

Abdollah Zibaei – Iran

1061s, Team 88, Pall-ETS, English 2nd language

A global village at my fingertips! ... this was my chance to experience such embracing unity in diversity across my team members from New Zealand, England, Iran, Nigeria, Indonesia and Canada. It was a heart-warming experience to be part of a vibrant team committed to making a positive difference in the world.

I was deeply fortunate to have Nick as my team leader. He was the model of a servant leader – professional and well organised, providing guidance and encouragement, listening and humble, and also doing the hard work. We also had a passionate and talented member in Richard Knight from England who used his contacts with architects to design the Pall-ETS Emergency Shelter system as the concept for our team project. I am sure Richard will become a high flying entrepreneur one day using business to make a difference – and he may even drive our Pall-ETS project to success!

For Iranians communicating with foreigners can be risky and Facebook is banned. As an Iranian member of the Baha'i Faith it is doubly risky. For more than 30 years the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has denied the Iranian Bahá'í community access to higher education, employment and making contributions to advance Iranian society. I struggle to understand why the government finds Iran's largest religious minority such a threat. The Faith requires Baha'is to be well-wishers of government, and committed to peace and unity. It seems the problem is that the Baha'i Faith postdates Islam, sees all religions as part of one common faith, and has no clergy.

I am fortunate that the Baha'i community has found a way for Baha'i like me to get a tertiary education. Almost 27 years ago, the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), was set up for Iranian Baha'is excluded from access to higher education in Iran. BIHE offers 17 degree programs in the sciences, social sciences and the arts. In 2011 there were 475 volunteer faculty members that include accredited professors from universities outside Iran who assist as researchers, teachers and consultants.

Since then, BIHE has been attacked by the authorities in Iran as part of the pattern of suppressing the Bahá'í community. On May 22, 2011, officials from the Ministry of Intelligence entered the homes of at least 30 of the academic staff of the BIHE, seizing books, computers and personal effects. A total of 16 educators were arrested and transferred to Evin prison. They were subjected to interrogation under harsh conditions, and then charged with activities against national security, were denied access to defence lawyers and were handed four to five years prison sentences. Among them was my brother, Ramin Zibaei, who has a Masters in Psychology, and was one of BIHE's directors and received a four-year sentence. We have a pleasure of visiting him in the prison, behind a glass wall once a week.

Today the BIHE is still operational and Iranian Bahá'í youth have the opportunity to enroll in their favorite programs and continue their studies, albeit in challenging circumstances. These young Iranians love their country and their aim is to finish their studies, graduate and start working in building a better future for their fellow men.

I am finishing my last term as a BIHE student enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts program majoring in Business Management and I am looking forward to finishing my studies and finding suitable employment. Taking part in the Global Enterprise Experience has been a valuable part of my academic learning, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity.