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Mohamud Noor
Narrator

Ahmed Ismail Yusuf
Interviewer

April 29, 2014
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mohamud Noor **-MN**
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf **-AY**

AY: Okay. I am Ahmed Ismail Yusuf recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. We are in Minneapolis. I am here with Mohamud Noor, who is the executive director of the Confederation of Somali Community, and at the same time a board member, actually the chair of the board of the Minneapolis Public Schools. He is also running for a higher office, which he is going to explain to us. Mohamud, thank you very much for agreeing to the interview.

MN: Thank you so much, Ahmed. Just a quick clarification—I am not the chair for the board. I am a board director in Minneapolis Public Schools.

AY: Oh, sorry. Thanks. To begin with, when were you born and where were you born?

MN: I was born in Somalia in 1977. I was born in Somalia, and then I lived in Kenya for most of my childhood before I arrived in Minneapolis.

AY: So, in Kenya, much of your childhood memory is in Kenya.

MN: Much of my childhood memories are in Kenya, where I started in the Utange [Utanga] refugee camp as a child. I lived in Mombasa, and then later on in my life I moved to Nairobi before I immigrated directly to Minneapolis.

AY: So were you then considered as a Kenyan citizen then, or you were just throughout Somali?

MN: I was a Somali citizen who lived in Kenya for most of my childhood until I was age twenty-two, before I arrived in Minneapolis.

AY: And then, from there, how did you end up in the United States, and what state did you come to first?

MN: My immigration started from Nairobi directly to Minneapolis in 1999, and since 1999 I have lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Suud Olat
Narrator

Ibrahim Hirsi
Narrator

May 7, 2016
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Suud Olat **-SO**
Ibrahim Hirsi **-IH**

IH: This is Ibrahim Hirsi recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. I'm interviewing Suud Olat [Hussein Mohamud] in Minneapolis. Today is Saturday, May 7, 2016. Suud, thank you very much for joining me for this important conversation.

SO: Thank you, Ibrahim, for having me. I really appreciate it for this program.

IH: Yeah. Where were you born?

SO: I was born in Somalia—southern Somalia, Gedo region, Luuq district.

IH: And when was that?

SO: It was 1989, two years before the Somali civil war.

IH: Okay. Yeah, two years before the civil war broke out in Somalia. What do you remember before the civil war? I know you were only two years old, but anything you remember? I mean, if you could talk to me about what kind of house you lived in and what kind of life your parents and your siblings had led at the time.

SO: In Somalia?

IH: Yeah.

SO: I don't remember that much about how we lived in Somalia because I was very young. I had my second birthday, the civil war erupted, and we flee to the Kenya border because the civil war erupted all over Somalia and we were forced to flee. We came to Kenya as refugees.

IH: So your first memories were in the refugee camp only.

SO: Yes, exactly.

IH: Tell me about life in the camp.

SO: Growing up in the camp, since I came to the camp when I was two years old, life in the camp was very hard, very tough. A very tough and rough journey. It was not something that everyone can live, because most of the people will not tolerate living that kind of life in a long period of time, because life in the camp was very difficult.

IH: So when you say life was really difficult, what do you mean? How difficult was it? What made it difficult?

SO: I mean, when I grew up and I started school there with the help of my parents, there is no movement. Because you're a refugee, you're not allowed to move. First, your movement is restricted by the government of Kenya.

IH: So you're not allowed to move around Kenya. You have to just be in that camp.

SO: Yeah. Be in that camp. That camp is just like a prison. It's like someone who is told you can live only in Eden Prairie, the suburb of Minneapolis, and you cannot go to Minneapolis at any time and you cannot go to Saint Paul or you cannot go to anywhere in Minnesota for the next twenty years, a long period of time.

IH: Wow. Living in that kind of life for twenty years, where you can't go anywhere.

SO: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, anywhere.

IH: Except for that one place.

SO: Yeah. It's twenty kilometers square, and you are not allowed to move. It's like if you move, you go to jail. So it's an open-air prison. That was one of the toughest things, the challenges and the toughest things that we encounter living in the camp.

IH: Wow. How did that feel, living in that kind of life for how long? Twenty years?

SO: I lived there twenty-two years.

IH: So tell me more about how did it feel, living in that kind of situation?

SO: When we grow up, when I was going to school, primary education, at the school, there was no proper sanitation, there was no proper education. Teachers faced too many challenges educating us. So there was refugee life, and teachers did not get a salary, we did not have books. We used to share classrooms with two hundred students.

IH: Two hundred students, one classroom?

SO: One classroom. Sometimes, like my sisters and the majority of the people who were older than me, they started getting their ABCD under a tree. Because we were the lucky ones who were learning how to read and write under the roof. So it was a very, very tough challenge.

IH: So even though you were sometimes in a classroom with two hundred people, and even though some of your siblings were learning under a tree, you were actually one of the most—those people with privilege.

SO: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Because when the camp was established in 1991, and the reason the camp was established was to house temporarily the people who were fleeing from Somalia—people like my dad and my siblings and my mom. Millions and thousands of other Somalis, they're thinking like, "We're going back." That did not happen, because when I grow up, I become five years old, six years old, seven years old, ten years old, when I became fifteen, I used to ask my dad when are we going back and why we cannot move. My dad did not find the answer for all of us.

My sisters were the first ones who get the opportunity to go to school through a UNHCR [United Nations Commissioner for Refugees] program, the UN refugee agency. So they started getting their education under a tree because there were no schools. Growing up when I was enrolled as a student in the primary education, that was the time that they started something like classes. There were no books. We used to share. We used to share pens, we used to share books, and teachers were so dismoral. But that didn't stop us getting an education because we knew the only way we could escape poverty and empower ourselves through this hard life was through education. That reaps—we reap the seeds. Twenty-five years later, I'm now in Minnesota...

IH: Yeah, and we will talk more about how you got here in Minnesota and your life here in Minnesota. But going back to Dadaab. You mentioned that you couldn't leave that small town called Dadaab. I'm just asking myself how did you live, in terms of how did you get food and water? I know that there were no jobs there. So how did you survive in your family?

SO: Yeah, it was very tough. The camp and the camp administration in the refugee camp was run by the UNHCR—the UN refugee agency—and the host government of Kenya. So the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations that received us when we came to the border designated food distribution places. But that food was not something appropriate or something that people can live on, because it was dry maize, small oil, no sugar, no rice. Just basic. Every fifteen days we used to get such kind of food, because you do not have work. Children who finished school, they do not have employment. Even if you have education, there is no place where you can work. So we just stayed there expecting every fifteen days that kind of food. Living in that kind of situation for a long period of time, it's quite sad. That's how we lived. Every fifteen days the UNHCR and the other organizations used to distribute the food. Every family size, if your household is seven members, they will get up to every person will get maybe 1 kg [kilogram] of maize, 1 kg of wheat flour, a cup of oil. That's how we lived.

IH: How big was your family?

SO: My family, we are eight people. My mom and my dad and my sisters and my brothers.

IH: So eight people getting one cup of oil and how many of maize?

SO: Oh, 1 kg of maize. Yeah, every fifteen days. And the food is not even something that you can eat immediately because it's not ready-made food. It's not something that you can eat by that time. It was really a very dire situation. We lived, and we got through.

IH: Yeah. If you could talk to me a little bit more about your parents before moving to Kenya. What did they do? What kind of jobs did they have?

SO: They used to be nomadic, and my family used to be people who they are pastoralists. When there was a drought, they walked all over Somalia, and they moved to the rural areas, and from rural areas to urban areas. That's where my mom and my dad met and they got married. Since then, they don't go back to the rural areas. They stayed in the urban area.

[background noise]

IH: If you could repeat what you were saying because of that.

SO: Yeah. Because my mom and my dad used to be pastoralists—people who live in the rural areas—they have camels and goats and cows and all of that. But there was a severe drought that hit Somalia, and they moved from the rural areas because of that drought and they never go back. They got married there, they met and married, and that's how they built our family. They never go back to the rural areas again.

IH: You are one of eight children?

SO: Yes.

IH: And where are you in that? Are you the eldest, the youngest, the middle?

SO: I am in the middle. Five girls older than me and three boys younger than me.

IH: Are they all here now?

SO: I think we, here, are five. Most of the children died in the young age. Maybe, I don't know, because of diseases or because of natural. My mother lost four of her children, and we grew up only five. So she gave birth to nine children.

IH: She gave birth to nine...

SO: And five who are living now.

IH: And four...

SO: Four who are dead, yeah. Two boys and two girls.

IH: And how old were they?

SO: One, our firstborn, died at the age of six years. Our second-born, she died, I think, the day when she was born. My other sister was born, and she is now living. My other sister was born, and she is now living. And my other sister, I was born. A younger brother was born, and he died when he was an infant. One other young boy.

IH: That's sad. Was it normal around where you grew up, kids dying earlier?

SO: Yeah. Somalia is one of the places that children may die.

IH: Did they die in Somalia or in the refugee camp?

SO: No, only one boy died in the refugee camp.

IH: The one, he was younger than you?

SO: Yeah, he was younger than me.

IH: I'm sorry that that happened to you and to your family. Now let's go back to life in the camp. I know that you had gone through a lot in terms of difficulties living there. But also talking to people who were from Dadaab, there were also some positive ways of life there. I mean, people were talking about soccer, people were talking about going to school and being happy and playing with their peers and getting married. So tell me about that. What do you remember about living in the camp and any fun memories that you have about the camp?

SO: When I grow up in the refugee camp, the life in the refugee camp was very hard, and we used to live like any other human being. We used to play soccer, go to school, play after school. Just live life like any other human beings around the world. But regardless of the situation, we never give up.

IH: I remember the first time I met you. I met you in the camp in 2010. I was a student at the University of Minnesota at the time, and I visited the camp for an internship. I remember you being very busy in terms of you were part of the FilmAid organization, and also you were, I think, leading a soccer team. So tell me more about that and that experience.

SO: Living in the refugee camp, we had been harassed, we had been dehumanized, we had been beaten, we are refugees, and there were a lot of bad things going on. Despite the Kenyan government hosting us, there were a lot of problems that come with being a refugee. You have an identity crisis, you don't know where you're from. You're not a Kenyan, you're not Somali, you cannot go back to Somalia. So with all those challenges, when I grow up, I become involved in my school leadership. I was on the school debate team, learning English, I was involved in debates. We founded our soccer team. That team was not something that we just formed overnight. It was time. We started when we are sixteen or seventeen years. Since I came to the United States, that team was existing. We played soccer, we won cups, we feel happy. We were living just like any other human beings, as I said before, because being a refugee or stateless or someone with an identity crisis who doesn't know where to go or who was like in prison did not

stop us from enjoying life, playing soccer. There were young people getting married in the refugee camp. There were people who were born in that camp and now married.

And still the challenge is the same. Now it's twenty-five years since the camp was established. People finishing school, they don't have hopes. They are eager to go back to Somalia and be recruited as members of the warring parties in Somalia because they found out about... There were no resettlement opportunities for all the people. There were no further educations so they can pursue their education. There are no employment opportunities in the camp. The health is very, very poor. The hygiene is the same. So a lot of challenges there are still going on.

IH: I remember you were part of FilmAid, which helps the youth there learn how to shoot videos and edit videos and tell stories through film. What kind of work did you do there, if you remember? Tell us more about your experience with FilmAid.

SO: Film Aid International was an organization that helps the refugees to tell their stories and use the power of film and camera to tell their stories, which go untold most of the time. That organization worked with UNHCR—the UN refugee agency—and they helped the refugees to have hopes and to use film and camera.

IH: How did that help you? What did they do for you and what experience did you get from it?

SO: That was a very, very good opportunity for me. The school taught me how to speak English, how to learn, how to read and write, and my primary and secondary education in that camp was quite a great learning opportunity. But one thing FilmAid helped me with was unique because I didn't know how to use a camera, I didn't know how to tell my story, I didn't know how to share around the world the untold stories in Dadaab, the suffering, all of that.

FilmAid came to the refugee camps and recruited young refugee members and put them in a workshop for one year and two years. So we became part of refugee filmmakers telling stories. There were a lot of things going on, like people with HIV/AIDS. They face a lot of stigma. There was discrimination. There was a lack of awareness because people didn't have radios, people didn't have newspapers, people didn't have all these—and half a million people! So as young people who grew up in the camp, we speak English and Somali, and when we get the equipment and the things that we can practice, we go and use it as a tool to empower people. That helped us. The reason that I met you was because of that project. FilmAid brought you all the way from the United States to the camp.

IH: Yeah. And before we get to the project that I worked with, tell me, maybe give me an example or two about a project where you worked on to create, to tell the story through video.

SO: For example, when we get the opportunity, we are selected as a few refugees who can participate in this program. So one thing we learned was we got the opportunity to use those cameras, how to do reporting, how to learn skills, how to edit videos and all that. So with that, we came up with a lot of great projects. Like a few of us started that newspaper called *The Refugee*, and that was the only refugee newspaper. It was the voice of half a million refugees who didn't have news to tell their stories. We make it online, use the power of social media to

tell our stories. That helps more people around the world to learn about this camp and find out there are this many people suffering in that refugee camp. That lead to world leaders visiting the camp and seeing what is going on there from around the world.

IH: I know that around 400,000 people lived in that camp, and they were turning to your organization and the stories that you tell for a news source. How did that make you feel to be part of that?

SO: Yeah. That makes me feel proud, to feel that—being a refugee and being a stateless person, being someone who didn't live with dignity and all those things. Being a refugee, it's like you are deprived of your dignity because it's like you're living in a prison camp. So that didn't stop us to empower our fellow refugees, those who just came to the camp. Such kinds of projects give us the power, the inspiration, the aspiration, the integrity, the dignity to tell our stories and feel proud of who we are. That didn't stop us to go and move forward and become who we are today.

IH: You mentioned a little bit about *The Refugee* newspaper. I was part of the group that started it. Earlier on, you took on the leadership of that. After leaving the camp, after my internship, I've been following you and the rest of the group. You were one of the leaders who played a big role in continuing that newspaper, which eventually became a magazine. Tell me about the role that you played after I left.

SO: As a journalist who is a Somali who can understand us, from the United States, that was a really great opportunity. Working with you on that project was really an amazing thing. When you came back to the United States, what we did was we came together and we worked with other refugee agencies and FilmAid to make this newspaper, news for the refugees. We make it on a monthly basis where we can share stories that are going on around the world and tell the refugees there to get empowered and tell their story.

That refugee newspaper was something that was an eye-opener and something that changed the way we think as refugees that we can reach. Since we are disabled and we are restricted in movement, they cannot make us voiceless. So we are basically being the voice of the voiceless, millions of refugees who are stuck and stranded in a refugee camp. That was really something. Most of the people did not believe that we can tell our stories. But when we came up with this newspaper, and this newspaper became something that was a daily news source for most of the refugees, they feel empowered, they feel inspired. When things happen, we share, and everybody around the world sees it. So that was really, really something up to now a legacy that helped millions of people.

IH: Yeah. And now, of course, it's not only a news source for people who live in the camp, but it's also a news source for people who live outside of the camp. So tell me about the audience of that news organization and where they live.

SO: The audiences were all over the world. We had a website and a Facebook page and Twitter and Instagram—all those. So basically the print paper was something that we distributed freely to the refugees in Somali and English. Online, on the social media, we used to tell and spread the refugee stories to the world so that the word can see what is going on in Dadaab refugee camp.

Many journalists who are famous and popular around the world come to Dadaab. One journalist once said that Dadaab is Hollywood, as famous as Hollywood. Everybody knows Dadaab now. When bad things happen, around the world newsmakers and leaders used to check and come to such kind of websites and papers like *The Refugee*, because it's the only way that you can get the refugee stories. Because when the terrorists in Somalia and all those insecurities came to the camp and there were high-profile kidnappings that happened in the camp, journalists and humanitarian workers did not come to Dadaab because of the fear of being kidnapped or killed or all that. So they use us as a source, to take sources from our website and then tell. We played a role when those journalists weren't able to come to Dadaab. We gave the platforms to help the refugee stories to continue. That didn't stop, the insecurity did not stop the reporters and humanitarian workers from seeing what is going on in Dadaab. So it was really, really something that we all feel proud of.

IH: Yeah, that's great. I remember one of the stories that you wrote was about a flood that happened and how it affected people and how it washed away people's homes. Do you remember that story?

SO: Yeah, I remember that story. That was one of the first stories that you sent me to write. There, the floods used to come when there is a rainy season. The refugees do not have proper houses. Houses are made of trees and plastic, so when the flood comes, the flood will come straight through where you sleep in the night and all that. There were mosquitoes that bite people, and there were scorpions, small insects that bite the refugees during the night. When the flood came, there were no restrooms. The restrooms were holes, and when the flood came the water will go straight to the hole and will bring all the bad things. Yeah. Diseases spread. So it was a really, really challenging life. That led to the spread of cholera sometimes. That was really something that we saw with our own eyes. We lived it.

IH: That is a story that you wrote about.

SO: Yeah. That is the first story that I wrote about when we were about to establish this newspaper.

IH: The people who produce, the people who report, the people who take photos for this project are all refugees.

SO: Refugees. Yeah.

IH: They're all born or grew up there.

SO: Yes. That was the best thing that we can think of, because we didn't know that we have all this power. But with the help of people like you and those organizations, we were able to, you know...

IH: Are you still part of that project?

SO: Yeah, I'm still part of it because I help Dadaab in so many ways tell their stories. I still hold fundraising events for Dadaab. Sometimes we held a Dadaab youth summit, where we can bring all the Dadaab youth together, and then we continue to tell Dadaab stories until that camp closes or the world finds a solution.

IH: Are there still people, your friends, people that you grew up with who still live in Dadaab?

SO: Yes, there are people who live in Dadaab still, yes. They still live in Dadaab.

IH: What are they telling you? What are the latest stories from Dadaab right now that they are sharing with you?

SO: They're sharing with me that there are a lot of challenges still that they're facing. There were not durable solutions twenty-five years in the camp. They think there would be solutions. Otherwise they will go back to Somalia, they will find a third country, because Kenya is not letting them become permanent residents. There is not citizenship. There are still too many problems.

IH: So a lot of people are saying they're going back to Somalia.

SO: Yeah.

[pause in the interview]

IH: Now let's talk about your journey from Dadaab to America, here. How did you start the process of coming here? After living there for twenty-two years, what made it possible for you to come here?

SO: In Dadaab camp, there were plans, solutions. The UNHCR and other organizations used to help refugees—those with protection issues or with serious medical issues. They looked for solutions for another country like the United States or Canada, all those developed countries to take refugees. We were some few lucky refugees who got the opportunity to be resettled to the United States. That was still a long time, but finally we came to the United States.

IH: How long did it take you to come here in terms of the process?

[pause in the interview for a telephone call]

IH: So how long did it take you to complete the process to come here?

SO: It was a long time. Basically I can say since the day we came to the camps up until now we had been looking for solutions.

IH: So twenty-two years.

SO: Yeah, twenty-two years basically, because the UNHCR and other organizations, they always have ways to help the refugees. So getting the resettlement to a third country was a dream of every refugee because there is no solution, there is no way to go back. So basically we believed that.

IH: Was that normal, though? Was it normal for other families to wait for this process for twenty-two years?

SO: Yeah, we had been waiting for twenty-two years, because once you're in the refugee camp, UNHCR is the organization that is responsible for your protection and your care and everything. In 1992, 1993, 1994, all the years we had been looking for opportunities to go to the United States or any other country, and that took us twenty-two years.

IH: Wow. Was there a time when you almost lost hope in terms of leaving that country to either Canada or Europe or here in America within that twenty-two years that you lived in the camp?

SO: Yeah, you know, always getting a resettlement to those countries—either Europe or the United States or Canada—it's a big, big, big challenge because it's not something you have control over. There are other people who are controlling it, so it's them who will decide who is going or not, and there are millions of refugees around the world who are looking for those opportunities.

[pause in the interview]

SO: Yeah, there is no way you can hope. You can just have a hope, but that hope was something very, very narrow. We lived that hope for all those years. So finally, twenty-two years later we got the opportunity finally to come to the United States. But it was really, really a long period of time with a lot of challenges and difficulties and risks. So getting a resettlement is the only hope people have.

IH: So were you able to come to the States with your family?

SO: Yeah. Most of my family members came to the United States with me, although it was not something that we came together at the time. It was years and years in between us, everyone, when we came. But, yes, most of my family members are now here, although some of them are now in the camps.

IH: Which state did you first land?

SO: I was resettled in Nashville, Tennessee, United States. So from a refugee camp straight to the United States was not easy.

IH: How was your first experience here, in Nashville, from a camp to Nashville? Was it Tennessee?

SO: Tennessee, yes. You know, all from a refugee camp to the United States, it was really, really something that, yeah, from a refugee camp—the world’s largest refugee camp—to one of the world’s most developed countries was not easy. That was the first time that I got into an airplane, when I was coming to the United States, to Nairobi from the camps, and then Nairobi to Europe, then Europe to the United States. Yeah, it was really an adventurous journey.

IH: What was your expectation coming here?

SO: My expectation was you’re going to the United States, the country that I used to see on the films, the country that I used to see on the films and books and everything. So coming to Nashville, I first landed in Miami. I slept there one night, and then the next afternoon I headed to Nashville, Tennessee, which was my final destination.

IH: Did your family choose to live in Nashville, Tennessee? Why Nashville, Tennessee? Why not other places first?

SO: The UNHCR will consult with the Department of State, and they will decide. When you are accepted to go the United States, they are responsible for your journey and where you’re going. So it’s them who will decide where you are going.

IH: So they decide. Okay. Interesting. So after that, what happened, what did you do there?

SO: I came to Nashville, Tennessee, and I started to look for a job because I was no longer restricted in moving and I had come to a land of opportunity where there are plenty of opportunities. So I continued pursuing my education, going to school and working, and sent money back to Africa to my family. Giving back, getting involved in this community, getting assimilated to the community that I was resettled in. Within a short period of time, I was among the community that’s in Nashville, Tennessee.

IH: What was your first job?

SO: My first job that I got was... When I came and first landed, I was resettled, and from the airport to my apartment there was an organization that has a contract with the US Federal Government that resettles refugees to those cities. I was resettled by Catholic Charities of Tennessee. A caseworker came to me, and he picked me up from the airport, he took me to my apartment. After living there for a while, I got my documents—like the social security and everything. Eight months is the time when those organizations, they can help you. Within two months of orientation and all this, I got the opportunity to get to know Nashville, because you are not a driver, you don’t know how to drive, you did not know. Where I’m from there is no cars, and if there is cars, only a few people has. Everybody was driving in the United States, and that was a challenge.

I looked for a job, and I was able to find a job at a production warehouse. That warehouse, I worked one year. Then I volunteered for the organization that brought me to help other refugees that are coming. Finally they hired me, and I was working with them for a while. Then I moved to Minnesota, home of the largest Somali community.

IH: After how long did you move to Minnesota?

SO: After two years in Nashville.

IH: Why did you move here?

SO: My sister, who was the eldest of our family, came to Tennessee, and most of her friends and her schoolmates lived in Minnesota. She said, “I want to move to Minnesota.” So she moved here. After a while feeling like you need to move there—there were a lot of friends and Somali community here in Minneapolis and Minnesota—so I moved here.

IH: To be closer to family members and friends here in Minnesota.

SO: Exactly.

IH: I’m sure that’s common for a lot of Somali immigrants who first lived in other states, and then they decided to move to Minnesota because Minnesota has the largest Somali population in the country and there’s a lot of support and a lot of help.

SO: Yes.

IH: So tell me a little bit more about your educational background. I know that you completed high school in Dadaab. Then when you came here in the States, were you able to go back to college?

SO: When I came to the United States, yes, I go to high school. I got my higher education and my primary education in Kenya, and when I came to the United States I tried to start college. I was one time enrolled to Nashville Technical and Community College in Tennessee. Because of working a schedule and working fulltime—most of my family members did not come at that time—it didn’t work for me to work fulltime at the same time as going to school. I was unable to take classes regularly. Then I focused on work.

IH: You had to support your family back home.

SO: Yeah. When most of the members of my family were here in the United States, I moved to Saint Cloud, Minnesota, and I enrolled to Saint Cloud Community and Technical College. That’s the school where I’m hoping now to pursue my education and finish there. Then I have hope of transferring to another university in Minnesota so that I get to continue my education and become part of the Americans, Somali Americans.

IH: What do you hope to study?

SO: As a Somali, as a person who grew up there with organizations like FilmAid helping me to know more about the power of film and camera and journalism and all that, I am hoping to study journalism and major when I got to university in international relations, so that I can continue

helping the global refugee crisis and become someone who is helping. With all the years I have been living in the refugee camp, people used to help me in different ways. So I wanted to pay back and help those people.

IH: So what do you do right now in Saint Cloud? I know that you're very involved in the community. You're an organizer. I see you speak at the events, especially youth events. So tell me a little bit more about what is your focus and what do you do in addition to going to school?

SO: Going to school is my first priority, and work. As someone who is part of this community in Minnesota, I advocate always for the refugees back there and those in Somalia, and I always look for ways to bring Somali people together so there will be peace in Somalia so those people who are now refugees in other countries and people who are risking their life and going to the sea and dying every day will have better ways to change their lives. There will be a government in Somalia that will take the responsibility of protecting its citizens. My hope is to see one day peace in Somalia where the Somali people will live in peace and have a prosperous life in their country and that they can have the rights and responsibilities and there will be law and order in Somalia. So as a community here in Minnesota, I work with community organizations based on developing and empowering the Somali community in education, in political, in social, in economic aspects. So that is something that I always spent most of my time doing.

IH: What is the organization's name?

SO: I work now with an organization called Abab, funded by youth from Dadaab refugee camp. Their goal is to educate refugees here or in Somalia or in Kenya. So our goal is to empower the refugees and base it on education. We know that people can go through education, and empowering people there will be a bright future. So that's why we're working hard to educate refugees and people who are less fortunate to have proper education and all that.

IH: That's really good. I know that there are a big number of Somali community in Saint Cloud, and that number has been increasing over the years. Ten years ago there weren't a lot of Somalis in Saint Cloud, but now there are thousands of them in Saint Cloud. So what is the experience for Somalis like in that city?

SO: Somalis in Saint Cloud came to Saint Cloud because of the war in Somalia. They were the first people to come to Saint Cloud back in 2001, 2002, 2003. Now there are thousands of Somalis in Saint Cloud. They're living there. There are children going to high school. Their businesses are owned by Somalis. There are worship places. There are Somali people who teach college, Somali people who have successful businesses, Somali people who are doctors. Some serve in the police and in the country's military. They are part of the community, and they are just like any other American. There are a lot of great things going on in Saint Cloud.

IH: What are the challenges?

SO: Yeah, there are a lot of challenges. Every country has its own challenges. There is a lot of racism here. You have some people—not all the people of Saint Cloud—but there are some incidents that related to racism. Racism is a big, big problem here in the United States. There are

some students who are being called names like, “You are a terrorist, and go back to Somalia,” like that.

IH: And you’re talking about the high schools.

SO: Yeah, the high schools.

IH: Which high school is that?

SO: Tech High School. There are some students who are being called names like that.

IH: That incident happened in 2014.

SO: In 2014, yeah. But that whole thing stopped. People live in Saint Cloud peacefully. Saint Cloud is a very, very nice place. It’s a growing city in Minnesota.

IH: Speaking of those challenges, some mosques have been vandalized.

SO: Yeah, and some cars have been vandalized. That was part of the challenges of people living in Saint Cloud, but the community leaders and the city leaders are working around the clock trying to overcome all those challenges. I think they cannot overcome all those challenges in an overnight period of time. But it takes time so there will be peace.

IH: Yeah. Also I want you to talk to me a little bit more... Now we’re in Minneapolis. I know you drove some kids who are playing soccer here in Minneapolis, in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Tell me about this game.

SO: Soccer is very important, and Somali youth love soccer—or football, we call it. We used to watch soccer on the cinemas in Dadaab refugee camp, probably the British football and the World Cup. They love soccer, and they need anyone who loves soccer or sports to invest and help those children to their fullest potential and become professionals who can represent the United States in the coming World Cups. Soccer is becoming popular in the United States these days. They love soccer, and soccer will help them to avoid involving in drugs and gangs. That’s something that I wanted to continue and help young people to feel that they can have ambition to become great soccer players in the future.

IH: Do you sometimes feel you’re almost doing the same things that you used to do in the camp? Because I remember you being very involved in organizing soccer games, and here you are in Saint Cloud doing the same thing, bringing kids from Saint Cloud to Minneapolis so that they can enjoy and have fun.

SO: Yeah, exactly. That’s what most of the time I like helping others to enjoy and to feel inspired. I like helping young people to see good examples and role models. Young Somali people now have been called names. Like whenever you think of Somalis, the first thing that will come to your mind is Somalis are terrorists, al-Shabaab are pirates. That’s not Somalis, who they are. They’re great people, they have a country, but due to the civil war they cannot live in

Somalia because there is no peace. So they came to this country, and the things that are happening with Somalia did not stay there, but they follow all those people. Whenever things happen, Somalis' name has been attached to something negative.

That's where we are fighting using the power of the pen and our education to overcome all those challenges, and tell that Somali people are just the same as other human beings, and they wanted to live in peace and they wanted to have a dream to enjoy their country. Those who are living in the United States are just like any other American people. They want to contribute and are already contributing. They created the state of Minnesota, socially, economically, culturally, diversity, and all that. So it's really, really amazing when you see a lot of successful Somali stories in Minnesota. All of the states come to Minnesota and see all those great things Somalis achieved in a short period of time—like twenty years.

IH: Yes. And also, I know you're very involved in the politics in Somalia. Why is that important to you—being engaged in politics there, while living here in Minnesota?

SO: Because it's very important that we young people, like myself, get involved in the Somali political changes because everything that happens here has something to do with it. Ninety-nine percent—every ten Somali people in Minneapolis, nine of them have family or someone in their immediate family in Somalia. So peace and stability and development in Somalia and good leadership, governance, law and order in Somalia, will help Somalis here, Somalis there, and around the world. Africa and all the countries around the world will benefit from peace in Somalia. It's a hope for everyone.

So as young people, as young active people, educated, leaders of the community, we are working hard to change Somalia's political situation because there is corruption, there are a lot of bad things going on. Politicians are not governing the country the way they are supposed to. There are failures of leadership. So as young Somali people, we wanted to change that and be the agents of change, ambassadors for change in Somalia, here. So once there are peace and transparency and justice in Somalia, it's a hope for the diaspora. Because every Somali person in the diaspora sends money to Somalia. They send Somalia millions and millions of dollars, so that's why we feel and we are concerned about the situations in Somalia. We want to see peace in Somalia, where we can go, we can contribute, we can play a role in peace in Somalia. That's why we're involved in most of the Somali issues most of the time. That's something that pushes us, because when there is peace in Somalia, it's a hope for Africa, it's a hope for all countries around the world.

IH: Yeah. That's good. Also, you're not only involved in politics in Somalia, but you're also involved in the politics here. Elections are around the corner. There are two Somalis who are running for the same position, state senator, house senator [member of the Minnesota House of Representatives], and I know that you have been visiting Minneapolis to be part of those campaigns. So tell me a little bit about the Somali political movement here in the Twin Cities. What are you learning?

SO: Somalis in Minnesota are the eyes and the role models for Somalis in other states. There are a significant number of Somalis in Canada, the UK, Sweden, all of those countries, but

Minneapolis is the small capital city of Somalis in the diaspora. It's almost now thirty years, twenty years since Somalis started coming to Minneapolis. It's great that we see Somalis have aspirations to hold public office in this state. It's just as of yesterday that there is a Muslim mayor who has been elected the mayor of London, which is a one of the world's most diverse cities in the world. It's great to see Somalis who are running for office. Now there is an elected Somali official in the City Council of Minneapolis, and there are two Somalis, one man and one lady, looking for the state Senate [Minnesota House of Representatives].

IH: That's Mohamud Noor and Ilhan Omar.

SO: Yeah. They are two great people. They are helping this community for a long time, and now they wanted to compete with someone, Phyllis Kahn, someone who...

IH: Who has been in that seat for forty-two years.

SO: For forty-two years. It's really great to see Somalis learning how to vote. The importance of voting in the United States is something we all know. You vote, your vote matters. If you want change and politicians to know more about you, you vote and have the representatives in the federal level and the state level. It's great Somalis are now running for office. We want see in the future, five or ten years down the road, Somalis who are running for federal state senators and congress and all that. It's something that we can be proud of.

IH: So when did you come to the States?

SO: In 2012.

IH: In 2012. So you lived in Nashville, you live now in...

SO: Minnesota.

IH: In Minnesota. You live in Saint Cloud, but also you are very aware of what's happening in Minneapolis. So when you compare Tennessee, Saint Cloud, and Minneapolis, how are they different, how are they similar? I'm talking about the Somali community.

SO: Somalis always, they are people who love to get involved in politics and be the change. The leaders of the Somali community always...

IH: Is that the same in Tennessee?

SO: Yeah. In Tennessee, a lot of great things are going on in Tennessee, too. Although the community is not as big as Minneapolis or Minnesota, there are a lot of businesses and Somalis who...

IH: Have you seen anybody running for public office?

SO: In Tennessee? No, I haven't, because the community is not as big as it is here.

IH: How about Saint Cloud?

SO: In Saint Cloud, yeah, a lot of Somalis run for city council, school board, and different kinds of public offices. There are a lot of great things going on in Saint Cloud, too. We are proud to live in Minnesota. We love this country, we love this state, and we feel that we are home here. The welcome and the hospitality that we receive here is something that we can never forget.

IH: One last question. Where do you see the future of Somalis in this state of Minnesota in the next ten years, twenty years?

SO: We are Americans. We call home Minnesota, and this is a great state, one of the best states in this country. In the future, what I see is there is a bright future for Somalis in this state, economically, socially, politically. There are a lot of Somali students graduating in schools, there are a lot of Somali businesses, there are a lot of Somali people excelling in education. They are doctors, engineers, politicians, journalists. All of those people came to this country as refugees, and now they become contributing members of the growing of this great state of Minnesota. Yeah, I want to see Somalis holding public office, Somalis running for governor, Somalis becoming commissioners and state officials.

This is our state and we love it, and we want to live with our neighbors, our brothers and sisters who are here already. We're Muslim, we're black, we're from Africa, there are a lot of challenges. People do not speak English, most of them. But still we want to work with everyone and get along with everyone who wants to help us in our days now. We are not the first ones who come to this country as immigrants. America is a land of immigrants, and people came. There were years and differences of time, but there were a lot of generations and generations of people who were coming, immigrating from all over the world and coming to the United States for opportunities, and that's why America is the number one country when it comes to diversity, development, and change.

So we wanted to be part of that, and we're feeling that we're Americans. Like myself, I cannot, when I finish my education, I cannot run for US president because I was not born natural in this country, but I believe I can run for senate, I can run for congress, I can run for any office in the United States. I'm not feeling that I do not belong to this country. I belong to this country, and my dream is to continue representing America and be part of this country. I'm proud to be here in Minnesota.

IH: You have been great. Thank you very much. Is there anything that we did not cover that you would like to add?

SO: Yeah. One thing that I would like to add is as a community of Minnesota, there was a lot of media scrutiny and media always focusing on reporting narrow parts and negative stories about the Somalis. So we want to see media who are honest about their reporting and telling our success stories about Somalis, not only for sensational stories about terrorists and all that and negative parts. We want everyone to feel that we are not hurting anyone, we are not here to harm or to hurt anyone. We're a Muslim society, we love everyone. Islam is a religion of peace. So we

want everyone to feel welcome, and, yeah, say, “We’re here,” and we are not going to push aside and only live on our people and on our tradition. We want to see other people’s traditions, we want to live with other people, we want to have a conversation. We are ready for dialogue. Yeah.

IH: Well, thank you very much for your time again. I appreciate you speaking with me.

SO: Thank you, Ibrahim.

AY: In Minneapolis, Minnesota. So your direct flight was just exactly to Minneapolis?

MN: My direct flight from Nairobi was directly to Minneapolis, yes.

AY: Not any other state.

MN: Not any other state.

AY: So, just then, how was life? Once you arrived, what did you start with?

MN: When I arrived, you usually see the culture shock. The first airport that we went through screening was New York, big airport, and so that was the first welcome. And you can see the difference in everything, even starting with the restrooms, where you have the level of water, which is high, and you're never used to it. Is this something broken? You know, you look at yourself and say—you are not used to that type of bathrooms. So just the beginning. So when you see those things, you arrive. On my second day of arrival, actually, I was here at the Brian Coyle Community Center.

AY: Same place.

MN: Same place that I am sitting right now, today. On that arrival day, I was going around in the neighborhoods, I was going around South Minneapolis. Like any other new immigrant, you want to venture out and see your surrounding. So while I was going around, I was actually on Lake Street and Chicago, lost with no idea where I was headed. At that moment police showed up, and while I was asking for my address direction, they stopped me and started frisking me. You know, searching me to see if there was anything that I was having with me. So I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. That was an eye-opener, where the police came to me and never helped me, but just to, you know, intimidate me.

AY: Harass you.

MN: Yes.

AY: And what was your impression then? Were you angry, were you shocked, were you surprised?

MN: I was shocked, because my aim was to get a direction coming back to where I lived.

AY: You were walking.

MN: I was walking, trying to find my direction. New to the country and the way of the surroundings, not sure of what's going on. At that moment, the only people who should have been helping you were the police. But it ended up on the opposite side, where they came and told me to put my hands up in the air, started searching me. And I realize now it's a reality. It's those things that you see on the TV that don't happen everywhere.

AY: But, at the time, though—now you see in TV—but at the time, didn't you...

MN: I mean, prior to arrival, you see those kind of police searches and everything else with the—not the siren—but all the lights are flashing and everything else. Those are not things that you see in everyday life. That was my first time, and the first time is on my second day of arrival. It's what I encounter.

AY: So you are disappointed, and were you just exactly saying, "What am I getting..."

MN: I was disappointed. They left me stranded with no direction. So they felt, well, this is not our place to be.

AY: What time of the day was it?

MN: It was late afternoon. And immediately after that, because I didn't have any identification that showed my picture—usually when you arrive you've got your other forms of identification and so many things. Those days, I-94s did not have the photo. So the suggestion was, "Let's go to the community center." So that's how I ended up here at the Brian Coyle Center, at the Confederation of Somali Community, where I received my first identification card with my picture. So that was an eye-opener, saying you need to connect with your community, you need to understand your surrounding, you have to focus.

AY: So you immediately started and somewhat you became an advocate immediately from that moment on?

MN: From that moment on, coming here and seeing the need for the people. And at that moment—you don't have your Social Security card, so you cannot find any jobs—my obligation is to come and join the community. This is the place where I found my first job, because I was helping others. Through helping other individuals and helping myself, I went to Hennepin County, and I ended up working for Hennepin County after a while. But this is where I found most of my life. Even, to be on the other side, even my wife was working here, so I found my wife at this center. [both chuckle]

AY: So the center itself actually made you, to some extent.

MN: To some extent, yes. This center helped me find education so that I can get connected to MCTC [Minneapolis Community and Technical College] and do my general education. This is where my starting revolved. As a new immigrant you need somebody who can navigate you through the process. So my navigation process started here, and I started helping other people to navigate the process. That's why I ended up working at Hennepin County, because most of the people who were coming here needed social services, and social services were being provided by Hennepin County at the Century Plaza. So I ended up going with them to Century Plaza, taking my time, helping them, helping myself.

AY: So in other words, just exactly, you followed the herd from Kenya, and the herd just exactly got you to Minneapolis. And then got you the first job, and you moved into the county, still you moved to the educational department, meaning you started also from community college.

MN: Yes, I started from community college. Initially I started working at a temporary job. Zomax, you know, doing packaging and so many things. That was a temp job that I was assigned to start working with. So early in the morning, you wake up five in the morning. I used to come here after I'm done, because you start early in the morning, and in the afternoons you want to go into the community, and we had the most right here. So this was the center of the community.

AY: Volunteering at the beginning.

MN: Volunteering at the beginning, after I'm done with my temporary shift. And temporary job didn't mean this is permanent. Some days you will go there, and then they'll just pay you two hours and say, "There's no job today."

AY: Okay, so then you got to school. You went on going to community college, and what's next?

MN: Yes. I went to the community college.

AY: Still working at the same time as well?

MN: At the same time working. I was working at Macy's. The first thing that I promised myself was my first income that I saved—I didn't know how to use a computer, so that was my biggest challenge at that moment. I had never owned a computer, never used a computer, and my target was to become an IT [information technology] professional. Somebody whose focus was from day one that I arrived, my goal was to become an IT.

AY: How did you come up with the concept of being an IT?

MN: That was the moment that the dot-com was growing, and everything in the whole world was evolving around IT. That was a new concept in 1999. It was just at the beginning of the dot-com. The whole process of computing was getting more hyped on.

AY: So the information was unavoidable, but did you know that you had the talent or you were able to do what it takes?

MN: It takes a determination and focus.

AY: So you knew that then.

MN: I knew that from the beginning, if I need to be successful. So my first savings, I worked at Macy's during the holiday season. I saved enough money to buy a computer for two thousand dollars. Those days would buy you—more than two thousand dollars I paid for my first computer. That was my first investment in life. I didn't know how to use it, and I had to connect

it through AOL. You know, “You’ve got mail.” Those days, that you will connect to it. Started practicing how to use that computer.

AY: On your own.

MN: On my own. And also playing around, opening an email account, surfing around. You know, that was an excitement. You can connect to an internet and start learning how to use the keyboard and everything else.

AY: Navigate through it.

MN: And nowadays they’re ubiquitous, the computers are everywhere. Even your phone is a computer. So those are the days that only a few individuals could access computers. Even accessing computers in their home and connecting to the internet, you disconnect everybody from the phone, so you end up spending more time using the home phone, because your phone is connected to AOL. So the struggles of any new immigrant that I went through. You know, you live with all your family members in a two-bedroom, it’s not enough. And now you’re hogging the whole telephone because you bought a computer, and everybody wants to go online and have that fun. So those are things that, starting from there on, as I went through the colleges—I started working at Hennepin County, where I started helping individuals who were coming in. Worked at Hennepin County in social services, helping newly arrived immigrants, helping the whole community as a whole.

AY: Still learning the computer.

MN: Yes. So I continued learning. During the nighttime I’ll go to college. During the daytime I’ll be going to a job, you know, working so I can earn a living. I had to make the balance of life. Down the road you start, as any other new...

AY: So wait a minute. It is school, you are going to college, you are actually working. You are actually trying to teach yourself also, not only how to navigate through the internet, but you are teaching yourself the technical knowhow of the computer.

MN: Yes. It’s multiple-task. And at the same time, I started engaging myself in my neighborhood which I live in, Whittier neighborhood. I attended the meetings...

AY: Meetings started from neighborhood meetings?

MN: Neighborhood meetings so that I get connected with my neighbors and see what resources are available to everyone—just know who my neighbors are and what are the concerns and issues that we all have.

AY: So in your case, a little bit of an advantage was just that you were able to speak the language.

MN: I was able to accelerate my English learning, yes.

AY: Oh, accelerate your—meaning you were not that proficient when you came.

MN: No, because I had that firsthand experience, learning from Kenya, the process of how to speak the English language, so I had to go through the college to accelerate it. That acceleration helps ground an individual. So that process of saying you're determined, you go through the computer, you learn how to speak the American English, because at that moment you have to adjust your whole life to the new environment. So it's that being sucked in into the process, and you focus and you learn and you engage yourself. Having that advantage is what took me to my neighborhood. Having that advantage is what took me to start getting involved. From day one when I saw that incident that you have to get yourself involved and engaged. So on that earlier stage I became a board member for my neighborhood community.

AY: In?

MN: Whittier, that was Whittier.

AY: Okay.

MN: And then I became a board member of the Confederation of Somali Community. So part of my engagement is to learn more, to engage more, to get involved. At the same time going to college and working.

AY: And also just getting on with life and getting married soon?

MN: Right, right. Those were days before marriage.

AY: Oh, we are still before the marriage. [chuckles]

MN: Absolutely. Those were before the marriage. We call them BC—before children and everything else. So those are days that you are on your own, you're a single person, you've got more time to do a lot of things. Even at that moment while I was still working at Hennepin County I got myself involved in the political process. I was appointed by Governor [Jesse] Ventura to represent—

AY: Were you?

MN: Yes, to represent the East Africans on the Council on Black Minnesotans. It's a state agency. So I was the first representative for East Africans in the state.

AY: You know, I wasn't even aware of that.

MN: For eight years I sat on the Council on Black Minnesotans. I was reappointed by Governor [Tim] Pawlenty when he was the governor. So I served eight years.

AY: So your political savviness started from the grassroots, but at the same time you kept on informing yourself and also somehow whetting your appetite to run for a higher office. When did you come up with the idea of—oh, before I ask that, though, what was the office after that one that you were appointed to? That you are talking about now?

MN: So the appointment was to be the advisor to the governor and legislature—understand the policy issues that impact us every day. So the advantage that I have is that I got myself involved in the neighborhood. Looked into the issues of neighborhood issues. Connected myself to the city. Knew what the city level of services are available. So it's more of understanding—maybe some people are attuned to policy issues—and resolving, you know, finding solutions and connecting people with the right resources, as somebody who has been helping anyone who comes through the door here at Brian Coyle Center. So you need to understand what is the role of the city, what's the role of the state, what's the role of the county. The biggest advantage I had was I knew what the role of the city was, because of I got myself engaged at the neighborhood level. And then I knew the role of the county, because I was working at Hennepin County—so the role of the county of doing social services, doing other activities, even the library when I went from the city to the county. Understanding the bigger picture. What is the role of different governmental entities, and getting myself involved at the state level. You know, you get things done at the local government, but everything that you do, it comes from the higher level, which is the state. The state sets the policy, the state sets the funding, and that level of engagement, you think, “Hmm, where is the bigger process.” Do you stay at the neighborhood level? At the same time I had to bring other people to get involved with the neighborhood. I had to find more people to work at Hennepin County. Although the city was a little bit farther away from me, but eventually things were starting to change, and people were becoming more—they knew what was going on. The population of the newly arrived immigrants increased, and everyone was aware of where to find services, so that reduced the demand on my side, because you have got more people now who are involved and engaged.

AY: Which means that to your advantage, it is just that you are from the community, so you definitely know the need.

MN: Absolutely.

AY: Were you involved in the neighborhood, so people just exactly come to you? And on the other hand, the classification or the strata of services just became clear to you, whether it is the city or whether it is the government.

MN: Yes. It becomes clear to you that in order for you to survive, first of all, you will need better education. You will need to know how the things flow, how to navigate the system. It's a complex system. It's not an easy task for anybody to just say, “This is how things are done.” Well, maybe it is my mindset that is more geared to the logical process—as I told you, my interest was in computing. Once you have got the logical concept, you can deal with calculus and math and so many other things. You are, at that moment, focused on the logical process.

AY: So you also just exactly telling me that you converged your technical mindset to the political arena or the policy arena, too. Which, normally, people just exactly say the two cannot marry.

MN: Absolutely. The two cannot marry, but the two can influence each other. So if you are thinking of the need of the community, that's a logical process. Now that you understand that the need exists, then you find the solutions. By finding the solutions, you have to tap into the resources that are available. And who controls the resources? The politicians control the resources. Working at the county, I moved on to work for the state. So for almost ten years I have worked for the State of Minnesota. I worked as a quality control reviewer, so I travel to different counties. To Fillmore County, Lyon County, and several counties. That was my job, to do an audit to the counties on how they do services. The social service program that the state—

AY: So you're auditing the social services, the delivery of the social services.

MN: Yeah. Making sure that the determination was correct, the amount of resources to individuals. So we are working, looking at what was the need and the county followed the policy that was set up by the state and the federal to issue benefits to clients. If there were errors, what was the error? Who caused the error? Was it the client or the county worker, or was this the systemic error? So we look into that to improve the system.

AY: So I am also interested in—because I don't want to leave the technical part of learning about computers, and sort of those things—what did you major in?

MN: Well, I was working at the state. So my first thing was I started working in Saint Paul, and luckily there was a college that was right next to me. It was not a college, it was a university. It was Metropolitan State University.

AY: Right. Close by.

MN: Close by. Life is getting together, so I enrolled myself at Metro State University so I can continue with my computer science.

AY: So you already chose the major which was going to be?

MN: Absolutely.

AY: Your major was going to be in computer science.

MN: Yes. My focus from day one until the end was computer science.

AY: [chuckles]

MN: It's always about focus. Once you focus, yes. So I went to Metro State, enrolled myself, while working at the state, doing my quality control at that moment. And I wanted to complete my two-year college, but the challenge was working full time now in a demanding job, which

requires traveling the state, in Saint Paul. And taking off during the day was not feasible. And some of the classes at the two-year college that I needed only a few credits to get my two-year—I decided to abandon that process and jump to a four-year college. So I had to transfer some of my credits—not all my credits, because some of them were not transferrable at all. So I started with some credits. But now that I knew that this is, “Where the life and learning meets”—that’s the motto for Metropolitan State—it was a perfect...

AY: Match?

MN: Yeah, perfect match for me and my lifestyle and everything else.

AY: In terms of, even, distance, because it was very close, and in terms of...

MN: It was close to me. It was just a walking distance from my job, and I knew what I wanted to do at the state. So while working at the state, I started working in the computing process while taking classes in the evening at Metro State. Got my job in doing—after the quality control, immediately after one year working as a quality control reviewer, I became a business analyst, looking into the business perspective of technology, delivery of service. So you have to look into how do you deliver the service, how does the system, systemic issue, meet that delivery of service. So you can see the logical connection of creating a process, getting involved at that early stage. And then while still working at the state, I moved on to become a system administrator for statewide systems, which used a mainframe and also distributed system. So it becomes more technically high-level at that moment. So now I’m helping eighty-seven counties how to use the system, the system that I was involved in at Hennepin County, the system that I was using to issue benefits. Now I’m there, somebody who is doing system administration.

AY: Which means that exactly you are the one who is feeding the information into it, information that is being used at the other end of a community that you are actually serving as well.

MN: Starting at the point, yes. At that moment now I’m doing production control. Holding the process of insuring that the systems run smoothly, the systems are available to the counties, and making sure that the integrity of the system is maintained. So starting from the lower level, going to become, now, the system administrator, within my fifteen years of arrival. At the same time while working at the state, got married, started having children. So life balance, that’s a bad moment. So my involvement in community gets reduced, because now my time is focused on family and work and a little bit of community delivery. So even as we speak right now, those things continue, with my family, taking care of an organization that I deeply care about that has been doing services for a long time. So when the struggles started, when the programs changed, when the need changed, the organization needed to shift—at that moment I decided I need to focus. So before then I ran for...

AY: For the board of...

MN: Education. That was way back in 2010.

AY: Yes, and you lost.

MN: Yes. I didn't succeed, initially, because that was my introduction, myself, to the political process.

AY: And what did you learn from that, and, actually, how did you take the defeat? Because that was your first office, right?

MN: In any politics, when you are doing, you have to live with the defeat.

AY: But did you know that, though, at that first time?

MN: Yes. I knew that it was going to become a challenge. I knew that I had to make sure that I had a footing in the process.

AY: So even then you were ready for defeat, if it would come to you?

MN: Yes. In running for office you have to be ready for defeat at any moment. I know different people will say, "No, we want to win." But at that moment it was my beginning. When you go around and see that people are not ready to stand with you, when you go around and introduce yourself, it takes a lot of time, because when you're running for city-wide, the whole city needs to know who you are, what you are going to do.

AY: So what was your obstacle first? I mean, what was the hardest of it?

MN: Just to track back a little bit, when I went for the DFL [Democratic-Farmer-Labor] endorsement, that was a convention. You know, we didn't plan for anything, but the last ten days before the convention, one week before the convention, is when we gathered ourselves and said we need to connect with the delegates. So I had to be on the phone almost every day talking to potential voters, getting them to know me, door knocking, getting my message out. So we are doing that. We did very well, very well at the convention. You know, somebody who is new, who got almost more than a hundred and something votes, there was no endorsement. The turn of events was by me running for that race, I was one of the top four candidates with no endorsement. That meant that everybody had to run for the primary. At that moment the dynamics have shifted. You've got limited resources, because nobody will give you any money until they see that you are a winner. Nobody will give you volunteering, so my wife and I and my kids were the ones who were going around giving out the lit pieces saying please vote for me in the primary. So in a way, it was a learning moment. You learn from the process.

AY: And what did you learn?

MN: I learned that you need money, you need volunteers, you need a big force to help you, push you into the process.

AY: You need resources.

MN: Yes.

AY: Human resources and capital.

MN: Human resources and capital. In politics with no money you are going nowhere, because you need to get your message out. And to get your message out you need to print documents. In order to get your message out you need people who are savvy enough who can help you, connect you with other potential voters. So it's more of connection, it's more of bringing people together.

AY: Does it help who you know, or is that just...

MN: It helps who you know, because in politics, it's who you know. And who you know will get you there, because they will advocate for you, especially those who are in the political field. They can help you succeed.

AY: So did they open doors for you? Could you say that how reliable—not reliable, but how important are they to the process, people with title, people with names, for example?

MN: If somebody can lend you their name and give you their endorsement, usually it carries big weight.

AY: Right. So you lost that and...

MN: I moved on after knowing that the primary was going to become a challenge. It's a city-wide, from one corner of the city to the other corner of the city. And for me to reach to that, it's going to take lots of resources and boots on the ground. So I knew that it was going to become a challenging moment. But we lost by less than a thousand votes. I got almost seven thousand votes. That was just the beginning.

AY: So that whet your appetite. You were just exactly saying, "Oh, I was right around the corner. This is my first trial." But you were two Somalis at the time, were you not? Even though you were not competing against one another.

MN: Yes. We had the late Brother Hussein Samatar.

AY: Hussein Samatar, the late Brother Hussein Samatar, was just running also.

MN: He was running for District 3. This is District 3. We'll come back to it. So as I went for that, it dawned on me that the central section of the city is where I had all—I was the leading candidate in all that section of the city.

AY: So were you running at the same region?

MN: There is overlap, because I'm running for the whole city.

AY: Oh, you were running for the whole city, and he is running for...

MN: And we have how many districts? We have got five districts. So with five districts, District 3 is one of them. So we elected the school board five districts and three at-large—no, sorry, sorry. You have got District 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and you have got four at-large, if I am correct. So we have got nine board members. I will correct myself later. So nine board members who represent different—oh, it's six districts, now that I note Tracine Asberry representing District 6, which is in southwest. So we've got six districts, and then three at-large, meaning that at-large, they're going to be elected through the whole city. That's how it's set up, and so anybody who is running for those six districts is where you will be looking for your votes. So you've got people who are focused on a small area, and you've got someone who's focused in all the six districts. So eventually I decided that we'll have to continue the dialog. Another opportunity will come.

As I said, around in 2011, Senator Larry Pogemiller, who represented this district that we are in right now, in 60—it used to be called 59, at that moment—he district that he represented had a majority of the Cedar-Riverside and all the community here. So after he announced that he was going to retire before the end of his term—and this is a special election. As you are aware of, in special elections less people turn out. Whoever can organize and mobilize will win. So we did just that. We put together a plan to win, get sixteen hundred votes, which we did, but then we lost by a few hundred votes. That was running for a state Senate position.

AY: And it's also, again, it's your first trial, except just exactly that the school board. And you are running for state Senate, your name is Mohamud Noor, you are an immigrant, you have an accent.

MN: Absolutely.

AY: So what the hell gave you the idea that exactly you are going to... [chuckles]

MN: It's my passion, my passion to see that we, as a society, understand the issues of inclusion, understand the issues of equality, understand the issues of the social mobility, of uplifting everyone in the society, understanding that there is a need to cover those needs. And for me, coming from the state, with my knowledge of working at the Department of Human Services, my knowledge and struggles going to college, my knowledge as an immigrant, positions me in a good way, in a unique way to bring that new perspective to the table.

AY: So the confidence was just that exactly, "I know what my community needs, I know what I am going to offer as well." Was that the drive? Was that what was driving you?

MN: Pretty much. I think it was also the coming out of the community in the political process. You know, when I ran for that office. The school board was not something that I ran. Let's put it in a simple way. That was more of—get the message out, that we needed the schools to become more responsive. We needed government assistance that was more transparent. To come back to me, again.

AY: Yes, yes.

MN: So, running for that state Senate opened a different way. I had to quit my job, just like I did right now. I don't want to jump the story to the other end. So we are talking more about politics. So running for that office is something that I knew that we were going to win.

AY: Eventually, meaning...

MN: Given the numbers. Given the numbers, although it was a quick dash. It was only within four weeks that we had to get the votes out. So having that four weeks means you have to be prepared, you have to be ready. Running against Kari Dziedzic, whose name used to be a well-known politician. Even the street behind quarry—I don't know if you know—it's called Dziedzic. So the street also has the name, the last name.

AY: How do you spell her last name?

MN: I'll give you the details later on.

AY: Okay.

MN: So, yeah. So, knowing that it's going to become more challenging and running against someone who is well known.

AY: Throughout the community.

MN: Yes, in this district. So that was something that people were saying, "If you do very well..." If I turn out the votes for the East African, if I turn out the votes for the non-East African—although I usually say if I turn out the people of this district to vote for me—that was a winnable approach.

Moved on in life, continued, went back to my job, settled down. But then that drive never ended. Anybody who observed that moment is what created something called—that brought so many people into the political process, even including the city council members, I brought in to help me organize and mobilize this neighborhood that we are here in Cedar-Riverside.

AY: Meaning that even Abdi Warsame was one of the people who just came aboard just because they were organizing the political process.

MN: Yes.

AY: Or he got involved because of your...

MN: My race for the Senate.

AY: Your race for the Senate.

MN: Yes. That's how the political process started.

AY: And the awareness of it just exactly grew from there.

MN: The awareness grew from there. And people understanding that they hold the political power, and they can make a difference, because coming that close to winning a state Senate office—it was big.

AY: So when it comes to appoint, or when it came to someone running for the city council—if I'm not jumping ahead already—it was not you who ran. It was Abdi Warsame who was working with you, got educated from the process, and then realized there is an opportunity. So did you work out a plan, or it was just exactly once he saw the opportunity, he jumped on it?

MN: It was spontaneous, because once you realize there is a potential here, once you realize there is an opportunity, you seize that opportunity, and that's how it happened. It took on its own life.

AY: But before you saw the opportunity, also that you added to the opportunity, you changed the demographics, you changed the demarcation of the...

MN: The process of getting involved, yes. For the city, they had to create something called—every ten years you have to do boundary changes—redistricting. That process means that you have to go to a way of connecting communities together, so they have that political power to vote for someone they believe will make a difference in their life. So that process started immediately after my loss to the state Senate.

AY: And you were the force behind it?

MN: No, I was not involved. The groups that I engaged and involved, like the city council member, Abdi, and everybody else, they got themselves organized, got involved, put a plan together. So by putting that plan together they knew where they were headed, knowing that they wanted to create the minority-majority ward, meaning that giving minority individuals—

AY: Are you meaning Abdi and...

MN: Abdi and his coalition and many other people who were involved in the boundary changes for the city of Minneapolis. So that was how the whole picture changed that created a major opportunity for him to win the city council. But that's also part of campaigning. They were involved in that campaign. They succeeded. They succeeded with the city hall.

AY: Did they succeed with your input, or were you not involved at all in that process?

MN: I wasn't deeply involved in that process.

AY: You were not deeply involved.

MN: No. It was just immediately after I lost, I had to re-focus, re-energize.

AY: So were you just exactly looking at the future? Were you looking at the horizon and just trying to get ready for the next opportunity? Or were you looking down at this and it was not a cup of tea for you? Why were you not involved?

MN: The involvement, meaning that the group was already ahead of me in terms of how that process works. So that whole picture took its own path and that succeeded, and the next move was for the city council election, which also succeeded very well. So those are things that when people understand where they are headed and what is their plan, you always succeed. And that was a successful process, that people who get themselves involved see the results.

AY: So in the process, yes, Abdi Warsame was elected, we celebrated throughout the world. We were so excited, and then all of a sudden you guys had a little bit of an entanglement. What was that about?

MN: To me there isn't any entanglement. It's just that there's a difference of opinion, based on who he supports. He has got every right to support who he wants, and he's got every right to say anything to help his own political career. For me, I don't see any differences.

AY: Does he see any differences?

MN: I think you have to ask him. That question belongs to him. So if you ask me, "Does he see any difference," I can't answer that question because deeply I don't understand.

AY: Right now you do have good chance, I think, of going to win the state Senate [state House of Representatives], so are you planning to work with him? Are you already working together in a way? Are you in good communication, in other words?

MN: I'll put it this way. I'm a school board member, as you noted. After the passing of Brother Hussein Samatar, the seat to represent District 3 became available. So I took the opportunity to represent our kids. Nobody can say no when that opportunity comes to represent our kids' interest—somebody who understands how the system works—to complete a year, you know, a one-year term to serve our children. I took that initiative head-on. Looking back into it, I saw that even if I run for school board, I'll have to run for the DFL endorsement. And working as a state employee, the Hatch Act will apply to me while here as a state employee whether I run for school board or I run for any office.

AY: Elected office.

MN: Yes. As long as I am seeking the DFL endorsement, that means I made it a partisan process, I have to quit my job. So I looked back and I said if I quit my job for school board, that doesn't help me. If I quit my job to run for another state office, which is the House of Representatives, representing the B side—the B side meaning the Cedar-Riverside, the Seward, the dynamic district, the district that has the highest number of new immigrants, the highest number of students, the highest number of progressives. So, I seized the moment. I said, "This is the time that we can make a difference."

AY: And, on the other hand, it is a daunting task, though. I mean, you are actually running against someone that who is not only reputable, but someone with a PhD in biophysics, forty-two years of service. Phyllis Kahn. I mean, Somalis just exactly say, “The man who chases away a lion is the one who doesn’t know what the lion is.”

MN: Right.

AY: Are you not getting yourself into a lion’s den?

MN: Here’s the question. With all due respect, I respect the contributions of Representative Kahn. I have got a high respect for her and for her service, but you have to be more cognizant of the situation. This district has dramatically changed. The demographics have changed. The issues have changed. The needs have changed. So the district has to shift with the need. That was forty-two years ago when she broke ground and became one of the few women in the House of Representatives. That was her moment to create the opportunity. We’re at a different moment right now, when we don’t even have a single preschool in this district, when we live in a district with the highest poverty, when we live in a district that has the highest density. You have to put together one and two. What are the issues? Students are struggling. Even yesterday their safety concern was a struggle. The immigrants are struggling. Progressives want to see change. They want to see people more involved and more opportunities that exist for everyone.

AY: So why do you think that you are actually better in that position of actually bringing services that is needed? Are you saying that she’s aged?

MN: No, I’m not saying that she is aged. Let me put it this way—I have lived through some struggle, which I still continue to see the same struggles that I lived when I arrived. I have seen the struggles of people trying to find better housing. I’ve seen the struggles of people trying to find better education. I have seen the struggles of people trying to find better jobs. The same struggles still exist, and nothing has happened. Someone has to become the champion.

AY: So you think also in terms of just proceeding with that if you are elected, also just being the first Somali state senator or a minority.

MN: State representative.

AY: I mean state representative.

MN: By the way, we have minority state representatives.

AY: Yes, we do, but in particular non-Somalis. Mostly, the majority of these are people who are in this area are Somalis, or East Africans in that matter to some extent, even though there are a lot of, of course, students and rest of Minnesotans. So do you think that, itself, is just exactly going to bring about a new perspective, a new appetite, and also, how do I say...

MN: If you are talking about representation...

AY: Representation and someone to also emulate, to some extent.

MN: Become a role model.

AY: To be a role model.

MN: At any given time somebody has to sacrifice to create, to pave the way. So paving the way for my children, your children, and all our children, somebody has to take that initiative so that they can become proud of themselves, so that they can feel the belonging, so that they can identify themselves as proud citizens of this state. So that sense of belonging, that sense of cultural initiative is what we are trying to identify. Say, “We belong.” We are here, this is our home. This is where my children, I want them to have their aspirations, their dreams, their potential, so they know that they can succeed if they put their mind in the right place.

AY: How confident are you that you are going to win?

MN: We are very much prepared and ready to organize and mobilize. It will take lots of energy. But in the end, the people will decide who becomes their next representative.

AY: And how are you going to heal the divide, now that somehow or other that you contributed...

MN: I think I’ll have to bring the question to you—what kind of divide? I think some people may tend to hype non-existing issues, but I want you to go into the details so we can have that dialog.

AY: Well, I am just referring to—as a matter of fact, I’m just asking the questions now.

MN: Right. Sometimes it’s good to clarify, because I don’t...

AY: But the point that I am just trying to get at is just that you got the endorsement of Mayor [R.T.] Rybak, who is highly respected in the Somali community. On the other hand are the people who are against you. The governor, [Mark] Dayton, endorsed your opponent. So we Somalis see that as a conflict, don’t we?

MN: Absolutely not. This is political interest, and people in politics will support someone who they’ve built that long-term relationship with. Someone who they see will bring that value to them. The governor is in a race. He has the right to support anyone, and he’s not going to be supporting a new, start-up person who’s coming into the political process against someone who’s been there for forty-two years. He’s smart enough to say, “I’m going to stay out of here,” but he cannot do that when he is being asked to support an incumbent. You know, it’s a given. The mayor, the former mayor, I appreciate his support. He shows his confidence in the process, that this is the time that we need to start having a dialog about the issues. So if you see that as a division, it’s not a division for the community. It’s a division based on political opinions. So those political opinions don’t apply when it comes to the race itself. People will decide, and the residents of this district will decide who their next representative will be. That’s all democracy is

meant to do—giving the people one man, one vote. We went through the caucus. There were some, a few challenges, even in this building that we are in right now. So those challenges should never have happened.

AY: Challenges—would you just say a bit about the challenges? What were the challenges? What were you not expecting?

MN: What I was not expecting is to see conflict, which was escalated to the media showing that the—

AY: Somalis were fighting among themselves.

MN: Not Somalis, but a few individuals who were involved in a fracas, ended up a caucus that many people who attended who wanted to participate.

AY: What was it said, though? Was it said that it was just between you and Abdi Warsame, or was it said it was you and between Phyllis Kahn—what, what?

MN: That chaos was never between me and anybody else. It was about a few individuals who were involved, which the investigation is still going on. So, nevertheless, that should never have happened in our community, should never have happened at any political process.

AY: So in terms of actually, in the future, though, do you think that we need—particularly the Somalis as long as we are politically active—do we need an education there?

MN: Let me put it in this way. There is no single place in the state that had hundreds of people show up at a political precinct.

AY: So it's the sheer number, are you saying that, as long as that—

MN: There were many people, there was passion running through. People wanted to participate, and there was no, you know, structure that was built to hold that level of engagement.

AY: Okay. I think we could actually go on and I could have thousands of other questions, but you have a full day ahead of you. If there is anything that you think that I missed—or, actually, before I wrap it up, I should ask you, though, in terms of Somali Americans, or Somalis in Minnesota, where are we? I mean, how successful are we, or the lack of? What would you say? We have been here for twenty years, or less, or a little bit more.

MN: We have been here more than twenty years. As you can see, our banner there says, "Celebrating Twenty Years of Service," so that's just to give you a hint that we've been here more than twenty years. [both chuckle] So in reality, this is the third generation that we're moving into. We started with Generation 1, 1.5, second generation. Now we're moving into the third generation. Those kids who were born here are starting to form their own families. They are second generation who are still having that conflict of identity. But at the same time, this is a community that is very closely connected. That has helped us a lot. That has made us stronger.

That has shown us the involvement and engagement. We have seen so many successful businesses. We have seen so many people become very successful entrepreneurs. They are engaged in education, they are doing very well. There are some struggles, pockets of struggles that any other immigrant will have gone through. But as we settle down and become part of the society, we become more integrated, we see more opportunities. We become part of the fabric.

AY: So what will we look like in twenty years?

MN: I think even given the sense that we've held closely together, given that we are trying to make sure that we can integrate in a good way, given that we are asking for opportunities, be it political, be it education, be it resources—comes with all of its challenges. If we can overcome our challenges and just focus on the opportunities that we have, focus on our strengths. If it's the entrepreneur, how do we make people succeed? Somalis are a more egalitarian society, and they like to become more business oriented. They want to be working for themselves. That's the society that we've lived in. We take the risk in doing those kinds of businesses and so many other things. So that kind of initiative is what helps us live the American Dream.

AY: Great. Are there any questions that you think that I did not—of course there are tons of questions that I did not ask, but are there any ideas that I actually left out that you want to add to it?

MN: I think at this moment, at this juncture that we are as a society, we need to re-evaluate—for the past twenty years we came from too far—and focus on where we are headed in the next twenty years. Giving ourselves kudos that we have done enough is not enough. It's time to look into how can we transfer our knowledge, how can we transfer our culture, how can we make sure that we keep our identity? How do we make sure that we live in a society where most of the people will say it's a melting pot? So how do we keep our identity alive, how do we keep our language alive? How do we make sure that our kids inherit from us the values that are deeply rooted in our society? It's time for that dialog.

AY: Wow. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Sorry that I took your time away from many million other things, but I am clearly appreciative of it.

MN: I know there's more to discuss, but we'll continue the dialog. Thank you so much.