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Abdirahman Mukhtar
Narrator

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Interviewer

May 24, 2014
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Abdirahman Mukhtar **-AM**
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf **-AY**

AY: I am Ahmed Ismail Yusuf recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. We are in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is May 24, 2014. Here with me is Abdirahman Mukhtar, who agreed to be interviewed. Abdirahman, welcome to the interview.

AM: Okay. Thank you.

AY: To start with, how old are you, or when were you born?

AM: I was born on May 4, 1981, so I am about thirty-three years now, and I was born in Somalia.

AY: Where in Somalia were you born?

AM: Mogadishu. Mogadishu, Somalia.

AY: So, prior to the civil war—I'm trying to say, did you grow up in Mogadishu?

AM: Yes. I grew up in different cities in Somalia, but my family mostly grew up in Mogadishu. So when the civil war broke out, I was in Mogadishu.

AY: What city do you mostly relate to, or what city do you remember the most?

AM: Oh, Mogadishu, Mogadishu, yeah. I mean, the city that I grew up the most, that I went to school, that I call home, is Mogadishu. But my family over the years lived in different cities.

AY: So what do you remember about Mogadishu, and how was your childhood memory relating to that?

AM: It was a good childhood. What I remember about Mogadishu is a safe place, good city, good education, good family life, beautiful weather. [both chuckle] Very, very nice city to raise kids and children. It's totally opposite than what Mogadishu is now.

AY: Yeah, because all the things that you mention and Mogadishu are not exactly in sync. They do not go together with what people, how people visualize Mogadishu now.

AM: Unfortunately, that's why we are having this interview.

AY: It's what brought us here.

AM: Yeah, so last twenty-four years, Mogadishu and the south side of Somalia have been in a civil war—so, in that case, still continuing even right now.

AY: As we speak.

AM: As we speak, yeah.

AY: So what do you remember about the war itself, though? I mean, you were in Mogadishu when the civil war...

AM: Yeah. Actually, I really remember a lot about the civil war. Even though my family, we were very fortunate. We left the second week of the civil war.

AY: Really. And when was that?

AM: January 1991. When we fled the country we were very lucky to have transportation to leave Mogadishu to other cities. But fleeing Mogadishu led to us, essentially most of my family, coming into Kenya. So my family, we were part of the first Somali refugees that came into Kenya. So we went through Mogadishu, Qoryooley, Jilib, Mareerey, all the way to Afmadow, to Leboi, Somalia, to Leboi, Kenya.

AY: So you actually avoided Kismayo [Kismaayo]?

AM: Kismayo, yeah. So we went the other way.

AY: Because your parents knew the country well and there may have been different relatives around those areas? Or what was the reason?

AM: I don't really know the reason. We were still very fortunate at that time, but some of my family actually took the last plane that flew from Mogadishu airport to Nairobi, Kenya.

AY: No kidding.

AM: And some of us actually took the long road. [both chuckle] My older brother and some of my uncles, we lost them on our way fleeing Mogadishu. They joined us later on. I cannot say the people that were driving us knew exactly where we were going, I cannot say they knew the country very well, but for whatever reason—as I say, we were very fortunate to leave the second week of the civil war, but still that affected us. It's not just one family, it's a very extended family.

AY: And it wasn't safe, and it was not organized.

AM: It was not organized so you really know where we were going. But fortunately, we end up in Kenya.

AY: So through all that, though, I am assuming that you were about nine years old.

AM: Nine, ten, yeah.

AY: Nine, ten years old. What was going through your mind? Did you know that you were running away or that you were actually running for your life?

AM: Yeah. I knew about the civil war, because my younger brother, who is two years younger than me, unfortunately was injured with a bullet. We were very fortunate, you know, it went through his chin and went under his right ear.

AY: And he survived.

AM: He survived.

AY: And he is still alive?

AM: Yeah, he lives in Minneapolis today. [both laugh] He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, today.

AY: Oh my God. What a lucky guy. And no damage?

AM: Yeah, he didn't lose anything. If you see it today, it looks like a dimple. It looks like he was born with that.

AY: No kidding.

AM: Yeah. You will not realize that.

AY: No permanent damage whatsoever? Not even a tooth?

AM: No.

AY: Wow.

AM: So we just went through that experience. But on our way, fleeing, as I said, we lost my older brother and some of my uncles.

AY: Lost, meaning that they stray away?

AM: Yeah. We did not leave the city at the same time. They went in a different way. And at that time, if you are a young man fleeing the country, especially fleeing from Mogadishu, and you were a male, most likely you will get killed. Because the only people who were fleeing were different—

AY: Were women and children.

AM: Yeah, the women and children, but also the different clans. So if you don't belong to specific clans, people will question you, they will test you, who you are. And then you get killed.

AY: Were you confronted with that? Was there any time, even through the exodus?

AM: No, not me and my family. But my brother and uncles went through that. He was telling me how lucky—you know, they were this close to getting killed a couple of times.

AY: What happened? Could you elaborate on that? When they were asked for their identity.

AM: Yeah. Because when we lost them, they didn't have transportation, so they have to find a way to get away. And they didn't have money and they didn't know where we were, so they have to stick together as a group. As I said, we grew up in Mogadishu, no one cared about clan and tribes. So a lot of times, even if you knew who you were, you didn't know in details to what tribe you belonged, to what extent—

AY: To what tribe you belonged.

AM: Yeah, and how far you can take that. So I think at one point he got questioned about what tribe he was, and he didn't give the right answer. [both chuckle]

AY: What happened? He happened to be the wrong tribe, or he didn't even know?

AM: No, he didn't know, and so the answer he gave is not an answer he was supposed to give. [both chuckle] But he was very fortunate to get away with that. So him telling me those horror stories, me actually seeing what happened to my younger brother, but also seeing other dead people on the way.

AY: When you were running away from Mogadishu.

AM: When we were running from Mogadishu. You know that, it changes, you know? Even as you are young and a child, you see you are basically running away, but you don't know what you are running away. At that time I didn't know.

AY: But did you know what was chasing you or what was just causing you to run away was just fear, fear for your life? You knew that?

AM: We knew there was a fight, there was a fight between the government and the militia, but in details, no one really told me or told us. So we have to go. It's not safe anymore. We are on the

run. And it's not only us—with other kids, other families. And that's why I always say we were very fortunate, because we left right away. It could have been much worse to experience what other people went through. So we were very fortunate to actually come into Leboi, Kenya, which was the first refugee camp in Kenya. Most people are aware of Dadaab [Dhadhaab], but before Dadaab, it was Leboi, which is the border. Because you have two Leboi—one Kenya and one Somalia. So we crossed to the Kenyan border and we stayed in the refugee camp. It was unsafe, so that's why when the UN [United Nations] and the Kenyan government built Ifo...

AY: Ifo, which was located...

AM: Ifo—that's where Dadaab is now, Dadaab refugee camp. So, they built Hagadera [Xagardheer] and Ifo refugee camps, which were very close to each other, but because of the capacity, both refugee camps, you know, got larger every time. People were coming in, coming in, so then it just became one refugee camp. So the name Dadaab actually comes from the city that used to be there before the refugee camps. So that's why Dadaab is swallowed by the refugee camp.

AY: Which is the largest refugee camp in the world today.

AM: In the world, yeah. Because of safety issues.

AY: What was the safety issues?

AM: Because there was a civil war, people, some people had guns to protect themselves.

AY: Somalis?

AM: Somalis, yeah. So some people were coming in the refugee camps itself—raping females, you know, stealing food from refugees. So you had, you know, people who were doing criminal activities.

AY: So meaning that there was a gang that actually, possibly, were members of the militias who were fighting in Somalia.

AM: Yeah, who were fighting in Somalia or whether they were from the Somali region in Kenya, no one at that time knew. But because of safety issue, because it was the border and the Kenyan government, for whatever reason, did not feel safe to have there as a refugee camp. Because people can easily come in, and they can leave and come back. Just right in the border.

AY: Right in the middle of the border.

AM: Yeah. So they relocated most of the families, most of the refugee camps to either Ifo or Hagadera.

AY: How far is Hagadera and Ifo away from Leboi?

AM: It is very close to Garissa. I don't know the exact distance, but it's far away from the border. It's just inside Kenya.

AY: It's far away from the border.

AM: Far away, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AY: So at the time, also, you chose that exactly that—of course, Kenya did not have control of even the side of its border.

AM: Yeah. I mean, most people were coming in at night. And once you're in the refugee camp, the United Nations, they will accept you. They have to help you. You are a refugee.

AY: And they couldn't tell. So they couldn't distinguish one civilian from the bad soldier or from the militia, the militia with the war.

AM: Yeah. And logistically, it was hard for the United Nations, too. You have people coming in every day. You don't have enough food. You don't have enough basic needs—shelter, tents to give out. For now, when I think about it, I can see why they have to move, why they have to close the Liboi refugee camp and relocate people. So anyways, I went through that refugee camp, and one-by-one my family came into Nairobi, Kenya. So we ended up in Thika refugee camp, which was just close to Nairobi.

AY: How do you spell that?

AM: Thika—I think it's T-h-i-k-a, Thika. I can look into that. So that was different. Liboi refugee camp was one hundred percent Somalis fleeing from the civil war. But in Thika you had Ethiopians, Sudanese, very diverse. Other refugees from other countries.

AY: East African countries.

AM: East African countries, yeah, in there. So we stayed there, because you have to be in a refugee camp if you have legal refugee documents. And then, my family then went to Mombasa, Utange [Utanga] refugee camp, which was also different refugee camp. So, for example, my family went through the ground, we were driving, but there were some people who took boats from Kismayo to Mombasa.

AY: So was it that you were making the choice of what camp to go? Or was it just the United Nations?

AM: No. It was the United Nations, but sometimes you can make the choice. We were making the choice in this case because Utange had almost hundred percent Somali refugees. We were in Thika, it was very diverse.

AY: I thought you were running away from Somalis. [chuckles]

AM: No, you were running away from the civil war.

AY: But you are running away to them here. I mean, as long as we are outside of Somalia you are running into Somalis. Or running after Somalis.

AM: You were running away from the civil war, the guns, the killings, but in this case, you just run to a safe place that you can call home, where you can have basic needs, food and shelter. So the idea of relocation, the idea of going to other countries, that comes later. At the moment, you really want to survive. You want to have basic needs.

AY: And your basic need is also, were you thinking that exactly that you have to be with your—

AM: With family, yeah.

AY: Okay. With that who speaks your—or other Somalis, in other words.

AM: Yeah, I think the idea of living with Somalis was not the most important influence. I think the influence came from the benefits of what you can get from that refugee camp. Will you get a refugee card that will allow you to get rationed food, shelter? Were you able to get water? Will you be able to live with your mom and siblings, the rest of your family? So, that was, I think, at that moment. But once we settled, once we were there a couple of years, that's when you make decisions of, okay, which refugee camp will most likely you will get a sponsorship where the United Nations or other nonprofit organizations that take people to abroad will sponsor your family.

AY: Okay. And how would you find that information, or where did you find that information?

AM: I think at that time the United Nations were working with different countries—Canada, the USA, and other European countries—where they can relocate. You know, countries were accepting refugees. So based on that. But also, if you had a family member who was, let's say, in the US or in Canada, they can actually send you a sponsorship. So it's easy. You can go through the process, because they have the IOM [International Organization for Migration], they have...

AY: What's IOM?

AM: I think it's an organization that deals with immigration, traveling.

AY: Yeah, okay.

AM: Yeah, so they help the process. I don't know what IOM stands for. We can look for that. But I think the idea is you have the US Embassy, not only embassy, but the organization that deals with relocation, resettling refugees from...

AY: Reuniting, the reunification process.

AM: Reuniting families, yeah. So you had that in Nairobi, Kenya, but also they were coming to Mombasa, which is not far away. So that's where the process was happening. So it was easy for families either to resettle in Europe or Canada or in the US.

AY: Particularly if you had someone living in one of those countries.

AM: In one of those countries, yes, and if they request their families to be reunited.

AY: So did you have anybody?

AM: Yeah, yeah. I mean, my older sister, she was the first families who left from Nairobi to San Diego, California, December '92.

AY: Wow. First wave of Somalis who came. Yeah, okay.

AM: Yeah, yeah. And most families at that time, I think, were going as refugees to San Diego, California.

AY: Yes, exactly.

AM: Yeah. So I had family members, so that's why I was able to get a sponsorship to reunite with my family in 1998.

AY: So, I'm going to go back to the refugee camp, still. When you were in the refugee camp, for you, where did you want to go? Or, actually, just wanted to leave or did you have...

AM: No, I didn't have any choice of where to go. I just wanted to go to a safe place where it was not a refugee camp. Because when you are in a refugee camp, you basically have basic shelter, food, but you don't have home, you don't have life. You don't think about education. You don't think about employment. You don't think about those basic things people think about. You're just thinking by the day. You just want to survive.

AY: Today.

AM: Today, yeah.

AY: Tomorrow doesn't come for you.

AM: No, because you don't know if the United Nations will take you back to your home. You don't know where you will go next. You don't know what will happen. I mean, sometimes people were losing their houses due to fire in the refugee camps. So right there, if you lose everything, then you start fresh, you start from the beginning again.

AY: You are a refugee again.

AM: Within the refugee camp, yeah.

AY: Within the refugee camp. [chuckles] Did that happen to you?

AM: No, no. But I experienced that, I've seen that. Definitely. And sometimes the ethnic Kenyan people that were living close to the refugee camp, for whatever reason, sometimes used to attack the Somali refugees. Yeah. So you always had that fear.

AY: So who else were the Somalis afraid of, or, in other words, who else attacked Somalis? Were they normally threatened by other forces, meaning the police, the...

AM: No. The police, for example, if you live in Nairobi, you have to have legal documents. And the Kenyan police are very corrupted, so they know who can speak their native language, Swahili. And if you do not know the language, whatever it takes, they will either arrest you and most likely they don't want to arrest you, they just need your money. So they want a bribe. Unfortunately, a lot of the refugees, they didn't want to spend their nights in jail, or they didn't want to deal with that legal issue. So sometimes whatever they have and if they don't have nothing, someone within the family will give them money so they can bribe the Kenyan police.

AY: And possibly the word got out that exactly Somalis were actually...

AM: Rich, yeah. And it became constant. It became another way of making money. So the police were looking for it, rather than keeping safe the city itself, the Kenyan citizens, the refugees who were there legal—they didn't really care. They'll knock the house, they knew the lodges, the hotels people will stay. They knew the area that fresh refugees were staying. When I say fresh, you know, people that just came in. So they will just come and all they need is some money. All they need is some money, really. And then that, unfortunately, is still happening today.

AY: Yeah. But also when it comes to the rape and robbery and all that—particularly rape, who was actually doing most of it? Was it the Somalis were doing it to each other or...

AM: No, no. Once you came in Thika, once you came in Nairobi, in Utange, you didn't have that issue. You didn't have that issue. So the only thing you dealt with was dealing with the Kenyan police and having the legal documents.

AY: So, in other words, even in the refugee camps, some were safer than the others? Some rapes were still happening—

AM: Yeah, because the refugee camps that raping was happening was the ones very close to the border. But Thika is just right inside. It is next to Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Utange is in Mombasa, the second capital city of Kenya. But the other things that related to rape and people stealing food from refugees and the fear—that was more in Liboi, Kenya, the border. At one point in Dadaab refugee camp, which is close to the Somali country.

AY: Okay. So finally you got a sponsor.

AM: Yeah. So I came to San Diego, California.

AY: When did you come?

AM: It was August 8, 1998. So this is interesting, too, because the day that I arrived in San Diego, California, that's when the US Embassy, the bombing happened in Kenya in 1998. So if my flight was on August ninth, I will not have come to the US.

AY: You would never have arrived.

AM: Yep.

AY: Wow.

AM: Yeah, fortunately. So I have to live with that. It was just right—so the day that I arrived in San Diego, California, that's when that happened.

AY: Yeah, of course, the policy and... Wow.

AM: Yeah. So the US government, you know, brought on halt for all the travels bringing refugees while they were dealing with that issue.

AY: Did you know anybody who...

AM: No, no, I didn't know anything. I mean, that's when this idea of terrorists, basically, that's when they started that. That conversation of knowing, because I can relate to that, you know. I went to that embassy before, couple of times before my arrival here. So I can't remember exactly how it looked like.

AY: And how many of your family members arrived at San Diego with you?

AM: We were a total of six people came. And we also had some family members in San Diego, California.

AY: Who actually already were there.

AM: Who were there, yeah. Who were the ones that sponsored us to come.

AY: What was it like to be in San Diego, then? How did San Diego...

AM: You know, San Diego was beautiful, similar weather to Somalia. [both chuckle] Beautiful then, you know.

AY: Warm. Was it the weather mostly that you think, then?

AM: But, also, you know, it's different. I grew up in refugee camps, so the structure, life, everything's different. Even in Nairobi, I was living in Eastleigh, which is really a bad neighborhood. The Somalis who built their business there made Eastleigh very popular.

AY: Right as we speak.

AM: Yeah. But still structure-wise, neighborhood housing, it's not a good place to live.

AY: Right as we speak, people still complain about the housing there. The road and the hygiene...

AM: Yeah. The living situation is different. So coming to a clean place, your own bed, coming to a safe place where you are not worried about police or anything else, it was different. Even though I only stayed there about two months.

AY: In San Diego.

AM: Yeah. So I made a decision to move out of San Diego quickly.

AY: Okay. I want to go back still there—when you just first arrived do you remember what your first impression was in San Diego? Or is there any particular memory that still stays with you?

AM: I think seeing my family, that stayed with me. And arriving, the people that welcomed us, even though we lost our luggage. [chuckles]

AY: Oh, you did?

AM: I remember that, definitely.

AY: Oh, the whole luggage, the whole family?

AM: Few. Few bags.

AY: Never been found?

AM: Mine was one of them, so that's why I can still remember. [both laugh] But people tell me it was a good thing that I lost that.

AY: Why?

AM: Because I was not going to use it at all—another shop. So you don't wear...

AY: But you did not know that.

AM: I didn't know that.

AY: I could imagine that. So, two months later you...

AM: So, when I came in to San Diego, California, I was seventeen years old at that time. And I was eager, I was really motivated to get an education. I wanted to learn, I wanted to be in school, I was motivated, and I told my family, "I want to go to school. Can you please take me to school, enroll me?" And because of my age, they told me, "Oh, you're seventeen. By the time you are eighteen years old you have to graduate from high school."

AY: And did you have any formal education in the refugee camp?

AM: No.

AY: Nothing!

AM: I mean, I was basically moving from one place to another. You know, I was very lucky, I was very fortunate. When I was in Somalia, I went to school. When I was in the refugee camps, you know, I learned how to read and write the Somali language. I used to love reading in my native language.

AY: In Somali.

AM: In Somali. But other than that—in the Liboi, Kenya, I was very fortunate. I had very bright, very dedicated—there was basically one family that they had a very strong educational background. It was a Somali family, they started a private school. Not private school, but they started a tutoring place.

AY: Program.

AM: Yeah, program, where people can learn basic English and the Somali language.

AY: A family started that.

AM: Yeah, in Liboi refugee camp. So it was very popular. A lot of people took advantage of that.

AY: Which means, am I wrong if I assume that exactly that when you're just saying private, that anybody that could afford it was just paying for it?

AM: I think the UN kind of was supporting that. But when I say private, it was not free, it was not government. And it was not Islamic education. We had the *dugsi* [Quran school]. We had a lot of *dugsi* there.

AY: *Dugsi* that you have to pay for. Learning the Quran you have to pay for. They were not charging you here.

AM: Yeah, but that was different. Because they were very young, they could speak English, and they were not afraid to teach what they knew.

AY: Both—was it...

AM: In Somali language and English language.

AY: So was it both the husband and wife, or was it...

AM: No, no, no, no, no. It was three brothers and their cousins, so just about five people. Just one family. And actually, some of the family, they live in this town today, in Minneapolis. One of those teachers lives in this city today.

AY: Oh, I need to get that. So do you still, do you have that...

AM: Yeah. I still respect, because I remember, for whatever reason, I loved education and I became a friend with them. I was one of the teachers—I was not a teacher, but basically helping. I was doing whatever I can do. I remember, I think I helped and create the school sign.

AY: Wow, no kidding. So that actually gave you, that built your base.

AM: Yeah. So that helped me, you know, rather than wasting my time with other things. Just I could actually, you know, whatever opportunity that I can get, I can educate myself. So because of that drive, when I came to San Diego, California, I didn't really have a good education background, but I was motivated to get education. So when they told me that I have to graduate from high school by the time I am eighteen, that gives me only one year.

AY: By the time that you are eighteen and by the time that you arrived.

AM: Yeah. So I didn't want to do that. I didn't want it to lie myself, so I kind of, you know, I talked to my family. I didn't know what to do. Then, because we had Somalis who were living here in Minneapolis, I found out that—my older brother actually, he used to work at Willmar, at that time he was living in Minneapolis—I found out that in Minnesota, especially in Minneapolis, you can stay in high school until you are twenty-one years old. Unless you are a problem-maker. Unless you don't want to get education. But if you really want to stay in high school, you can stay in high school until you are twenty-one. So that gave me extra...

AY: A ray of hope.

AM: No, it gives me extra three years, and high school is four years. So that's why I made my decision to move from San Diego within two months. And those two months I was waiting for my Social Security card and my legal documents, basically.

AY: But you were already...

AM: Yeah, I was ready, you know. [chuckles] So I moved here in September '98. No, I think it was October—yeah, October '98. So I started at Roosevelt High School. I graduated with honors at Roosevelt High School, and then went to the U [University of Minnesota].

AY: Wow. My goodness. Within three years or four years.

AM: Within four years, yeah.

AY: But also, if I can remember that actually you became a leader, you became a student activist. You got into the middle of Somalis and African American issues, and actually you played a major role.

AM: Yeah, it was tough, it was tough. When we started, as I said, we were motivated to get an education. And all of a sudden we came in—you know, the American education system is different than other countries. For whatever reason, American students—in middle school, I can't say—but in high school especially, just with the exception of few, they don't have that drive, you know. They really take life guaranteed, and they just, for whatever reason—and they were different than us. So when we came, we knew what we went through. We went through refugee camps, we went through a lot of hardships.

AY: Possibly just because the need of education.

AM: The need of education, yeah.

AY: It is just that you don't want to waste your time, possibly. Is that what you're trying to get at?

AM: Yeah. So when we came, then, all we wanted was to be in our class, learn, move to the next class. We were not socializing. We were not doing any extra activities within the school, because, number one, we were learning a new culture and a new language, so we had no time to waste. And every opportunity we can get to talk to our teachers and to take advantage of their advice or service or tutoring, we were doing that. Then we had African American students, you know, Native American students, Hmong students, very diverse. But the way we dress was different, especially our girls and females, the way they dress. No one knew who we were. We were speaking a different language. So, unfortunately, a few students who were just doing stupid stuff started giving a hard time to Somali girls, Somali females—grabbing their hijab or scarf or veil. And, you know, Somali men or boys, we protect our girls. So we fought back, just to protect. We're not fighting just to create trouble. It was more like self defense. And that kind of started this issue of African Americans and Somalis fighting all the time.

But it was lack of—cultural misunderstanding. They didn't know who we were, they didn't know our culture. They didn't know why our girls were wearing the scarf or the veil. They didn't know why we could not talk to them. I wanted to have friends, but I cannot talk to them, because I didn't know the language. There's nothing I can tell them. So that created an issue. But that's when we started, when we just came together and said, "This is not all right. We are here to stay, we are students in this school, you guys are students in this school." We knew all these fights

were happening often, and the fights started to happen at the school buses. So at that time we kind of came together, we started the Somali Student Association, which basically said, you know, we have to be united. We have to come together. We have to talk about our issues. We have to talk about our culture, but also we have to educate other people about who we are.

AY: And you were in the middle of it. Actually, you were one of the leaders, if you were not the leader.

AM: Yeah. So we started the first Somali Culture Day, because it was Ramadan. And we started—the Eid—we started bringing sambusa, halwa [*xalwo*, sweets], Somali food, to introduce to our teachers, to other students from different—

AY: You, as students.

AM: Yeah. As students, we came up with that idea. And it was really successful because people were coming and enjoying our food. We had Somali teachers, scholars, who came, who could speak English very well, who could educate other students, our school faculty and staff. So that led to us seeing a difference. We share a lot in common. We started reaching out to other African American students and other white students, native students, who were in the student council for that school, so we can talk about how we can live peacefully and understand each other.

AY: How we could coexist.

AM: Coexist. We had a lot in common that we knew.

AY: So, for example, when you started bringing your cultural food and tried to educate them about your cultural identities. First, when you brought your food to them, who participated? Did the other students come, particularly the African Americans?

AM: Yeah, they came, yeah. They came, they ate, they enjoyed the sambusas, [both chuckle] the halwa, you know?

AY: So they realize Somalis eat, too?

AM: Yeah. They realized we were not different, or we were not out there to fight them. We were not disrespecting them. It was different, though. You know, the few students who started fighting with the African American students?

AY: Yeah.

AM: Actually came from San Diego, California, too.

[pause in the recording]

AY: Sorry. Go ahead.

AM: Yeah, so they dealt with the similar issue in San Diego, where they were fighting with African American students and Latino students there in San Diego. So they knew, already, that the only way they can survive, for them to fight back, to protect themselves. Unfortunately, the school faculty or staff, they didn't know that. They were not proactive. They could not sense what was happening. But after that issue came back again and again, we started organizing. You're just creating a leadership where we can educate other people, but also educate ourselves. Because we found out that if you fight back, you will get suspended, and if you get suspended, you know, you're not coming to school. If you're not in the classroom, you're not learning. So we have to find a way, even if someone wants to fight with us, to either talk to the teacher or other employees at the school and to let them know what was happening. So we started the Somali Student Association. The group that started, right away they graduated, they were the fresh students who started at the University of Minnesota. But we also realized other students who were Somali who were attending other schools, like Edison High School or Washburn, were facing similar issues. So then we started helping them create their own student association.

AY: Do you remember the first educational meeting that you had with the Americans, whether they were Hmong, African American...

AM: I don't remember the date, but we had a pan-African group who used to meet after school. It was out-of-school-time program, after school program that used to happen at Roosevelt High School. So the leaders of that pan-African team initiated a meeting between us and the African American students and anyone else who could come. And I remember sitting in that meeting, but I don't remember exactly what the date was. And I know it was end of '98, I think, early 1999. But I remember the people who were involved in that. Nimco Ahmed was also part of that meeting. A few other people were sitting there. But I remember the team who organized the pan-African.

AY: So, you had not been there, or in the country, that long. It's not even still two years.

AM: Yeah.

AY: But did you understand what the talk was about, or what do you remember about that particular...

AM: We really wanted our African American brothers and sisters to see that we're not there to fight them. We're there to get education.

AY: Did you get that across, though, to them?

AM: Yeah, yeah, I think. And what we were trying to do is, we had few actually Somali athletes who were in the soccer team. They already played with other diversity students. We had few students who could speak the language very well, so we were trying to reach out to them so they can help us communicate well.

AY: So you recruited the ones that could talk to...

AM: Recruited, yeah, the ones who already have African American friends. So we created our own friends who were African American or Latino, so they can see African American and Somali students who are friends, who are walking together in the hallway, who were getting along. And to be honest, it was not like every day. It was not like every African American student and every Somali student were fighting—no. As I said, it was a few stupid mistakes that happened. But the media, you know, they grabbed that. The school was suspending people, so it was a bigger issue. The buses. It was a safety-related issue. But, yeah, it was different.

AY: So, as the time went on, you became the president of the Somali Student Association.

AM: Yeah, the president of the Somali Student Association at Roosevelt High School.

AY: What was—of course, you had a responsibility.

AM: Yeah. The responsibility was to bring Somali students together so we can keep our culture and our identity, but also we can coexist with other students. And mostly we wanted to share with our culture and food. And that's how the Somali Culture Day started. Showcasing our dance, history, culture, food to other students, so they can see we have a culture, we have a lot in common. We have our own music. So that led to me getting involved in the student council, city-wide student council. Just learning there's other ways to get that message across. And just kind of working with other non-Somali students. And then we started—we had daily announcements. So the daily announcement in the school every day, it was only in English language. Then I started translating it in Somali so Somali students knew what was happening.

AY: The ones who were not able to speak English, the ones who just arrived.

AM: Arrived, yeah.

AY: So you involved everyone.

AM: Yeah, so basically, I'll just come down when announcement time is for my class, come down to the main office. And then they will make the announcement in English, then I'll make the same announcement in Somali language. So it was not only me. We had really very strong young leaders in that class. But also, I want to thank the group who were there before us, who were a little bit older than us. They came up with the ideas. They were very supportive, even though they were graduating from high school, they were still involved. They were very supportive. So, they used to come back after even when they graduated—like Yassin Garad, Jamal, Abdi Noor—there's a few people, they were there. And in 1999, they started the University of Minnesota SSA—Somali Student Association. So it was not only in high school. That trend continued, even in higher education.

AY: Yeah. So, it was once upon a time actually, I don't think it still exists, but there was a time. Were you not even connected to—once you actually, I think when you moved away from Roosevelt—

AM: So, no. So when I came to the U, we actually had a very strong Somali Student Association at the U, which led to the Minnesota Somali Student Union, MSSU, which was an umbrella that brings together all the Somali students in Minnesota, whether they were in high school or in college, or universities. And they all came together and elected officials.

AY: And what happened to that? That was very powerful once. You were very active.

AM: I was the president of that association in 2005. But, you know, it died down because I think the generations changed. Even though we still have the Somali Student Association at the U, even though we still have the Somali Student Association at Roosevelt High School. It was interesting, actually, last night I went to South High and they had the first East African Culture Night in South High.

AY: Wow! Ethiopian, Somali, Oromo?

AM: Yeah.

AY: Wow! Eritreans?

AM: Yeah!

AY: That was happening...

AM: It was interesting, though, after sixteen years, the first East African Culture Night in South High. [both chuckle]

AY: But still, that actually shows, to some extent, that we are learning from the rest of the world, we are learning from even the United States. So even though we are came from different countries...

AM: We are coming together.

AY: When you are here, yes, we should be, actually, as one. Isn't that the message that they conveyed?

AM: Yeah. But, South, about a year ago, they went through the same issue we were dealing with Roosevelt High School. The fights, you know, between African American and Somali students.

AY: That was South High. It wasn't Roosevelt this time, right?

AM: Yeah, so they're dealing what we dealt with sixteen years ago. [chuckles] But that time we didn't have YouTube or cell phones where people can also videotape the fights.

AY: But on the other hand, even South, what is it called, South...

AM: Southwest?

AY: Southwest High School—Southwest High School had not been integrated with Somalis, and Somalis just arrived not long ago at the doors of this school, I think, and that’s what brought about the commotion, right?

AM: No, South High have been there. I mean, it’s different than compared to Edison and Roosevelt High Schools. Historically, they didn’t have strong Somali students who had just arrived, or ESL [English as a Second Language] students.

AY: Is it South High, or is it...

AM: No, South, South High. Not Southwest. Southwest is different. Then I graduated from high school in 2001, and my second day of college was 9/11.

AY: Oh, again.

AM: Again.

AY: What’s wrong with you? [chuckles]

AM: Yeah, so just dealing with that, just the [unclear]. I remember waiting the bus Number 16 outside of the Metrodome. You know, that indoor parking in front of the Metrodome. The Metrodome doesn’t exist anymore, but they were building that parking. And I remember I didn’t know anything. I didn’t check the news, I didn’t check the TV that morning. I was trying to take the bus and make it to my 8:15 class. But you know, this guy who was a construction worker said, “This is crazy, this is crazy, they blew up the Twin Towers! Oh my God, I can’t believe this.” You know, he was really sad, upset. It’s like, “What is he talking about?” I didn’t know exactly what he was talking about. So I took the bus, went to school. I had speech class, and everyone in the class, they were watching the TV. So they were watching 9/11 happening, basically...

AY: Alive.

AM: Yeah, alive. And the school was cancelled. All the classes were cancelled.

AY: Wow.

AM: So, yeah. But just to make a long story short, after college I started working for a nonprofit organization.

AY: Still working with the student body—not student body, but actually youth?

AM: Young people, youth, yes.

AY: You work for Somali Confederation—I always screw their name up!

AM: Oh, the Confederation of Somali Community, yes.

AY: Oh, it's the Confederation of Somali Communities in Minnesota.

AM: Yeah, the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota.

AY: Okay, so you work for them.

AM: I started working for them as a diversion youth worker. You know, after college, actually, I did an internship with the Minnesota Thunder, which was a professional soccer team. I wanted to work for them. You know, I loved soccer, but it was corporate, it was different, the environment was different. I did not see myself...

AY: Fitting into it?

AM: Fitting in, working for-profit. I mean, it was a different work environment than I expected, so I decided to join the Confederation of Somali Community.

AY: What did you not like about corporate America?

AM: I mean, actually, my goal was not about getting rich or getting money.

AY: Oh, that's why we're all in America. Come on! [chuckles]

AM: No, honestly, the work environment I was in, it was different. For whatever reason, I was not happy just being in there. So I made a decision to come and work with the Confederation of Somali Community. I started the youth diversion program. It was very successful making a difference working with young people and helping young people who were at risk. Going to juvenile courts and helping families who were dealing with kids who were in the legal system for whatever reason—truants and other at-risk behaviors. So that led to me taking a position at the Pillsbury United Community Center—Brian Coyle Center—managing the youth program and just working with young people.

AY: You have become not only a person who actually were responsible for that program, but you inspired a lot of children who still actually have your name. I remember when you were leaving and people were just really sad. Did you know that you had that much effect on them?

AM: Not really. I think, for me, I don't really think about the effect I have with them. I think about the relationship I have with them every day. So I intentionally think about it before I can work with them or mentor them. I know if I'm not honest with that relationship, I'm not helping them and I'm not helping myself. So that's why they respond that way—because they know I care about, deeply, honestly, and when I advise them I tell them the truth, and they know that I will go that extra mile to help them. But at the end of the day, they know I have high expectations for them, too. And that's one thing that is missing, because within the youth work field, you lose people, quality people who can build that relationship with young people, because the youth work job is not high-paid job. It is a very stressful job, so a lot of times you don't keep

people with high quality who can work with young people, who can do culturally appropriate work with young people. So that's why for me it was not just a job. It was not an easy job, but I was there, I had a passion for working with young people, making a difference, and I have seen how young people were responding to that. Because I have seen some of the young people, some of the friends that I went to high school with, who are dealing with drugs and alcohol, and no one really, you know, took the time to understand what they were going through. No one sat down and said, "Why," you know? "People make mistakes. You can come back. How can we help you?" So because of that, it was not an easy job. Young people were shooting each other, killing each other. Seeing someone that you knew getting killed the next day, or having someone actually die on your hands, experiencing that is not a—

AY: Did that happen?

AM: That happened, yeah. That happened. So just dealing with that. But also, we only talk about the ones who died, but just imagine the ones who were there when the shooting happened. Who witnessed their friends get killed, who also have some wounds. Because some people get shot, but they don't die for it. So just dealing with those and giving them an opportunity and a space to grieve, recreational activities, space, you know—someone, an adult, or someone they can trust that they can talk to. Bringing the law enforcement and creating a relationship between the youth, so they don't harass them, so they understand where these young people are coming from, what they're going through. It was sad for me to leave at the Brian Coyle Center, but I still work with young people here at the Hennepin County Library System. I coordinate youth programs in a different level. Now I'm on the education side, academic side. I coordinate the homework help program, which actually I went through. I used to use that program when I was a high school student.

AY: So does that mean that exactly you know the...

AM: The needs. And so I coordinate the same program that I used to use. And I know how much difference it makes. And that's why every summer I coach soccer at the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood.

AY: Oh, do you volunteer that?

AM: I volunteer, yeah. I recruited some of the young people that I used to work with who love soccer to be assistant coach and the head coach. And I work with PAL, the Police Activity League, with the Brian Coyle Center, because I volunteer. So they help me with the uniform and the logistics, reserving the soccer field. But every Tuesday and Thursday from the second week of June through August, that's what I do. Twice a week, but it's different this time, because two of my own sons participate.

AY: No kidding.

AM: Yeah.

AY: How old is your oldest?

AM: Ten, and my second child is going to be six on June eighteenth, actually.

AY: Good, because I have to follow up with that. I have to actually bring to you to my child. [both chuckle] We are getting actually to the end of our interview, but are you going to add anything, or do you know anything that you wanted to say that I did not ask the question?

AM: Oh, no. It was good. I was not thinking about the questions, but I think that's my journey, you know, basically. So I'm Minnesotan now, my four children.

[pause in the recording]

AY: Go ahead. We were interrupted by my son. So, there are two questions that I ask everybody.

AM: Okay.

AY: What do you think of us, and are we progressing, if we are Somalis? Try that one first.

AM: I think we came a long way, just even with this interview—from a teenager who went through high school, this challenge, with a dad, who have his own children now, who works professionally, who is a taxpayer, playing soccer...

AY: Not thinking about anything else now?

AM: No! Yeah, so, and the difference is I'm not thinking about back home. I'm thinking about local here. You know, I'm thinking about...

AY: You're Minnesotan.

AM: I'm Minnesotan. I'm thinking about how I can give back in my community, how I can coach, so the young people who are not very fortunate to have a mom and dad will also have an opportunity, the same opportunity my son has. So, just we created businesses—you know, my wife, she is a businesswoman. So this is home. And a lot of success stories like that. We have politicians, we have teachers, doctors within the community. It's interesting because I see some of my high schoolmates who are doctors now. [both chuckle] You know!

AY: And that's heartwarming.

AM: Yeah, so that's how much we are progressing.

AY: So you say that we are making it.

AM: We are making it, definitely.

AY: Okay. How do you see us in twenty years from now?

AM: In twenty years from now? I think we will still be called Somali Americans. [both laugh]
That will never change.

AY: We are not going to be just Americans.

AM: No, yeah. So that will not change. [both chuckle] But in twenty years, you know, my son will be thirty years old, so hopefully he will be a professional. He will be accepted as a Muslim American, not Somali Muslim American. But we also will have some issues, you know. Because there's a lot of young people who are really at risk. And the education system in this country is failing a lot of young people. So if things continue the way they are now in some neighborhoods, with same ethnic groups, the disparity, whether it is health or education, then in twenty years we may have this conversation again.

AY: I hope not.

AM: No, honestly, because a lot of families, the poverty level and the achievement gap, and the lack of recreational and opportunities for young people—not only Somali, but within the city of Minneapolis—it's challenging.

AY: We can actually talk, I think, on hours and hours, but as a matter of fact, you have responsibilities, and I think we had a good talk.

AM: Thank you.

AY: So thank you very much. I appreciate it.

AM: Thank you, I'm glad I can... Thank you.