

Public health graduate channels passions for language and health equity

May 19, 2022 11:45 AM Audrey Burroughs
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Layla Babahaji will earn a master's degree in public health, with which she hopes to improve healthcare access for the New Orleans community. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Layla Babahaji is no stranger to public service — she received the Trailblazer Award, the Leader in Service Award and the Gifford Darling Reiss Newcomb Award for her commitment to others last year at the time of her graduation from the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, with a Bachelor of Science in Public Health. This year she will earn a master's degree from the School of Public Health as well.

Growing up in Dallas, Babahaji spoke four languages at home — English, French, Spanish and Farsi. With parents from Iran and Morocco, she realized the impact of language proficiency in migrant populations, particularly in healthcare settings. She didn't know exactly how to channel her health equity interests until discovering public health at Tulane.

“Tulane pushed for the importance of public service, and I believed in amplifying the voices of people in the community,” Babahaji said.

Through a nongovernmental organization (NGO) partnered with the Tulane Center for Public Service, Babahaji spent her first year working with local immigrant populations to provide English as a second language tutoring. She found it to be an important project and wanted to continue beyond the Tulane service learning requirements.

During her second and fourth years, Babahaji worked in the Center for Public Service as a service learning assistant. She coordinated service learning courses for Tulane students, connecting them with French immersion schools in New Orleans.

Babahaji was also a public service fellow, where she continued working with the same NGO and began providing translation services for the immigrant community in New Orleans.

“I met some people that had similar backgrounds as me, that were from Iran and Morocco, and I was able to use my languages to help them navigate life in the U.S.”

After studying abroad in Spain, Babahaji traveled to Morocco in the spring of her third year for a migration and transnational identity-focused program. There she applied her public health skills in real life practice, visiting with NGOs that provided migrants with daily-life and health services.

Through this experience, she realized she wanted to continue pursuing her passion to promote health equity among migrant communities and use her language skills to

help empower them.

This summer, Babahaji will complete her graduate practicum in Morocco before returning to Tulane to officially receive a Master of Public Health diploma at the school's graduation ceremony in December.

"I'm very open to anything that meshes my passion for public health, migration, healthcare access and equity," Babahaji said. "I'm hoping to stay in New Orleans to work with local communities before working internationally."