



Young Change Makers: Why and How Layla Tehranchi of Coco's Angels Is Helping To Change Our World

Yitzi Weiner | May 15, 2023



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

Coco's Angels is a non-profit foundation, created by Los Angeles-based teenagers Layla and Delara 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 joining us in this interview series! 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 an Iranian American household as the second of three daughters — in time, I would be the second of four once we adopted my foster sibling, Coco, in 2021. My parents were first-generation immigrants who fled a war-torn Iran, but we kept our Persian heritage alive by maintaining contact with our relatives there, and I'd spend every week on WhatsApp calls with my cousins, practicing Farsi as we played games together and built a relationship that would prove pivotal once the recent women's revolution began. I think that this was the type of cultural community that instilled in me the values I hold today — values like inclusivity and cultural competence, sensitivity to others' differences and a drive to help those whose life circumstances impede them from having the same opportunities I had in the states. Here, in the states, I was a free young woman, but for some of my relatives, this was not the case — a stark reality that compelled me to become more involved in advocacy efforts not only for foster youth here in the states, but for women fighting for basic rights in Iran. It's a fight we have not won yet, a fight that I will continue to fight because I grew up being taught to never give up on a cause that you truly care for.

Is there a particular book or organization that made a significant impact on you growing up? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?

Growing up, my family and I volunteered at the LA Mission on a regular basis, and it was one of the most prominent memories of my childhood. I always thought I knew what to expect on the weekends we'd go down and serve food or sit with the communities the Mission served, but time and time again my eyes would be opened to a new social problem that intersected poverty and housing insecurity. I learned about problems incarcerated individuals faced after leaving prison and trying, albeit failing, to gain steady jobs. I learned about epidemics of opioids and the lack of legislation regulating those drugs. I learned about LGBTQ+ youth being kicked out of their homes, about ineffective strategies (like the cruelly named 'street sweeps') law enforcement led to remove encampments from Venice Beach or Skid Row. And, of course, I learned about the foster youth who aged out of the system, only to experience poverty, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, and housing insecurity before they were 21 years of age. The leaders and volunteers at the LA Mission took me under their wing and taught me how to look deeper into social problems and not see people as the problems they experienced. They challenged me to ask myself what we could do — together — to solve this problem, and they single-handedly had the greatest influence on inspiring me to create a movement of foster youth advocates. They supported me when I needed help, partnered with Coco's Angels as soon as we became a 501(c)3 organization, and taught me that when you have a support system like this, hope for a better future evolves into actionable steps to ensure those hopes are manifested in real, positive change. To them, and to any media agencies that choose to share Coco's Angels' stories, I want to express my utmost gratitude for helping propel Coco's Angels to the place it is now.



How do you define “Making A Difference”? Can you explain what you mean or give an example?

I define “Making A Difference” as an actionable effort that results in real change. This change doesn’t have to be something so massive that impacts thousands; it can be a change that happens on a micro-level. I think that when we consider what we are capable of doing in order to induce change, and we think about it realistically, we can see how our collective efforts to make a difference accumulate into something far bigger. It’s like we are each other’s puzzle piece in this jigsaw of social problems that cannot be ignored. We might think our efforts are futile because they seem so small in the big scheme of things, but no puzzle is complete without each piece being placed together, in the right positions — and no puzzle piece is the same size, shape, orientation, or color. I think that’s a metaphor that I’d like to consider worthy of living by, and one example I can think of is when I began volunteering at a COVID-19 testing clinic during the pandemic. I was only 14 years old at the time and admittedly thought that what I was doing was so far from enough since I’d watched my mother, a first responder physician, struggle with the overburdened ICUs at her hospital. Still, I began to realize while inputting data for the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization’s (WHO) records, that each of our efforts, including my summer performing data entry and analyzing test results, contributed to a more meaningful way of truly “Making a Difference.”

Ok super. Let’s now jump to the main part of our interview. 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 aims to transform foster youth’s lives by creating equitable opportunities for foster youth that do not exist, since Los Angeles county’s social welfare system is so under-resourced and has historically failed to provide essentials that these youth need. These youth are my peers — they are fellow high schoolers, they are as young as my sisters, and they represent all walks of life, yet they remain one of the most marginalized minority groups in the nation. I want to change that, and we’ve set up foster youth tutoring programs that connect local high school students to foster youth in need of educational assistance. We’ve put on book fairs where youth received books for free, offered back-to-school drives, and orchestrated several years of holiday events to ensure that foster youth get similar chances to enjoy holidays with the help of other non-profit partners like the LA Mission. This is just the beginning of our efforts to change the world for foster youth. I am excited to reveal some of the projects I’m currently spearheading to offer foster female youth free AI classes, grow our tutoring services with the help of other organizations, and open a popup gallery documenting foster youth’s lives that will be accompanied by a published book of photographs, poetry, and prose.

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

Coco’s Angels would never have existed if my mom didn’t come home telling us about a mother who was addicted to meth and heroin, who was pregnant and whose infant would be born



addicted to the same drugs. This baby changed our lives because my mother refused to let Coco enter the system after she was delivered; as a family, we opted to become a foster family, which is a decision that I truly believe any family with the means to do so should consider, as it expanded our understanding of love, brought immense joy to us, and opened my eyes to a world that I would have never otherwise known — the world of foster youth. I spoke with social workers consistently, co-founded a school club to help fundraise and provide tutoring to foster youth, and created a non-profit with my sister because we knew Coco was but one of tens of thousands of foster children in our community who needed external resources to have the same opportunities as everyone else. Taking care of Coco alongside my parents and older sister, I saw the dark side of addiction, but I also saw how a light could come from such a dark place. That light was Coco, and her pure fight to live defied all the prognoses that doctors gave her; she surpassed developmental milestones that other children her age had not — teaching me the importance of the right environment in propelling a person, no matter where they come from, to their potential. This made me recognize I had the power to do this for more youth, and so the drive behind Coco’s Angels’ mission was born.

Many of us have ideas, dreams, and passions, but never manifest them. We don’t always 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?

One day, our social worker broke down, as she was visibly frazzled from the strain that a lack of resources had put on her and the other workers at the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). I listened to her tell us about how this year, DCFS would not have enough funds to provide Christmas presents for the kids in the system and immediately knew that this was not okay. How could I live in such privilege, knowing that this was happening, and not do anything? My sister and I were in tears, but those tears pooled into a desire to take action, a plan of how we could fundraise through crowdsourcing in our community, and an orchestrated event that allowed us to not only fundraise what we needed, but purchase one of the top three gifts on every single child’s list in the foster care system. When we delivered those presents from foster home to foster home in December of 2020, it was like the “Aha Moment” got even bigger — as if I was triggered to realize that we’d begun something that would not stop. It was the start of momentum, and it was a momentum that would build the more we interacted with DCFS, social workers, and partnered with organizations whose missions aligned with our goals. That holiday event catalyzed something in me personally because I began to see the faces of the same youth I’d met in their homes at community events we put on, cultivating a relationship with real people who had real needs that certainly needed to be met. These faces were driving forces behind our motivation to grow Coco’s Angels from an idea into a 501(c)3 non-profit.

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?

One of the most important steps that I took was to figure out how to build relationships with other organizations because I knew that creating a non-profit that had a large scope of impact was impossible alone. At the all-girls school I attend, we are taught that together, we are greater



— and through collective efforts, greater change can be achieved. This meant identifying organizations that had similar missions, forging relationships with representatives from there, and co-creating events in which we could both reach people in need. I think about the LA Mission as a great example, as I'd volunteered there since childhood; it was a place my family and I had served food to housing-insecure communities, and I knew that foster youth who aged out of the system became staggeringly more likely to experience housing insecurity. It's amazing to think of how much the relationship with LA Mission administrators would mean to me. These were the same leaders who had I had looked up to as a kid and who were now sitting in boardrooms with me as we planned events like our 2022 Resource Fair — an event where foster youth and LA Mission's served communities could benefit from the fundraising, publicity, books that emphasized diversity, and resources we garnered together. Because of our relationships, I gained mentors who knew how to start and successfully run non-profit organizations and those mentorships motivate me every day when things get difficult or I want to accomplish a new goal, like my summer 2023 plan to provide AI instruction to female foster youth.

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

One of the most amazing things that's happened since I began leading Coco's Angels is witnessing the accumulation of people I'd never expected to support us join in on our efforts. At one event, LA's Mayor Karen Bass was in attendance, which encouraged me to see just how important our work meant to the community. If we could reach the mayor of one of the biggest cities in the U.S., what else could we do? As a springboard, it catapulted me into a realm of possibilities, but big names in philanthropy such as Maria Shriver or influential social media accounts like The Good News Movement weren't the only ones who supported us. My friends, peers at my school, and even people from other schools whom I'd never met reached out to find out how they could help. Some shared their own stories about being foster siblings, while others expressed the way that they wished they'd had an organization like Coco's Angels when they were in the system. I was moved, to say the least — moved to do more, to keep this momentum, and to make my mark on the world through making this dream that Coco's Angels had into a reality.

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?

Santa Claus ghosted us. No, really. The adult whom we'd hired using our raised funds didn't show up on the day of our holiday event, so instead, I begged one of the social workers who — how do I put this — looked the part — to put on the Santa outfit and sit with the hundreds of foster youth who attended the event. What had started as a disaster turned into what the social worker told us was the most memorable holiday he'd had in all his years of foster care. What I learned from this was that you have to expect the unexpected, be willing to pivot at a moment's notice, and surround yourself with a team of people who share your passion for the cause. That way, when something unexpected happens, you handle it together, stay positive, and make it work — that's what life demands. It's something I've strived to hold onto as a philosophy in executing future events where things went wrong, from buses breaking down to unexpected atmospheric rivers curtailing venue options.



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?

From the very outset of Coco's Angels, I had the privilege of having a mentor that worked at a private foster care agency. I would soon realize that this woman, along with her agency, embodied pure passion and heart for the children who are part of the L.A foster care system, just as I had. It's no surprise that being only 14 years old at the time left me with lingering feelings of doubt and uncertainty while building the infrastructure of a soon-to-be 501(c)3 non-profit, but with my mentor and her agency on my side, I never felt alone nor did I ever feel unsupported. I remember nights during the early stages of planning our first-ever holiday event being filled with phone calls from her — phone calls where she would offer me insightful advice, tips from past experiences, and even more general guidance as to how I can widen my personal scope of impact through Coco's Angels. Support and guidance from an individual you trust and look up to is truly priceless and cannot be replaced by a simple Google search. Learning from someone who has experienced similar obstacles that, at the time, laid ahead for me, was a gift that I would later realize was so powerful. I honestly cannot articulate how grateful I am to have met such an incredible role model who has endowed me with tools that I now carry with me each and every day I step out into the world.

Without saying specific names, can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?

This past Thanksgiving, I met a nine-year-old who attended one of our events with her grandmother, who was her guardian because her father was in prison and her mother had been deported. At age five, she'd already learned that her parents weren't coming home and holidays wouldn't include them. I couldn't imagine how that must feel like, at such a vulnerable age, to know that the people you expect to take care of you leave and never come back. I played with her for hours and then sat with her grandmother long after we'd broken down the tents and tables. We talked about the conditions that had brought her to this point, and the role that organizations could have in helping to provide a safe place for foster youth to feel like they had all the opportunities that everyone else had. I seized this moment as something that would be cemented into my memory, knowing that if I held onto it, I could have an external impetus when I started to slow down, when I needed to remember who Coco's Angels was truly helping to serve.

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

A lot of people think you have to be able to donate money to solve a problem, and that's not true. Someone could throw a million dollars into a GoFundMe, but if there's no intention behind what is done with those funds, they may be spent on things that don't truly address the root problem of an issue. I never want people to think that their one way of helping is to write a check. That isn't a very human-centered perspective on how to solve any problem that involves real people. Foster youth need mentors, they need peer tutors, and they need supportive communities. The



first thing that our community can do is find time in their schedules to educate themselves about the problems facing foster youth, then find ways of volunteering their efforts to help them. It could be as simple as showing up to a Coco's Angels' event after registering as a volunteer, or it could be deciding to tutor a kid once or twice a week who really needs it. The second thing that I think communities — especially youth-based communities like high schools — can do is to start a chapter of an organization (like Coco's Angels) at their school. Leading the charge, they'll already have our resources as we direct them how to get involved, how to lead or organize events, and what it means to create a collective effort. Third, what politicians can and should do (with the support and encouragement of their constituents) is to pass legislation that creates programs oriented towards fostering youth's longitudinal growth. This means passing bills that help to finance college tuition free of charge, getting grants for foster youth educational services, and increasing the budgets of social welfare systems in counties where there are extremely high rates of foster youth (like Los Angeles).



Fantastic. Here is the main question of the interview. 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. Money doesn't solve a problem — people do. If you don't have the right plan that's put in place with real people thinking about how they'll use the funds, where those funds can best be invested, and how money can be turned into meaningful efforts, then you won't get anywhere. I used to think that fundraising could take care of it all, but I realized once we'd raised so much money for our first holiday event that we had to think long and hard about where it could best be used. Budgeting before you fundraise is a skill I wish I'd learned several years ago, but now it's one I feel confident about when organizing each fundraiser for an expected event.
2. Getting overwhelmed is natural and, if you don't feel like you're not doing enough, then you're



probably not doing enough. At first, I wanted to solve every problem that foster youth face but when you learn about the staggeringly high amount of challenges, to take them all on can weigh you down. At times, I felt overwhelmed to the point where I didn't know where to go or what to do first, but I learned how to quell those insecurities and take it one step at a time. When you realize that stress is an expected part of any process, the stress means that you care; you learn to plan things out so that you can execute one action after another, but only one at a time. We haven't solved all the problems of foster youth, but we're working on it, and when you take things apart and set yourself to doing them one at a time, then you're that much closer to truly accomplishing a goal. Remember: to worry about something, to be stressed about something — that just means you care about it, and you've got to care if you want to make a real difference.

3. Lean on the people who've done this before. My sister and I felt we were unstoppable, and our eagerness to change the world for foster youth propelled us to accomplish so much. Time and time again, however, there were experiences where we really didn't know what to do. How do we register our organization as a 501(c)3 and why was that important? What kinds of permits do we need to shut down a neighborhood block for an event and where do we get them? How do you cold call businesses and nonprofits to establish a partnership that will be mutually beneficial? There was so much to learn and I think that every teenager who wants to do something, whether big or small, needs to know that asking for help is one of the most valuable skills to learn. After all, if you don't ask, the answer is no!
4. There is no rulebook for creating an impact. Your impact doesn't have to be like Coco's Angels. It doesn't have to be a registered organization or a chartered school club. Your rulebook could be whatever you want it to be, as long as you're working towards making that positive impact while considering all the costs and consequences of each decision made. I recognized this lesson when I had to pivot over and over again during the organizational process of putting together community-wide events. Things will go wrong that you didn't expect or were never supposed to happen. The rulebook you once thought was perfect could all crumble, and if you don't rely on a standardized set of actions, then you can use creativity, team brainstorming, and innovation to find a way to make that impact you really want to have.
5. Don't underestimate the power of a self-designed weekly schedule. There is so much potential in establishing parameters for times in your week to devote specifically to the organization you're wanting to create or support. Every Sunday, spend an hour making this schedule but do it realistically. If you know you have AP Microeconomics homework that will eat away at your weeknights and practice in the afternoons, ask yourself where there is time to spend on drafting a proposal or writing emails to potential supporters. Take advantage of downtime, but make sure you still give yourself moments in the day to recharge. Maybe spending an hour each day on this project isn't possible, and that's okay; make up for it on the weekend, train yourself to get up early, and learn to find joy in checklists that can help with those daily routines you've scheduled for your week. It will truly make all the difference, and it makes everything so much more manageable.



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?

Whatever you think your goal is, be prepared for it to spiral into something that mirrors the effort you put in. When we started Coco's Angels, I knew that we wanted to create events that helped foster youth get more resources. I hadn't planned on starting a peer tutoring program, but that came about when creating a chapter at my school. I could have never foreseen the partnership we forged with Toast Masters to help teach foster youth public speaking skills, and this year I wouldn't have foreseen the unique AI classes we aim to deliver to female foster youth to bolster their STEM learning. Goals should not be concrete, but flexible, and if you're willing to adapt and take advantage of a possible detour, you may realize there's an opportunity to do so much more than you originally thought. Don't be afraid to explore those possibilities, because it's the possible path that can lead to an unforeseen reality.

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. :-)

At a young age, Malala Yousafzai offered young women a role model who spoke up against what was wrong with the world, becoming a leader who weaponized defiance as a form of advocacy. Using her platform, risking her life, and making waves across the world, Malala became a symbol for my younger self of what true courage looks like. As someone who has already fostered organizational development and social justice programs throughout the globe, Malala is the person I'd love to have a private meal with. Together, we'd discuss the practical ways we could go about gathering more support for the causes we care about. I have no doubt that I'd walk away from that meal satiated by the insight she gave me, and inspired by the actions she'd compel me to take in order to truly help foster youth across the states get the resources they deserve.

How can our readers follow you online?

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

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

<https://medium.com/authority-magazine/young-change-makers-why-and-how-layla-tehranchi-of-cocos-angels-is-helping-to-change-our-world-1f9ea7454447>