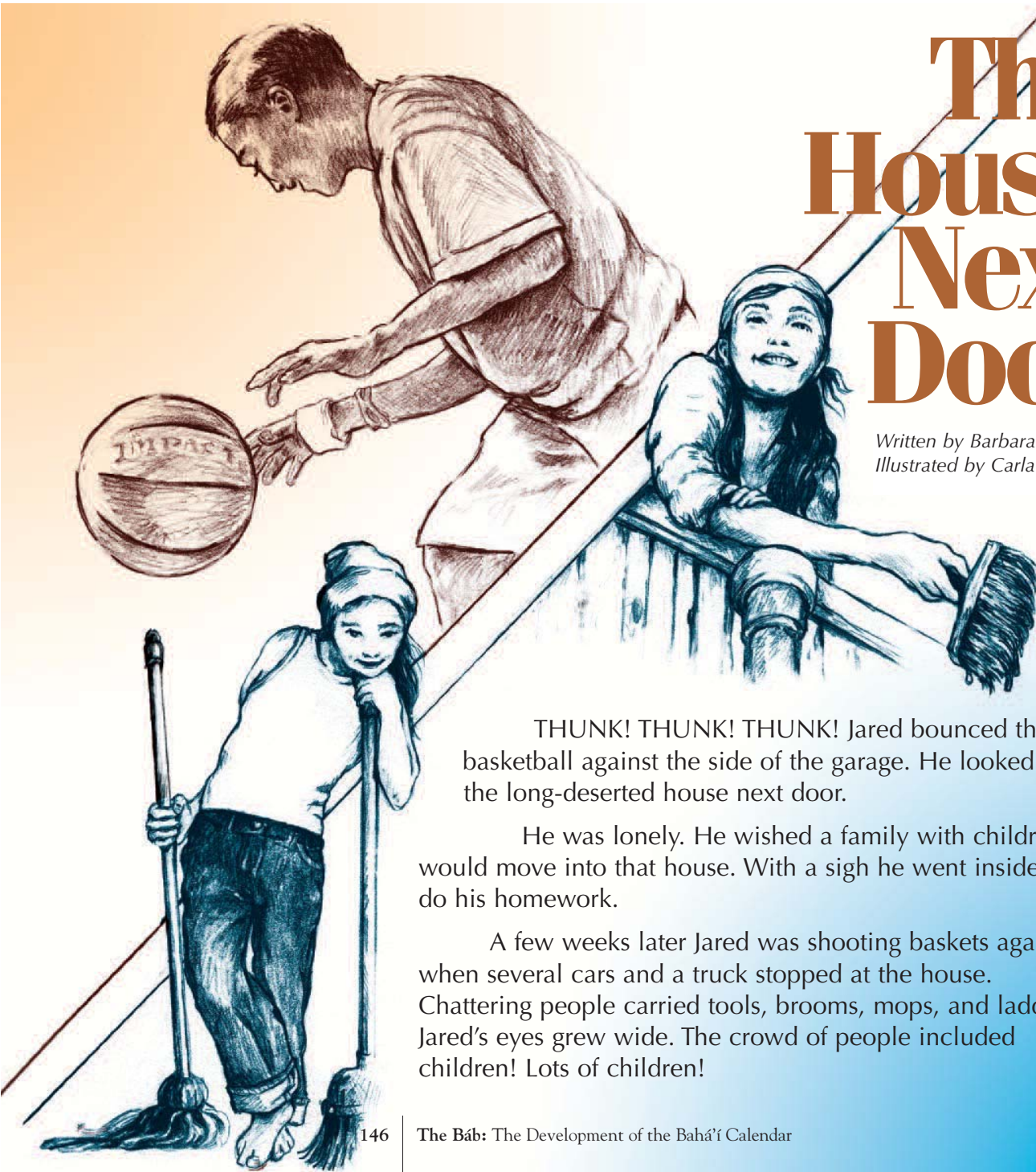


The House Next Door

*Written by Barbara Marino
Illustrated by Carla Trimble*



THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! Jared bounced the basketball against the side of the garage. He looked at the long-deserted house next door.

He was lonely. He wished a family with children would move into that house. With a sigh he went inside to do his homework.

A few weeks later Jared was shooting baskets again when several cars and a truck stopped at the house. Chattering people carried tools, brooms, mops, and ladders. Jared's eyes grew wide. The crowd of people included children! Lots of children!

“Let’s get busy,” said a man with a red beard, “or we won’t finish in time.”

“In time for what?” Jared wondered.

Ladders and cans of paint went into the house. Windows were washed. The grass was cut and flowering plants were set out. The children were working too. A boy saw Jared.

“Hi!” he called. “Want to help?”

“No, thanks.” Jared had to stay in his own yard when his mom wasn’t home.

“Okay,” said the friendly boy as he kept sweeping the walk.

That evening Jared excitedly told his mother about the friendly boy who had invited him to help. His mother looked at his hopeful face. She knew how lonely he was. She smiled.

“If they come again, and if I think we won’t be in the way, maybe we can both go.”

“We won’t be. They’re nice people.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. You’ll see,” said Jared.

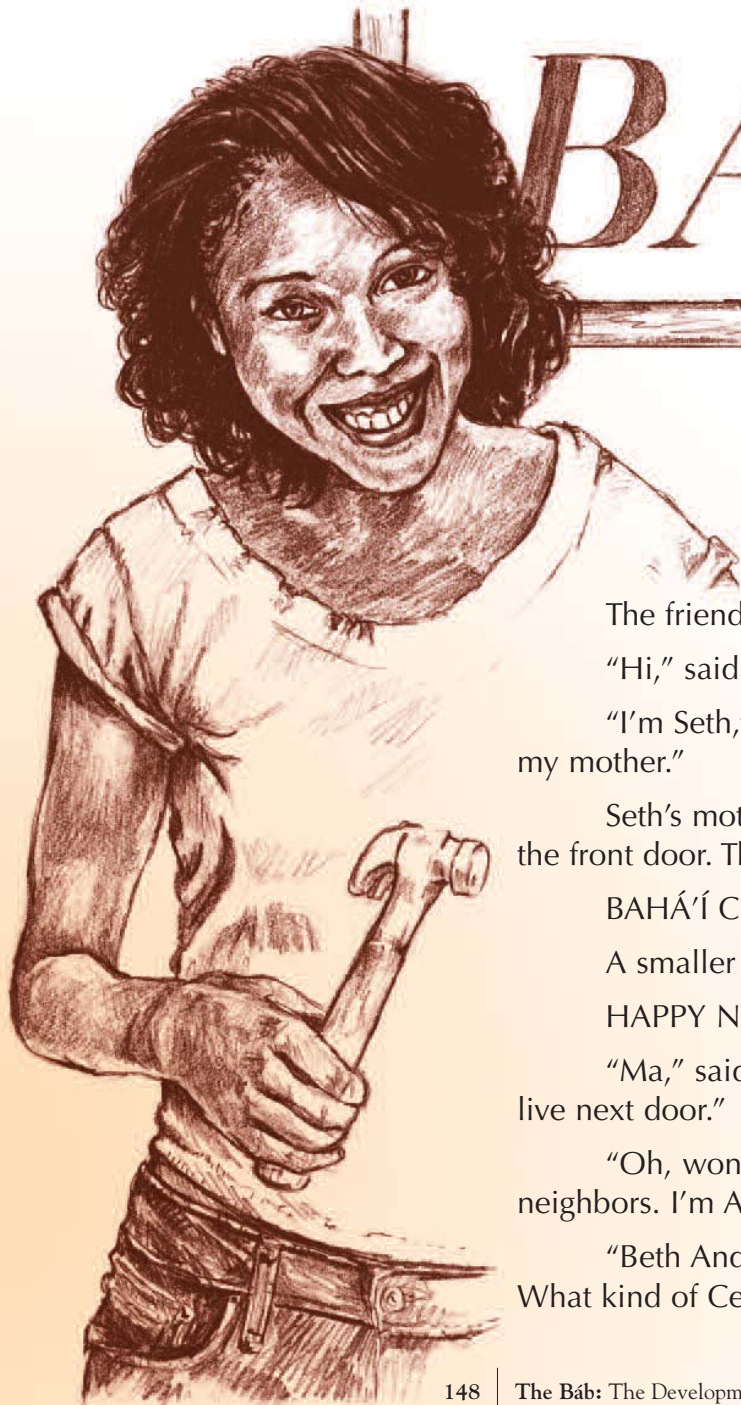
The next day Jared called out, “They’re here, Mom!”

They watched from the window. Chairs, tables, and framed pictures were taken into the house. Children carried vases of bright flowers.

“Come on, Mom,” said Jared, pulling her outdoors by the hand.



BAHÁ'Í



The friendly boy saw them. “Hi, there,” he smiled.

“Hi,” said Jared. “I’m Jared, and this is my mom.”

“I’m Seth,” the boy said. “Come and meet my mother.”

Seth’s mother was helping to hang some signs over the front door. The larger sign read:

BAHÁ’Í CENTER

A smaller banner said:

HAPPY NAW-RÚZ!

“Ma,” said Seth, “this is Jared and his mother. They live next door.”

“Oh, wonderful! We’ve wanted to meet our neighbors. I’m Alice O’Hara. Welcome to our Center.”

“Beth Anderson,” Jared’s mother replied. “Thank you. What kind of Center is this?”

The two women talked while the boys carried chairs from the truck inside.

Finally everything was ready for the Naw-Rúz festivities.

“Beth, we’d really like you both to come this evening for our celebration,” Seth’s mother said, smiling.

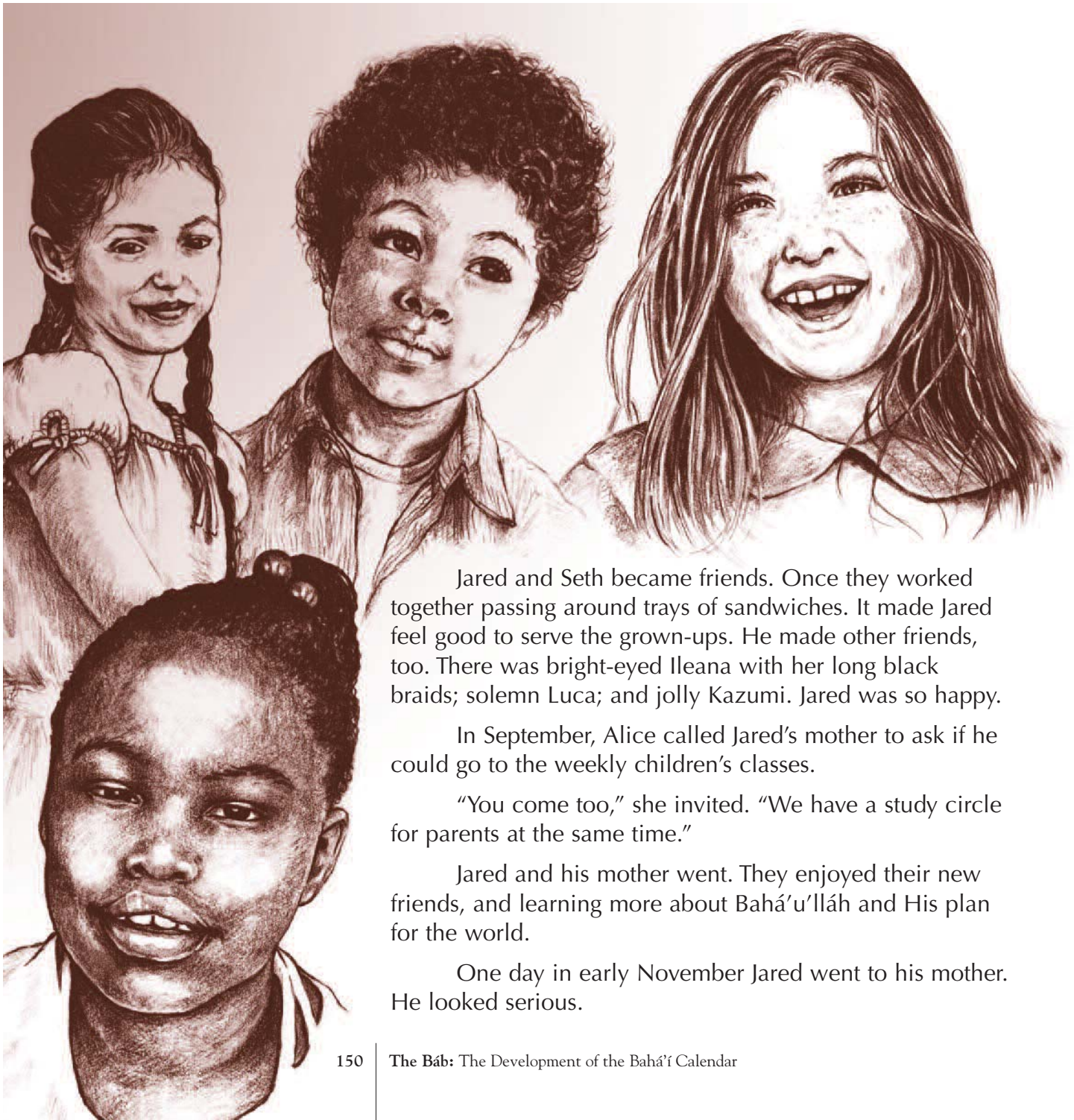
Jared and Seth waited, hoping. After a moment, Beth nodded.

“We’d be glad to come. Thank you.”

“YES!” the boys exulted.

In the next few months, Jared and his mother went several times to the Bahá’í Center. In April, they heard wonderful stories about Bahá’u’lláh and the beginning of His Faith. In May, they learned about the Báb and His first followers. In July, singing—and a sad but exciting play—told more about the Báb.





Jared and Seth became friends. Once they worked together passing around trays of sandwiches. It made Jared feel good to serve the grown-ups. He made other friends, too. There was bright-eyed Ileana with her long black braids; solemn Luca; and jolly Kazumi. Jared was so happy.

In September, Alice called Jared's mother to ask if he could go to the weekly children's classes.

"You come too," she invited. "We have a study circle for parents at the same time."

Jared and his mother went. They enjoyed their new friends, and learning more about Bahá'u'lláh and His plan for the world.

One day in early November Jared went to his mother. He looked serious.

"Are you okay?" she asked, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

"Yeah," he replied. "I've been thinking a lot about Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb."

"You have? And what do you think?"

"I think . . . I think . . . They really did come to tell us about God and help us be better people. Mom—I want to be a Bahá'í."

His earnest face made her smile. She felt lucky to have such a son. "I'm glad," she said. "I've been thinking the same thing. I'll call Alice and ask what we do now."

A few days later they sat close together as they sang the joyful song that opened the celebration of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. Jared looked around at Seth, Kazumi, Ileana, Luca, Mrs. O'Hara—all of his new Bahá'í family.

"I belong here," he thought. He hadn't felt lonely in a long time. "I have two homes now—my own house, and my other home next door!" ★

