

Layli Miller-Muro



What would you do if you met someone in serious danger? When Layli Miller-Muro was a law student at American University in Washington, D.C., she met Fauziya Kassindja, who fled to the U.S. from Togo, Africa, to escape forced marriage and violence. Layli and others took action to help. After a court granted Fauziya protection in 1996, she and Layli wrote a book about the case.

Layli used the money she earned from the book to create the Tahirih Justice Center. With a network of over 1,000 attorneys, the center provides free legal services for women and girls. Today, it has an amazing 99% success rate. Layli has won many awards for her work and frequently speaks out for women's rights in the media. She lives near Washington, D.C., with her husband, Gil, and three children, Serena, Amira, and Kalil.

Q: What's your favorite childhood memory?

A: I think my favorite childhood memory is horseback riding. I was an avid horseback rider, and really, really loved to be on a horse and galloping across a field.

Q: What was your most challenging experience growing up, and how did you handle it?

A: My high school had some problems with racism. In particular, there was a black student dating a white student, and other students were upset by that. And so it created a controversy. I was able to work with the principal, along with our local Bahá'í youth dance workshop, to do some educational programs at the school on race . . . I think it was my first opportunity to play a leadership role in changing a social problem that I saw.



Left: For a dance performance at about age 11, Layli's costume was inspired by cowgirls.

Right: Layli, about age 12, rode a horse named Bars. Layli says, "I enjoyed horses and horseback riding so much that I now have a collection of horse statuettes from around the world."

Q: You're now a successful lawyer, but you said that you once had trouble in school. What was that like and how did you overcome it?

A: I was not a good student. I didn't like school very much, and all the tests I took told me that I wasn't very smart . . . I believed the tests, and so I didn't do very well, and it wasn't until I was later in life that I realized my strength was in dealing with real, live situations rather than remembering facts on paper.

Q: How did you decide that you wanted to be a lawyer?

A: Well, I didn't want to be a lawyer. I went to law school, I think, because I wanted . . . an understanding of the laws that I was trying to enforce. So I wanted to do work in civil rights or human rights, and I wanted to use the law to help do it. But . . . I didn't want to go into court, and I had negative stereotypes of lawyers . . . Bahá'u'lláh had other plans and gave me the opportunity to work with a woman that helped me realize that . . . as a lawyer, I could have amazing opportunities to create change.

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Left: Layli and Oprah Winfrey were both honored at Diane von Furstenberg's 2012 DVF Awards in New York City, given to women who "transform the lives of other women."
Right: Rainn Wilson helped Layli at a fundraiser for the Tahirih Justice Center in 2011.

Q: Who is Táhirih, and why did you name your organization after her?

A: Táhirih was an amazing woman . . . a very courageous woman . . . In her most famous act of defiance, she . . . removed her veil [and appeared] before an assemblage of men [in 1848], which was . . . shocking . . . I think her legacy was made clear when she was executed and her last recorded words were, "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you [cannot] stop the emancipation of women."

Q: In your work, you see a lot of injustice and suffering. How do you keep a hopeful attitude?

A: I keep a hopeful attitude for two reasons . . . I am inspired by the women who have demanded help, and the fact that they have stood up is positive. And then when we can help them, their lives are positively transformed . . . The other reason is because we know in the Bahá'í Faith that all of these little injustices that we see, all of the forms of violence that we experience, are all just parts of a process of growth, and that ultimately . . . we are making progress.

Q: You've talked about a process for achieving justice. Can you describe it?

A: In order to do something we know we have to do, we have to maybe be *made* to do it . . . Laws can help us do that. But we won't really, really change if we're just following a bunch of rules. We have to believe in the rules and understand why they're there and *want* to follow them and *want* to be better people. It isn't until we have that belief inside our hearts that things will really change.

Q: What advice do you have for kids who would like to make a difference in the world?

A: I think if they see someone being bullied, or someone being made fun of, or someone being treated not as well as they would want to be treated themselves, that they should stand up for that person. That's justice.



Layli lives near Washington, D.C., with her husband, Gil, and their children, Amira (left), Serena (middle), and Kalil (right). Layli says one of her goals is to "be the best mom I can be."

Q: What advice do you have for kids who feel nervous talking about the Bahá'í Faith?

A: I think . . . having the tools that the Bahá'í Faith gives us is like being a superhero no one knows about . . . We have insights and wisdom that come from Bahá'u'lláh, and we are more powerful than anyone around us can realize . . . If they're able to share their gifts with other kids and give them the same superpowers, it would be a tremendous gift.