



Los Angeles teen launches app to connect aging foster youth with adult mentors

Travis Schlepp | October 4, 2023

At just 17 years old, Layla Tehrani has a lot on her plate. She's a senior at an all-girls high school in Brentwood, co-founder of a nonprofit organization and now she can add the title of tech entrepreneur onto her growing list of accomplishments.

In August, Tehrani launched FosterBuddy, an app that connects emancipated teens and foster youth aging out of the system with mentors and professionals who are interested in making a lasting difference in the lives of those in need.

For Tehrani, it all started with a dream, or rather, a lack of one.

During an event hosted by her nonprofit, **Coco's Angels**, Layla had a life-changing conversation with a foster teen who was aging out of the system.

"I asked him in just casual conversation, what his dream was, essentially what his dream was for life," Tehrani said. "And he told me he had none."



Delara and Layla Tehrani, co-founders of Coco's Angels, pose for a photo at an event for the nonprofit in this undated photo. (Coco's Angels)

She started Coco's Angels alongside her older sister, Delara. The organization has raised more than \$300,000 for foster youth-related support and services, but Layla quickly discovered that some problems can't be solved with just fundraising.

"It just dawned on me that money would help, but it wouldn't solve the problem for these teenagers who were the same age as me and for the teenagers whose outlooks on life were so



dramatically different than mine,” she said. She asked herself what she could do to help those in the foster system who are often ignored or forgotten.

She thought back to a peer-tutoring program, which she also started, that called upon high school and middle school students to volunteer their time to help foster kids with their studies.

“I thought to myself, ‘what if I could do something similar, but now for emancipated youth who the county simply treats as, like, ‘not our problem anymore’ once they’ve aged out?’” she said.

That thought led her to FosterBuddy.

But how Layla ended up on the path to foster youth advocacy is a complex and deeply personal story.

Her mother is an OBGYN, and in 2020, she appeared on “Dr. Phil” to lend her expertise and guidance to a woman who was a regular user of heroin and crystal meth. The woman was seven months pregnant and used drugs every two hours, she said.

“She was heartbroken,” Tehranchi said. “So after the the show was filmed that day, my mom reached out to [the mother] and she said, ‘Look, I will give you free care for the rest of your pregnancy, if you promise me that you won’t do hard drugs for at least the duration of the rest of the pregnancy.’”

She agreed, and both women followed through with their promises.

About a week after the baby was born, a social worker told the mother that the baby was going to be taken into the foster system since she didn’t have the means to take care of her. By some sheer coincidence, Layla’s mom was there and heard the conversation. Feeling compelled to speak up, she offered to take the baby in, and the baby’s mother agreed.

That baby’s name? Coco — Layla’s foster sister.

Since coming into their lives, Coco has flourished and surpassed every developmental milestone they had hoped. Layla saw firsthand the impact that a positive environment and gentle nurturing can have on a child.

In the years since, helping foster youths has become her full-time job.

While unique in many ways, Layla is still a teenager, so the idea of creating an app to make her new mission a reality was a no-brainer. She didn’t know how to code or how to start a tech company, but she dove in head-first to try to learn.

She quickly discovered that a bit of the process was beyond her grasp, and she began looking for help. After being unable to find the perfect person whose ideals aligned with hers, she ended up connecting with a tech coder who shared her vision, a father of five adopted children.

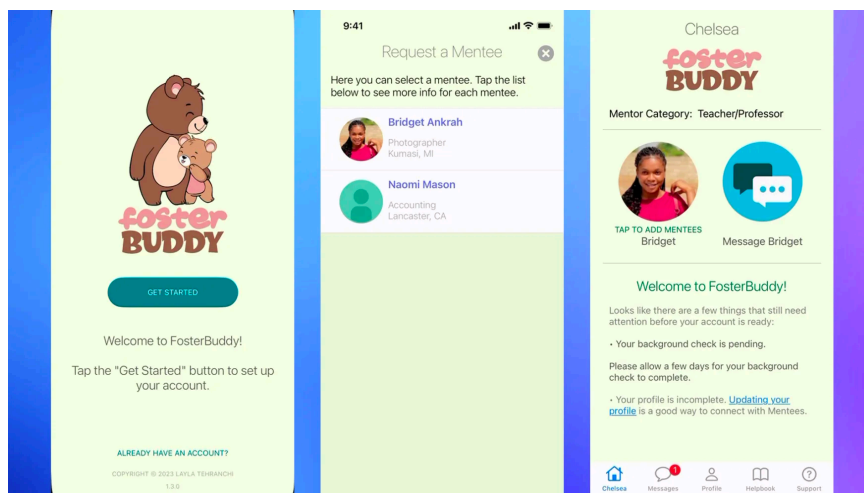


They began beta testing the app and figuring out how find mentors to offer their services before the app officially launched in August.

She says the app's purpose is to encourage foster youth to be "excited about the prospect of what is next in their lives and, most importantly, remind them that they are never alone."

The app is pretty simple: foster youths create an account by filling out basic personal information, write a brief bio with the assistance of AI text software ChatGPT, and then comb through a selection of topics of interest for what that next step in life might entail.

They can also choose the gender of their preferred mentor, which Tehranchi says is important for many of the teens who sign up. The system will then provide a list of suggested mentors for the teens to choose from. They aren't limited to the app's suggestions, and they don't have to connect with any mentor reaches out.



Screenshots from the FosterBuddy app show the app splash screen and the mentor interface. (FosterBuddy)

For those interested in becoming mentors themselves, the process is pretty similar, but mentors go through additional screening to ensure the app environment is safe for youth and young adults who are often at greater risk of becoming victimized.

The screening process is built into the app and is conducted by Checkr.com, a prominent and trusted tech company that conducts background checks for major corporations.

"It basically checks for criminal records and sexual assault records in order to make sure that these mentors are not predators in any way, which is the most important thing honestly," Tehranchi said.

The background check also only applies to mentors, not the foster youths seeking guidance. Tehranchi said she didn't want her app to exclude teens and young adults who have touched the prison system or spent any time in jail.



Once connected, the mentor and the “mentee” begin conversing via chat, with options to expand to video chatting. Mentors follow a thorough, in-depth handbook with a guide of how to be an effective and appropriate mentor, Tehranchi said.

The app has had a modest launch, with hundreds of sign-ups and thousands of views since its August launch, which is fine for the FosterBuddy team.

“I wanted to make sure that everything was working and functioning correctly ... we did have to do about two updates just for small minor errors in the first week, which was why it was so important to start out kind of a minimum volume,” she said.

But Tehranchi hopes it will continue to expand as word gets out, and the first in-person promotional event for FosterBuddy will take place later this month.

Many of the teens and young adults who have signed up for the app actually heard about it through Coco’s Angels.

Two former foster youths speaking to KTLA via email shared their stories and experiences with the FosterBuddy app, as well as their reasons for signing up.

Benjamin, 24, said he knew he needed the guidance and support of a mentor. Having grown up in the foster care system, he says he’s become resilient and has learned how to figure most things out on his own. “But I reached a certain point in my career and my personal life where I just couldn’t keep doing it alone,” he said. “I didn’t have all the answers and I needed support.”

He described his experience with the app as “smooth” and “authentic” and said he hopes to continue building a foundation that becomes a lasting relationship with his mentor.

Lesli, 22, said she signed up for the program after it was recommended to her through another foster youth organization. She said she wanted additional mentorship from someone who understood her on a more personal level.

“My experience so far has been really positive and real,” she said. “I met my mentor through Zoom and we keep in communication through texts. Immediately I loved how caring and sweet she was to me, not just as a mentor but as a person.”

Both Lesli and Benjamin say they are building trust with their mentor and hope that they will become someone they can rely on and confide in as they continue on through adulthood.



Layla and Delara Tehranchi alongside volunteers with Coco's Angels at a back to school event in this undated photo. (Coco's Angels)

For Tehranchi, she hopes that the app helps bring hope to teens and young adults who have otherwise given up on themselves.

Still just a teen herself, Layla says all of her ventures can become overwhelming, but the importance of her work keeps her going. This is what she's passionate about, this is what Coco's story has taught her.

"As I run Coco's Angels and FosterBuddy, it's really my greatest and biggest hope that I can witness their growth in tandem, and sort of their simultaneous impact on minors and adults now in the foster care system," she said.

She also hopes any foster youths, or adults looking to give back, read her story and give FosterBuddy a chance.

That, she says, would be *her* dream.

"I want every foster youth to know that this app is kind of unlocking their ability to dream and to kind of be able to envision a future for themselves that they've been told that they can't have for so long."

FosterBuddy is available for download on iOS devices now.

<https://ktla.com/news/local-news/los-angeles-teen-launches-app-to-connect-aging-foster-youth-with-adult-mentors/>