get the best education they could. And we did.

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Above: Mona Foundation helps schools around the world, including Badi School in Panama (left) and the Anis Zunuzi Bahá'í School in Haiti (right).

PHOTOS BY MONA FOUNDATION



Left: Mahnaz talks about education at a benefit held by actor Rainn Wilson in 2011.

PHOTO BY DAVID CONGER

Q: What is Mona Foundation, and what led you to help start it?

A: My parents were very, very charitable . . . My father used to take food off our plates and give it to whoever came to our door . . . We lived in this household that basically gave away everything . . . [Later], when I was getting my Ph.D. . . . I went to [a conference on] social [and] economic development in Florida, and . . . I saw some of these projects, and . . . [the] wonderful work they were doing with so very little . . . I got together with a couple of friends . . . It took us about a year to get our non-profit, and then we focused really on education . . .

Q: How does the Bahá'í Faith influence your work?

A: The Bahá'í Faith is all I am and who I am. It defines who we are . . . all the principles and our life values are centered around the Faith. It . . . influences every decision I make . . . And I won't compromise that for anything . . .

Q: Tell us about a Mona Foundation project.

A: [There are] several schools in Haiti that we are supporting . . . We visited . . . after the major earthquake there, and . . . while 80% of the infrastructure was crumbling and there was . . . no water . . . these Bahá'í schools stood . . . They became the centers of community activity . . . In some of these countries, the levels of poverty [are] just *unbelievable*. You know, you think about . . . whether or not you eat every other day or every day . . . whether or not you actually have shoes to wear . . . [It's] very, very inspiring and moving to see the strength of [the] human spirit . . .

Q: You recently received an award from the University of Washington as one of the 2014 Women of Courage. What does courage mean to you?

A: Courage means that you know that everything is possible. And that you go after it . . . In life, you can't give up. And I think that's a trait that I learned when I was a kid, as they were . . . throwing stones at us . . . You can't give up to your own fears . . . It's really a practice that means perseverance and confidence that you're doing the right thing . . .

Q: If you had one wish for *Brilliant Star* readers, what would it be?

A: Go serve. I think that we would not need Mona Foundation if service was . . . embedded in our culture and in our practice as a way of life. And I think that my wish for everyone . . . is to be able to really think of service as the fundamental thing we do . . . And if you choose service, you will be happy across everything you do.