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Meet Layla Tehranchi

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We caught up with the brilliant and insightful Layla Tehranchi a few weeks ago and have shared our conversation below.

Layla, we're thrilled to have you on our platform and we think there is so much folks can learn from you and your story. Something that matters deeply to us is living a life and leading a career filled with purpose and so let's start by chatting about how you found your purpose.

When you witness people you love face problems you've never had to confront in your own life, something in you changes. It's like a switch goes off, activating a fight or flight reaction in which fight is the only option. A tiny newborn from the NICU ignited that fight for me, and each time I'd hold her close throughout the day as I navigated freshman year in high school during COVID-19, Coco became a tangible reminder that I had a purpose and it was one I couldn't ignore. I don't think humans are wired to have just one purpose— that feels a bit reductive and limiting to us as complex, social organisms. We live in communities where one's purpose can have a domino effect on elucidating another purpose. I think about it like a series of doors that lead to more doors, each with its rooms where we confront increasingly complex interactions between social phenomena. Coco showed me my passion for fostering youth equity. Still, by immersing myself in efforts with **Coco's Angels** (a nonprofit organization my sister and I founded to support foster youth in Los Angeles), I began to see more complex reasons that foster youth experienced far more disparities.

I began to look deeper, and I think that's what finding your purpose requires—a deep, complex process of refusing to accept simple explanations for injustice — a complicated investment in



seeking out the truth that isn't always immediately accessible. While Coco's Angels and our organization's app, Foster Buddy, are by-products of seeking my purpose, I think the most important thing anyone can learn about a "purpose" is that we don't find our purpose. Instead, we're constantly in the act of finding, then redefining, our purpose the more we learn, the more we act, and the more we interact with those whom our purpose serves.

Appreciate the insights and wisdom. Before we dig deeper and ask you about the skills that matter and more, maybe you can tell our readers about yourself?

Three years ago, my sister and I founded Coco's Angels because we observed firsthand the lack of resources for foster youth. Our family welcomed a 9-day-old infant into our home who was born addicted to meth and heroin. During the pandemic, we watched for signs of withdrawal, having learned how to respond and when we needed to rush Coco to the hospital. In the following months, we learned about the thousands of foster youth who weren't getting presents during the holiday season, and we vowed to fundraise, then hand-deliver those presents from each child's wishlist because it simply wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that others didn't have the joy of opening gifts—a simple pleasure many of us take for granted but one that is denied to thousands of foster youth in L.A. county simply because resources don't exist. Policies neglect to include more than what's "fundamental" for a child's well-being. While they prioritize healthcare and a stable family, they don't recognize there are many things, ranging from school supplies to gifts on the holidays, that are unaccounted for in the minimal budgets provided to foster parents.

We started Coco's Angels, quickly realizing that offering holiday gifts was a short-term form of support. So, we decided to expand our efforts, looking for ways to provide resources that help youth not just in the immediate moment but for months and years. This included creating a tutoring program where high school students from local schools could sign up as tutors for foster youth, ultimately pairing youth with youth to create mentors, offer stable forms of interaction and support, and honestly give a service that was lacking from our own country's social welfare policy. The result was highly inspiring, as the tutoring program opened many people's eyes to the inequity foster youth live with, and I loved hearing feedback from foster parents about how much their foster child looked forward to biweekly tutoring sessions. We created school supply drives, paired with the Los Angeles Mission and Guardians of Love to put on more holiday-themed events, and brought a community of activists to life who joined Coco Angels' cause (which, by the way, we ALWAYS need more volunteers to support our ongoing efforts).

But my sister's ability to take a hands-on approach to running Coco's Angels with me began to wane. She readied herself for Stanford, and knowing that she would soon be gone, I asked myself what I could do. As I shot portraits of foster youth to document their lives in hopes of producing a coffee table book that ignited conversations, I realized that so many children my age shared a common dominant emotion: fear. They were terrified at their impending



“graduation” from the county’s services since they would be adults alone for the first time. Most didn’t think they were ready. Every single one already knew the statistics that were not in their favor—statistics like 20% of foster youth experience homelessness the second they emancipate, like the 20% of former foster youth that make up our country’s prisons, like the 80% of foster youth that live with mental health disorders, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression. As I listened, I knew that my coffee table book might spark discussions about the unique challenges of foster youth, but was that enough? The answer was a resounding no.

I brainstormed ways to create something more long-lasting that I could continue to run long after I left high school. I didn’t just want to leave a legacy—I tried to maintain it not for me but for the foster youth who had no one else advocating for them, who’d been neglected for far too long from society to disregard them even more as adults. In doing so, I created the first iteration of Foster Buddy, an app that paired professionals from fields like game design, medicine, artificial intelligence (AI), and law with foster youth who had just turned 18. This would connect them with someone who could help provide mentorships like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America did, but meant specifically for foster youth aging out of the system. I designed the interface, tested Beta versions with foster youth I worked with, and worked daily with a team of highly talented and socially conscious adults who shared in my passion to make this dream a reality. Today, Foster Buddy has become the dream I’m proudest of pursuing, knowing that, like all things in life, it came from the springboard of a previous effort or interest. From my sister Coco came emotionally moving conversations with her social worker; from that came a desire to create Coco’s Angels; from Coco’s Angels came a tutoring service, holiday drives, and educational equity events with community partners; and from there came the chance to create something new, something specific for a demographic of teenagers in the foster youth population that could make a real difference. Of course, there is still so much to do. Still, Foster Buddy represents an opportunity I want to provide and promote to individuals who can help foster youth directly, one meaningful mentorship at a time.

If you had to pick three qualities that are most important to develop, which three would you say matter most?

Three areas of knowledge distinctly stand out as instrumental in my journey to co-found Coco’s Angels and, later, Foster Buddy. First, I needed to learn more about the social welfare system that my younger foster sister came from, as I’d sit with our social worker and listen to her stories about the challenges foster youth faced. As she recounted how so many foster families couldn’t afford tutoring and essential learning materials, I started recognizing the barriers to education holding foster youth back. It was unfair and wrong, and I wondered why so many kids ended up in a system that couldn’t fund the fundamental services they needed, a chance to overcome the stigmas and statistics they faced. I began taking social science courses at a college level because there was nowhere else for me to learn about them in a classroom setting, and it was through sociological lenses that I started to deconstruct the intersecting reasons contributing to inequity, poverty, and lack of educational and healthcare access, to



name a few. However, I also learned that social welfare and injustices faced by underserved communities were also a direct product of flawed policies. How could I know more about the law—a field I intend to enter to advocate for changes in foster-related legislation—while learning how to change those ineffective laws? I began researching child welfare policy, reached out to local leaders, engaged with social welfare advocates at community events, and read articles or books that could show me the opportunities for improvements in policies impacting youth. Through gaining this knowledge, I saw an apparent lack of longitudinal resources allocated by state and county policies in L.A. for kids transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood. It was a scary transition for most, as many were only offered a means of effectively transitioning for a short period if they met specific qualifications and assumed that they had the abilities or support necessary to earn a college education. This led me to the third area of knowledge that was fundamental to helping me start Foster Buddy — a social enterprise. Learning how to create a 501(c)3 nonprofit was not easy, but when my sister and I founded Coco’s Angels, we had each other to share in the work required to balance our time and unique abilities. After she graduated, I knew starting Foster Buddy was up to me. So, I enrolled in a certificate program, Media and Social Change: Becoming a Change Agent for a Better World. I leaned on my mentors from organizations like Guardians of Love and the L.A. Mission.

Together, this created a more vital understanding of making another nonprofit and producing an accessible service through an app that connected professional mentors in diverse fields with foster youth aging out of the state or county system. Without the investment in these areas of knowledge—social welfare, public policy, and social enterprise—I don’t think I would have had the mental means necessary to launch and promote Foster Buddy successfully. In many ways, it was a learning lesson reiterating the role education plays in helping someone realize and achieve a goal. When you don’t know about something, it’s up to you to take the initiative to find innovative ways of learning, even if it initially seems intimidating. In the end, it’s always worth it.

Alright so to wrap up, who deserves credit for helping you overcome challenges or build some of the essential skills you’ve needed?

As a child, I listened to my parents detail their struggles fleeing a war-torn Iran and making a new life for themselves as refugees in America. While it was never easy for them, their perseverance always inspired me. As my passion for the natural and social sciences grew, I began to recognize how much hard work and discipline it required for my mother to reach her dreams of becoming an OBGYN and gynecological surgeon. In awe of how she prioritized what was necessary while never straying from a compassionate approach to practicing medicine (particularly for underserved populations), I observed the importance of grit and empathy not as unique characteristics but as intersecting ones I wanted to embody. The ability to manifest grit meant recognizing that challenges would indubitably occur in my life. Still, the ability to practice empathy meant seeking out ways of better understanding the challenges others faced.



It's so easy to turn our heads away from things we witness that are hard to process like foster youth experiencing housing insecurity at unacceptably disproportionate levels in the first year of aging out of the system. It's easy for us to focus on our problems while not thinking that the problems of others are ones we inevitably share in an intricately connected society. However, we must practice grit in taking on an undeterred approach to facing the challenges of marginalized groups since that's what privilege demands we do. Of course, we always have a choice with what we do with the resources given. Still, as I draw upon the influence of my parents—especially my mother's work ethic and dedication to helping pregnant parents of foster children—I cannot help but acknowledge the role played in teaching me what it takes to build essential skills, quality, and knowledge to be successful. It's that same role that impacted how I approached Coco's Angels when we founded the organization, events that I currently orchestrate to augment equitable opportunities for foster youth, and the decision to create Foster Buddy. Just as those who came before me never let go of their dreams in the face of adversity, I hope to do the same while imparting those qualities to the foster youth I aim to reach.

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