



AUTHORITY MAGAZINE

Young Social Impact Heroes: Why and How Delara Tehranchi of Coco's Angels Is Helping To Change Our World

Penny Bauder | May 2, 2022



Your Age Doesn't Matter: I wish someone told me, despite being 15 at the time of starting my non-profit, that it's possible to make a social impact no matter your age. When I was contemplating starting my non-profit, there were doubts in the back of my mind telling me that I was too young to spearhead an organization. However, after making the decision to open and expand Coco's Angels, I realized that determination and dedication doesn't have an age requirement and social change is possible, no matter the age.

As part of my series about young people who are making an important social impact, I had the pleasure of interviewing Delara Tehranchi.

Coco's Angels is a non-profit foundation, created by Los Angeles-based teenagers Delara and Layla Tehranchi. The foundation aims to raise awareness for, and support, foster children through public campaigns and events that affect change in the children's lives. Their passion for advocating for foster children stems from caring for their then foster sister, Coco, who's now officially adopted into the family. Launching the foundation in 2020, their first drive was



holiday-themed for December. Creating a GoFundMe account in hopes of raising \$15,000 for Christmas gifts for the kids, turned out to be more than \$50,000 raised in donations with attention from celebrities such as Kim and Khloé Kardashian. The money allowed the non-profit the ability to give Christmas presents to hundreds of foster children, allowing each child to receive three gifts each. In the span of two years, Coco's Angels has helped hundreds of children in the foster care system in neighboring cities like: Compton, South Central, Crenshaw, and East Los Angeles, with the hopes of one day being able to support foster children across the country. Their unwavering efforts have not gone in vain as the foundation continues to be a beacon of light to those in need.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit. Can you tell us a bit about how you grew up?

I grew up in a household where both my parents were first-generation immigrants who fled from Iran during the Iranian Revolution. Seeking asylum in America, they experienced much of the mythos surrounding the "American Dream" including the systemic and cultural barriers for immigrants seeking to achieve success in business and medicine. By the time I was born, my parents had beaten the odds that were against them — my father a successful entrepreneur in the construction industry, and my mother a board-certified gynecologist and philanthropist. At an early age, it was impressed upon me that I was born with a distinct privilege that they didn't get, and that with this privilege came a unique responsibility to use my own voice to speak up for those who are marginalized by society. My childhood memories became permeated by experiences at fundraisers, volunteer events, and hands-on civic engagement that exposed me to a world of neglected lives lived mere miles from my home. When I was fifteen, we became a foster family after my mother delivered a baby who was born addicted to meth and heroin, and as the oldest of three, my responsibilities grew in our household. Additionally, both my parents worked full-time, and the pandemic caused the demands of their careers to grow, as added pressures in each industry meant they left home earlier and came home later each day. It was during the early stages of the pandemic that I strived to get involved with providing relief to first responders who were overburdened by under-resourced hospitals and care facilities. I saw the fatigue in my mother's eyes as we ate our dinners that had been waiting in the oven for hours, and while we talked, we decided to participate in a 100,000 Mask Challenge. It was inspiring to see my mother's drive to help in all capacities, even as she was working 60–80 hours a week at Cedars Sinai Hospital. Together, we contacted community members, local government officials, schools, celebrities, and businesses in order to raise funds to provide PPE for healthcare workers in Los Angeles County. By March 25, 2020, we had raised over 1,000,000 masks and I felt proud of the way that our mother-daughter relationship manifested into something bigger than ourselves — something that would ultimately save lives.



You are currently leading an organization that aims to make a social impact. Can you tell us a bit about what you and your organization are trying to change in our world today?

Coco's Angels is a foundation that aims to raise awareness for, and support, foster children through public campaigns and events that affect direct change in the children's lives. Educationally, this means providing tutors, learning materials, and school supplies to children in low socioeconomic areas. It also means working with city councils to create better opportunities for foster children and get exposure to positive role models who can provide mentorships from childhood through adulthood. Economically, it means ensuring that holidays are positive experiences. Today, we have partnered with organizations like XOS trucks and the Los Angeles Mission to put on community events for Los Angeles County foster youth, and spearheaded a peer tutoring program that links high school students to tutor younger foster children. This not only expands our reach by increasing involvement and awareness, but provides relationships between mentors and mentees who may otherwise not receive guidance. I want this particular program within Coco's Angels to become something that exists on a national level, with colleges and high schools adopting the program through their own chapters—allowing our impact to spread.

Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?

During my sophomore year of high school, my family met an unhoused pregnant woman unable to get the medical resources she vitally needed. Battling housing insecurity, poverty, malnutrition, and substance addiction she was taken to Cedars Sinai where my mother, a board-certified OB-GYN, delivered the baby. The newborn was suffering from both heroin and crystal meth withdrawals, so social services immediately informed the hospital staff that they were going to take custody of the baby, named Coco.

When I learned that Coco was going to be taken away, I begged my mother to not give up on the baby because she had been fighting against all odds since before she was born. It was that moment that sealed the deal and the day I became a foster sister — a day that catalyzed my purpose in life. In the ensuing months, Coco became my little sister during the pandemic where she would sit with me during my virtual classes for school as I graphed logarithmic equations for my Honors Precalculus homework, and went into breakout rooms to conjugate Spanish verbs. Coco even changed my Spotify Wrapped list of the year — a year when the Arctic Monkeys and Lana Del Rey were replaced with Cocomelon, Baby Shark, and Disney lullabies. Skin-to-skin contact was essential for infants separated from their birth mothers, and I felt a profound impact knowing that I was bonding with someone so vulnerable who mattered so much to me.



But Coco also did something else far more profound. As I sat with her social worker during a wellness visit, I listened to the DCFS (Department of Children and Family Services) worker lament about the hundreds of foster children who wouldn't be receiving Christmas gifts that year because of the lack of funds. As her tears fell, I thought about Coco who was in my arms, and how unfair it was that children like this were denied equitable opportunities throughout their entire lives. Coco had us, but what about all the other kids who were still in state facilities or homes where finances were tight, at best? Vowing to take action, I contacted private agencies that worked with social work and human services, engaged in meaningful conversations with volunteers and campaign organizers, and within the week, designed the website of my non-profit, Coco's Angels. As Christmas 2020 approached, I collected wish lists from Los Angeles county children, raised over \$60,000 in a single month, and garnered support from local businesses to rent and decorate a bus that would deliver hand-wrapped gifts from the children's top three wishlist items in cities like Compton, South Central, Crenshaw, and East L.A.

That holiday season, Coco's Angel's was born, and since then, I've continued imploring myself to find ways that spur equality for children in foster care— providing memorable experiences they wouldn't have been afforded otherwise. Whether partnering with Guardians of Love, a foster care service in Los Angeles, or hosting a back-to-school event with the LA Mission to provide more than 1,000 foster children school supplies, Coco's Angels continues to grow, affirming for me that this is what I was destined for. Because of Coco being in my family's life, it has inspired me to begin dual enrollment in college to study coursework relating to social work. Recently, Coco's Angels appeared on "The Dr. Phil Show" to discuss the non-profit and there isn't a day that goes by that I don't feel gratitude towards Coco for not only opening my eyes to the world of inequality faced by foster children, but for compelling me to take actionable steps to provide life-changing opportunities for those who truly deserve it most.





Many of us have ideas, dreams, and passions, but never manifest them. They don't get up and just do it. But you did. Was there an "Aha Moment" that made you decide that you were actually going to step up, and do it? What was that final trigger?

The final trigger for me was when I was sitting with Coco's social worker and watched her break down in tears because the foster children she was assigned to were not going to get Christmas presents that year because it wasn't in the budget. As I held Coco in my arms, tears rolled down my cheeks as well, and I was determined to not let this be the destiny of my city's foster youth. For weeks, I spoke with the social worker almost daily, collected wish lists from each of DCF's children, and cold-called everyone in my contact list before enlisting the help of community members to fundraise. I organized spreadsheets, coordinated every child's top three gifts on their wish lists, and calculated how much funding we needed to meet the goal. Getting the gifts was just the beginning, because I wanted their Christmas to be a full experience they would remember in joy — I secured a partnership with the Guardians of Love Agency, renovated a bus to make it look like a Christmas sleigh, hired a Black Santa to come along with us, donned an Elf outfit, and traveled with the bus to hand-deliver each present, wearing a mask over the undeniable sense of joy that came from watching my efforts come to fruition. It's funny, though, because I once thought that there would be a sense of accomplishment after the event was over — instead there was a gaping realization that this was only the beginning of a lifetime of service. What about next Christmas? What about the back-to-school season? What about needs that were unmet during the school year? I would learn from these "aha" moments that there would be many triggers to follow— triggers that would ignite a fire in me.

Many young people don't know the steps to take to start a new organization. But you did. What are some of the things or steps you took to get your project started?

No project ever gets accomplished alone. At first, I was overwhelmed and wondered how I would be able to secure all the things I needed to turn my vision into a reality. But it's normal to be daunted by taking on something bigger than yourself, which is why collaborating and communicating have been my two greatest tools to not only execute my first project but to increase participation amongst my community. I reached out to community members to enlist their financial support because getting funding for Coco's Angels was a priority. I created spreadsheets that would organize gifts, prices, and donations needed so that I was aware of how much it would precisely take to execute our goal. Above all, I believe having tenacity is what it takes to get any project started.

My advice to anyone who wants to pursue a project that seems daunting and bigger than yourself is to not give up, remain organized, and communicate effectively with those whose collaborative efforts will make the difference. Tenacity, communication, and collaboration are my top tools to make any project a successful one and the proof is with Coco's Angels.



Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company or organization?

When I decided to bring Coco's Angels to my high school and start a youth-helping-youth initiative, I never dreamt that my non-profit would become the school's largest civic engagement club and chapter. I'd followed all the steps to make Coco's Angels an official student organization, including securing faculty sponsors, creating a charter, and meeting the minimum required member sign-ups during club rush. I had hoped that some of my peers would be interested in lending a hand and was shocked at its immediate success! Creating a peer tutoring network with foster children and students at my high school allowed students to become involved, see the world beyond their viewpoint, and connect with youth who needed educational help. Today, our organization boasts more than fifty members, many of whom donate their time to lead tutor sessions with LA's local foster youth. I remember one particular day I received a call from one of the foster parents. I worried that something had happened, like a tutor not showing up or an academic problem with the foster child's performance at school. Instead, the parent had called to tell me what a difference the relationship our tutor and her foster daughter created in only a few weeks. The child's performance at school increased, and even after finishing the required work for each weekly session, she eagerly stayed on the Zoom calls to connect with her tutor. I am so thankful for the team of volunteers who have helped make Coco's Angels possible, and I keep the memory of that phone call as motivation to keep going.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson or take away you learned from that?

During the second annual holiday drive, both our buses broke down in the middle of delivery. It was as if something was trying to thwart our plans, and the frustration started to sink into everyone's mood. If there's anything I've learned, it's that you can't give up when the road gets rough (like your buses breaking down on the road!). When situations like these arise, you make it work. You don't give up, despite things not going your way. What we can't control is beyond us but we can control our attitudes. In this case, it called for us to pile into the security truck that followed both buses, pile our gifts and team together, and continue our deliveries. I learned that next time, when traveling to hundreds of houses across Los Angeles in buses, it's probably smart to make sure they're well-maintained before starting out on the journey because the alternative would've been walking house to house dressed as an elf!

None of us can be successful without some help along the way. Did you have mentors or cheerleaders who helped you to succeed? Can you tell us a story about their influence?



One of my greatest mentors was my science teacher who headed all the science fair submissions and projects at my school. In a classroom where almost every student focused on the natural sciences, I wanted my year-long research project to focus on the social sciences — particularly social work and foster care challenges for the city of Los Angeles. Anais Cauich helped me translate my passion for helping foster children into a data-driven inquiry, which allowed me to explore some of the unique problems faced by private and public foster care agencies. Seeking to better understand the differences in retention rates of foster parents, I relied on Laura Espinoza, a social worker from the LA Department of Family and Child Services, to help me distribute surveys to foster parents in the public system. In order to collect data on private agency foster parents, I turned to Kinikki Fullerwood at Guardians of Love, an agency I had partnered with during Coco's Angels first event. In the end, the guidance from these three mentors was extremely helpful.

My research allowed me to understand how parents were retained longer in private foster agencies because they felt more supported than those in public agencies did, which led me to strategize changes in our current system. After submitting my research and presenting at the LA County Science Fair, I won first place and was so thrilled that the work I'd done was strong enough to warrant such recognition at this level. My mentors inspired me to keep being inquisitive about problems faced in the foster care system, and to communicate said problems to create bigger change at the local, state, and national level. I also credit my professor who teaches Introduction to Social Work and Human Services while I'm dual enrolled in college courses. My professor lauded my efforts and gave me greater insight into the barriers faced by foster children and their families.

Can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?

While most of our efforts are targeted towards foster youth, I met a former foster child who entered adulthood without parents and faced countless obstacles. She heard about Coco's Angels and reached out to find out how she could help, even as she struggled as a college student. Immediately, I realized she represented the product of a failed system of foster care — a system that lets go of the youth once they're of legal age, demanding that they endure life's perplexities on their own. Moved by her story, I invited her to become involved with Coco's Angels, and in turn, we began financing her college tuition, books, and living expenses. This really made me think about Coco's Angels mission— ensuring that foster care youth are provided life-changing skills, knowledge, and opportunities that can help them long after they reach adulthood.

Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?



The important thing society can do to help address the root of inequality in foster children's lives is to become more educated and involved. Many neglect to help because they simply do not know about these problems. However, in our current digital age and use of social media, we can share information about foster children's issues, unite to raise funds or highlight particular areas in need of community assistance, and become more civically engaged. One communitywide action that can be done to address the problem is to pair foster children in the city with local organizations, schools, or colleges where children can have access to educational opportunities, and develop strong mentorships with positive role models who can help them believe in themselves while also offering support/guidance.

Legislatively, our politicians can enact measures that increase funding for public foster agencies, finance learning programs out-of-school, and offer unique opportunities like internships or jobs to older foster youth to help provide them with a sense of independence, maturity, and financial gain (while also helping them become vital members of our society). When our politicians believe and allocate resources to foster youth, our foster youth have a higher chance to thrive and not just survive.

What are your "5 things I wish someone told me when I first started" and why. Please share a story or example for each.

1. Your Age Doesn't Matter: I wish someone told me, despite being 15 at the time of starting my non-profit, that it's possible to make a social impact no matter your age. When I was contemplating starting my non-profit, there were doubts in the back of my mind telling me that I was too young to spearhead an organization. However, after making the decision to open and expand Coco's Angels, I realized that determination and dedication doesn't have an age requirement and social change is possible, no matter the age.

2. Stand Firm On Your Vision: When I started Coco's Angels, I encountered lots of people who wanted to take control and direct the organization's efforts in a different way from mine. For example, I was told that providing holiday events wasn't necessarily "big enough" of an impact, and while I understood where they were coming from, I didn't agree. From listening to a social worker cry over the lack of Christmas gifts given to foster children to witnessing the joy that our events gave to those who participated in them, I realized that justice comes in all forms, and that small, short-term efforts can lead to larger ones. I don't have to agree with someone's ideas about what constitutes appropriate efforts, but I do have to understand where they are coming from and how I can use that insight to further my goals.



3. There's Power in the Youth: I wish someone told me to take action within my community sooner. Initially, I surrounded myself solely by adults, positioning adults in different capacities to help because I assumed this would be most effective. Then, a year into Coco's Angels, I started a student chapter at my school and saw how readily and eager my peers were to help. My peers were far more active than my adult volunteers, and I recognized that there was an unwavering power within the youth — a power I utilized to foster organic social change.

4. Higher Learning Is Key: I wish someone told me to research learning opportunities related to civic engagement beyond high school. When I started Coco's Angels, I didn't seek for more learning opportunities because I didn't know they existed. This past year, I learned about dual enrollment and began taking courses at my local community college. And if dual enrollment isn't offered at your high school, look into it, seize the opportunity, and keep learning tools to impact change (and getting college credit at the same time certainly doesn't hurt!).

5. Collaborate with Like Minded People: I wish someone told me that nothing you do will ever be done alone. When I first started Coco's Angels, I wondered if my younger sister, Layla, and I would have to do it by ourselves. We tried and failed but once we realized that our goals came to life through help, we accomplished more than we can imagine.

Reach out to family, friends, local city council members, representatives of nearby organizations, and even cold call businesses to get the help you need. By collaborating, there is so much more that can be done than you can ever do alone. And to be honest, no organization will ever thrive with just a single person handling it all. People *want* to help you — you just have to give them an opportunity to do so, and then your project will quickly evolve from an idea into a reality. There is strength in unity.

If you could tell other young people one thing about why they should consider making a positive impact on our environment or society, like you, what would you tell them?

I would tell them to find the problem before you find the solution. There are so many short-term changes we can make by donating items or volunteering once — but if we don't know the root cause of the problem, we can't fix it. It will still be there after the donations run out and the events are over. Currently, I'm completing a UPenn Social Impact course, and I've learned that when we approach problems from a solution-based mindset, we fail to understand the complexity of the problem and by doing so, we fail to create a plan that will truly remedy the ailments of that particular social ill.



Look deeper than the problem. Examine the flaws in the policies that are adopted by lawmakers. Search for the reasons why funding isn't allocated in the right place or the minority isn't being adequately represented. With an inquiry-based mindset, we can start to better understand the problem and adopt effective strategies to solve it. The other thing I would tell young people is to look locally at the issues that are happening in our neighborhoods. They are universal. By starting small, it's easier to see a connection to something larger than yourself and beyond your bubble. Reach out to organizations that exert efforts in that realm, and don't be afraid to start something just because you are young. Being young is what will ultimately be your gift in using technology, creating a social network, and inspiring others to participate in positive social change as well.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

I would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with Oprah. This year, I appeared on "The Dr. Phil Show" to talk about Coco's Angels and that made me realize exactly how powerful the media is in terms of generating support. If I could share my story with Oprah about my baby sister, Coco, and my efforts with the non-profit, I feel that she would connect with it. She, too, has overcome adversity in her life and has used her platform to raise funds for homeless and at-risk youth. Having a meal with Oprah, I am confident that I would leave the table gleaning from her wisdom and hopefully gain her support. While my efforts are currently grounded in Los Angeles, I know this will not stay that way. My ultimate goal is for Coco's Angels to become global, so that I can provide resources and support for foster youth and their families across the world.

How can our readers follow you online?

Instagram: [@cocosangelsnonprofit](https://www.instagram.com/cocosangelsnonprofit)

Website: <https://www.cocosangels.org/>

This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!

<https://medium.com/authority-magazine/young-social-impact-heroes-why-and-how-delara-tehranchi-of-cocos-angels-is-helping-to-change-our-c42010927c4d>