

WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Yalda Modabber

TITLE: How The Iranian Hostage Crisis Led To Inclusion & Empathy In Preschool

SUMMARY: An Iranian immigrant is creating a new generation mindful changemakers inside of a Farsi-language preschool in Berkeley, California.

WEB TEXT: Yalda Modabber, the founder of a Farsi language preschool and afterschool program called Golestan Education in Berkeley, California, is in a small cafeteria with a bunch of preschool kids. Today they're eating rice with a Persian chicken and pomegranate stew called Fesenjoon. And they're singing about it.

"Every day before lunch the kids thank where the food comes from. In terms of like, the source of the food," says Yalda "And then after lunch they thank the people that prepared the food, collectively as a group."

The kids give thanks to their food, the weather, the plants. Their teachers. Each other. Yalda, is a scientist by training, says research shows that not only does being grateful make more mindful and kind people, it's actually good for your mental and physical health. So throughout the day, Golestan's teachers cultivate the moral and emotional side of their students, not just the academic side. And their work is being noticed on an international level. In fact, last year, Golestan, was given the prestigious honor of being named an [Ashoka Changemaker School](#), the only preschool in the world to be recognized by Ashoka as the leading global nonprofit education group.

"I see these kids as being the people that are going to go out in the world and that are going to be so passionate, and so empathetic, and kind, and inspiring to other people, that just by virtue of these qualities they will create change," says Yalda. "They will inspire other people to want to be like them. They will draw people to them and they will have aspirations that are greater than their own good. They will recognize that their place in society is much greater than just their immediate surroundings."

Yalda's immediate surroundings changed a lot as a kid. She was born in Boston, then moved to Tehran, Iran's capital, as a little kid. Then she moved back to Boston in 1979. That was the year of the Iranian Revolution, and the year 60 Americans were taken hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Iran. It wasn't a good time to be an Iranian immigrant.

“I didn't have any friends. And one time two girls came and knocked on our door and asked my mom if I could come out to play. And my mom was so excited. I was so excited I couldn't believe it.”

Yalda went outside with her two classmates. They turned a corner and about a dozen kids were waiting on their bikes for her in a parking lot, holding plastic bags filled with casting plaster.

“All of a sudden they came out of that parking lot and they started singing, ‘bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran.’ And they were pelting me. They were like stoning me. It was so painful. And it was so humiliating. I remember just walking and being like, ‘Don't cry. Don't cry. Whatever you do, don't cry.’ I was nine.”

TRACK: That harassment from her classmates went on for another two years. Yalda says she was both emotionally and physically bullied. And it was terrible. She felt isolated, sad and scared.

Yalda never wants any of her students at Golestan Education to grow up feeling like it's ok to hurt a classmate because she's different.

“There's certain crossroads where even a child can stop and say, ‘You know what, this isn't OK.’ And I want to give them the ability to make that decision. To be able to confidently say, ‘No, I'm not going to do this.’ And then for the other kids to follow suit.”

Yalda plans to open another school, a primary school, that will include Farsi, Arabic and Hebrew. Yalda says now more than ever, we need to bring diverse communities together. Kids are the best way to do that. At this new primary school, students from different cultural backgrounds will learn side by side, only separating for their language classes.

“We create an environment that is intimate, that is very close,” Yalda says. “That promotes collaboration, much like our preschool. Though we want to support a child becoming independent and able to take care of themselves, we also want them to learn to care for others and think of others' needs as well.”

Yalda's school collaborates with schools around the world by producing teaching materials modeled after their holistic curriculum based on best practices in bilingualism and child development. Golestan also offers free consulting to schools who want to develop similar programs. Yalda says it's about paying it forward.

At Golestan, the students learn to care for one another. The older preschoolers help the younger ones take off their shoes after recess. They pick flowers from the garden and put them in bouquets in the teachers' rooms. And on most Friday, Yalda brings her Labrador Nika to school, to play with the kids. She shows the kids at Golestan how to groom Nika, her dog. They also feed her, give her water, and the daring ones help clean up her poop.

“Studies have shown that being around an animal can stimulate the release of oxytocin, which is a happy hormone, it makes you feel good,” Yalda says. “And there are tons of different studies that they’re doing now on [the impact of having animals around children](#). And what they’re finding is when children are around babies, or around animals, more often than not, I’ve seen the reverse too, they tend to be empathetic toward that being. They become the stronger being within that dynamic, and so they become the caretaker. And that skill is critical in promoting empathy and compassion. If one is able to connect with another individual nonverbally, and is able to read their cues and to figure out what their needs then they’re better able to tap into another person’s emotions.”

Studies show empathetic kids are less likely to become bullies, or show antisocial behaviors. Preschoolers who are taught emotional skills in school have [fewer behavior problems](#) and are more like to share with others. A [recent study from Duke and Penn State](#) found that kids who shared and helped others in kindergarten were more likely to graduate from high school and have full-time jobs. So kindness and empathy pay off. Literally.

One way to be kind to others, is by understanding who people are, and where they come from. That’s why Yalda’s school teaches their students about a different country every week.

“The kids eat the food from that country. They hear the music from that country. They learn to count in the language of that country. And so by the time a whole year goes by they’ve learned about the entire world. Their view of the world grows. Especially little ones who have no idea that there is a world outside of their world. If they meet someone from Peru, and they remember learning about Peru they can strike up a conversation and ask them about the lamas. There’s a context there. There’s nothing negative to teaching them about all these other cultures. There’s only benefits.”

Yalda Modabber says by celebrating different countries, the students at Golestan Education are learning they have more similarities than difference to their neighbors around the world. They learn to be inclusive and not hold stereotypes. Yalda says her students aren’t perfect. Sometimes they fight, cry. They can be mean to each other. They’re human. They’re kids. But each time the kids do hurt each other, they talk about it. They work through it with their teachers. They learn to be kind to each other. Yalda says these skills are crucial. Because these kids are going to be our future leaders. And we really could use some kind and empathetic leaders now and in the years in to come.

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Created by the Neda Nobari Foundation

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