

# Barbara Talley



**C**ould you pick apples from sunrise to sunset almost every day? For Barbara Talley, that was part of childhood. She was born in New York, U.S., in 1954. When she was two, her mother passed away, and she and other siblings spent time in foster care. Later, three siblings lived with relatives, while Barbara and two sisters lived with their father, a migrant farm worker. The kids worked when they weren't in school. They moved often, so it was hard to make friends.

Barbara was determined to create a different life. In high school, her math skills earned her a chance to learn computer programming. After graduation, she worked as a programmer and trainer in New York and Washington, DC. Training others sparked her interest in teaching people to end racism, appreciate diversity, and develop life skills. In 1987, she started a training company. She's now a motivational speaker and author of six books.

Since 2019, Barbara has focused on encouraging African American and Indigenous Bahá'ís with conferences and study programs. She lives in Maryland with her husband, Gile, and their daughter, Radiance.

**Q: What's one of your favorite childhood memories?**

**A:** At the [migrant worker] camps, after we worked all day, we'd go into the camp, and grown folks would be laughing . . . or shooting dice. But we could put some money in the jukebox . . . I loved dancing.

**Q: What was the most challenging experience for you as a kid?**

**A:** At two years old, I [lost] my mother because of a car accident . . . My dad fell asleep at the wheel . . . They immediately put us in [short-term] foster care. Some of the people were very, very mean . . . My earliest memories are people just beating us or yelling at us.

**Q: What qualities helped you succeed, despite the difficulties you faced?**

**A:** I never took no for an answer . . . I never said no to an opportunity. . . . I have resiliency because I'd gone through so much, and I survived . . . I like learning. I like books . . . Learning gives you opportunities . . . If you stop learning, your options are limited . . . If you continue learning, you strengthen [your brain's] neural connections.

**Q: What's your advice on finding a career path?**

**A:** What would you do even if you didn't get paid? If you do what you love and you're continually getting better at it, life is joy, and people want to see joy . . . Follow the joy and the unique gifts God has put into you.



At age 19, Barbara moved to Rochester, New York, to work for Eastman Kodak, a photography company. She also did fashion modeling part-time. She taught herself to model from a library book.

Questions and  
Answers with an  
Inspirational Bahá'í



**Above:** Barbara (center) and her husband Gile (behind her) gather with their kids and grandkids near their home in Maryland in 2021.



**Left:** Barbara reads one of her poems at the 2017 Bahá'í National Convention in Illinois.

**Q: What life skills are most important for kids to develop?**

A: “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” [the Bahá'í writings say]. So look for your own gems. It's that stuff that you get excited doing . . . Then try to figure out, how can I use this in service to humanity? Become excellent at it. Continue every day . . . And don't be afraid, because fear will stop everybody . . . Just try, and don't beat yourself up if you're not perfect . . . your own spirit will guide you.

**Q: What tips do you have for making a conversation meaningful?**

A: The best conversations [begin with] being interested in the person . . . Find out what they're already interested in, what they're already excited about, what questions they already have . . . I think we should listen more and talk less . . . 'Abdu'l-Bahá did a lot of listening.

**Q: When kids experience prejudice, what's your advice about how to respond?**

A: If you experience it, tell people how you feel. Now, they may not change . . . I've learned [that] maybe others won't stand up for me, but the greatest injustice [is] if I don't stand up for myself . . . If you are witnessing it, stand up for that person so they know they're not alone . . . If they continue to do it, remove yourself from that space . . . You don't have to put up with it.

**Q: In 2019, you launched the ARISE Pupil of the Eye Conference, mainly for African American Bahá'ís. Tell us about that.**

A: I had this vision of bringing Black people together so we could heal each other. My co-chair Sue St. Clair and I created a safe space to nurture and encourage people. The Bahá'í writings emphasize Black people's paramount role in the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh said we're like the pupil of the eye through which the light of the spirit shines forth. No other faith gave us this importance. We needed to come together, just be ourselves, and not have to educate other people and fit into their cultures . . . Studying these teachings helps Black people find meaning and know they matter. People are walking with their backs a little straighter and their hearts fuller of love. Now there are a lot of different [outreach] things people are doing . . . the race conversation is front and center, where it ought to be.