

Ruhiyeh Thabet



Growing up in Oman, Ruhiyeh Thabet loved stories of Bahá'í heroes. Decades later, these stories gave her strength and courage when she was imprisoned for her faith.

Born in 1978 to a Persian family, Ruhiyeh excelled in school. She went to college in Jordan and studied English. She then taught in the United Arab Emirates and met Nadim Al-Sakkaf, a fellow Bahá'í. They married and moved to Yemen, his homeland, where they had two sons. Ruhiyeh taught English while earning a master's degree in Educational Leadership.

In 2011, Ruhiyeh launched a group to empower youth and women. After a civil war began in Yemen, persecution of Bahá'ís led to the arrest of Ruhiyeh and her husband in 2016. They were imprisoned and their home was ransacked. After a month, Ruhiyeh was released but forced to end her work and Bahá'í activities. She and her sons fled to Malaysia, and months later, her husband joined them.

They moved to Luxembourg in 2018, and Ruhiyeh co-founded a group that helps immigrants learn French and find jobs. Today, she enjoys freedom in a diverse, welcoming community.

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

A: Sitting with my twin sister as our mother read [to] us . . . I was five or six when she first read about Táhirih, who defended the equality of men and women and gave her life . . . I felt her courage and sense of justice in my heart so strongly.

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

A: We had an Islamic religion teacher [who] knew we were Bahá'ís and made negative comments about our faith . . . One day, she made a very negative comment and some of my classmates stood up to her and said, "That's not fair." Their courage really touched us . . .



At about age 5, Ruhiyeh (left) and her twin sister, Roya, loved listening to their mother read stories about Bahá'í heroes—especially courageous women.

Q: What experience set you on the path to your current career?

A: [When I was a teen], my friends would talk about how their siblings failed in school, and mainly it was English [that] was difficult . . . They were very afraid that their parents will punish them. I felt in my heart that I could help them . . . A local organization offered a hall where my sister and I could offer classes for English . . . We had over 100 children in the class every summer . . . We [created] games to teach them the subject . . . We felt so joyful, especially when they passed the exam . . . That [motivated] me to stay in the field of education . . .

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Above: Ruhiyeh and her husband, Nadim (center), with sons Sam (far left) and Youssef (far right).

Left: In her office at Excellence for Integration and Development (EFID), Ruhiyeh interviews a young woman to determine what training and support can help her settle and find work in Luxembourg.

Q: In 2016, you were imprisoned because you're a Bahá'í. What was that like?

A: It was a very, very frightening experience . . . It was very cold [in the prison] . . . We got terrible food that would always make us sick . . . [Guards would] bang on the door at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. and call you for [questioning] . . . No one in the family even knew where we were . . . I was so worried about our children . . . I prayed so hard in prison that God would bring them comfort, peace, and calm . . . [Later] we tried to explain, when they went to school and it was all over the news, it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's something to be proud of. We were not in prison because we did something wrong, but because we refused to stop believing in love, unity, peace, and justice . . . This experience . . . made them more resilient and courageous to be champions of justice and service . . .

Q: What is Excellence For Integration and Development (EFID)?

A: When we left Yemen and we started our new life in Luxembourg, I often thought about all the people in the world who, like us, had to leave their homes because of racism, war, or deprivation of their basic human rights . . . We didn't see them as refugees, but [we saw] them as friends and people with so much talent and potential . . . [We] equip them with skills and knowledge to . . . contribute to their new society . . . Being a refugee is not who you are. It's not your true identity . . . They come with a desire and hope to make a better future . . . So our job is to empower them [to] improve life for themselves and their children.

Q: This issue of *Brilliant Star* is about creating a new society based on justice and unity. What can kids do to help?

A: Join a junior youth group and invite their friends . . . Read the needs of their community. Fixing, planting, gardening, cleaning up the neighborhood, preparing meals for people in need, consulting to solve a problem . . . Service [can be] visiting neighbors to pray together, play music, read inspirational stories . . . Doing things together binds people, rather than just talking about it.

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

A: Remind yourself that you are a noble soul created by God to know Him . . . and help make the world kinder . . . The world can be very noisy . . . Find that little space of quiet in your heart every day to pray and ask yourself, what kind of a person does God want me to become? How can I fulfill my full potential?