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Abdi Sabrie
Narrator

Ibrahim Hirsi
Interviewer

August 13, 2014
Mankato, Minnesota

Abdi Sabrie **-AS**
Ibrahim Hirsi **-IH**

IH: This is Ibrahim Hirsi, reporting for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. I am interviewing Abdi Sabrie in Mankato. The date is August 13, 2014. Abdi, thanks for the opportunity.

AS: My pleasure.

IH: So, our first question. If you could tell us where you were born, and when was that, and about your childhood years.

AS: I was born in Somalia to a nomadic family, as is the case in most instances in Somalia in my generation. I was born to a nomadic family that owned four hundred heads of cattle, in a nomadic lifestyle.

IH: And what state was that?

AS: Well, you could say the range was all the way to what's called Ethiopia and also Galguduud, Mudug, you know, that region. So I was born somewhere in that region. When I was two years old my father passed away, so, as a result, that event became a blessing as well as a curse. Because I lost my father, of course, but it was also a blessing because as a result my family moved to the capital city of Mogadishu.

IH: That was when?

AS: I was born in 1959. When I was five, about '64, we moved to Mogadishu, Somalia, and we settled there. My eldest brother was already established there. He established himself by leaving the countryside as a young man, and he came to Mogadishu and went to work in the marketplace, helping people carry their loads home. And then he got a job at a restaurant, and he went to school. He put himself through school, and he became a city council eventually, and a businessman. So when our father passed away, he became my father. I joined his family in Mogadishu. He became my surrogate father, and as a result I was able to go to school and finish school and also work with him with the family business. This is a long story. I don't know where you want to stop.

IH: Okay, so where do you fall in the family? I mean, how many siblings do you have?

AS: My father had twelve children. I'm the youngest of the twelve. But my mother remarried and had more kids, so my siblings are eighteen. I'm number nineteen. So it's a large family.

IH: And where are they now?

AS: They are all over the world. As a matter of fact, we just came back from Europe. My seven children, my wife, and I visited Sweden and England, and I have brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews. I don't even know how many nieces and nephews I have. I get to know new ones all the time. So it's quite a lot of family.

IH: And what was life like in Somalia growing up? You know, your childhood friends and things that you did.

AS: My childhood was actually very unique. It was not the average, because my brother, whose children were older than me—some of his children were older than me, and he had some who were my age, some younger—I grew up with that family. It was quite a large family. I became his trusted assistant. He didn't even trust his children, so I became his assistant with regards to the business. I used to help run the business.

IH: And you were only how old?

AS: I started working as soon as I was able to add two plus two, I was working with the business. So I didn't have an ideal childhood. You know the tradition in Somalia, when people have lunch, everybody comes home around 2:30 from school, from work, and they eat lunch and the children are told to go to sleep, you know. And that's the only time I had to play, so I used to sneak out of the window, go play soccer, and come back through the window, pretending I woke up from sleep. So in that regard. And I also used to have a deflatable soccer ball in my school bag, so when I am walking to school I used to inflate it and play, to school and back.

IH: Because that's the only time you had.

AS: That's the only time I had to play, because I used to go to Quranic school as well as regular school and then help with the business. So my day was divided into those three, too. But still, looking back, it taught me a lot of values in terms of work and experience of elder age. So as a result I became a better person, a better adult. But I didn't like it at the time.

IH: The kids that you went to *dugsi* [Quran school] or to school with, what was their typical day?

AS: Their typical day was they had adults take care of everything, and they either go to *dugsi* or to school, and the rest of the time they had, they used to play neighborhood soccer. You know, competition—this neighborhood against that neighborhood. And I used to hear about it all the time, but I couldn't join.

IH: That wasn't your style.

AS: Yeah, so...

IH: So tell me about your educational journey from elementary school, middle school, to high school.

AS: My educational journey is typical in my generation. You know, in elementary school, the instruction was in Arabic at that time.

IH: Everything was in Arabic?

AS: In Arabic.

IH: Including science and math?

AS: Oh, everything, all our subjects were in Arabic. And then we came towards middle school, and then fifth grade it changed to English because I was in an English system. And then there was one year I studied in Somali, and then in my high school I went to—

IH: Wait. So everything was in Arabic, then in fifth grade everything would be in English.

AS: Everything in English.

IH: And in Somali?

AS: And then seventh grade or eighth grade in Somali.

IH: Wow. Wasn't that confusing?

AS: It was, but still, it was ok. That was the system.

IH: And that worked out well for you?

AS: That worked out well for me because I get exposure to each language. And so in high school, then, I went to agricultural high school, which was in Afgooye. It was a boarding school.

IH: And Afgooye is about thirty miles...

AS: Thirty miles outside of Mogadishu, and it's where the cultivatable land is, and that was right next to the University of Agriculture. And that was run or financed by the European Economic Corporation, so it was a special school.

IH: And who were the teachers?

AS: The teachers were foreign teachers. We had East Germans, we had Americans, we had Indian teachers. We had a teacher who was the education principal who was from Sri Lanka. He was a PhD in animal husbandry. It was like a retirement for him, and he used to teach in universities in the United States in 1935. He was well established. So it was a wonderful school.

IH: And do you remember the cost? Did you have to pay for that?

AS: No, we didn't have to. The only thing was the top seven students from each region of Somalia were allowed to go into that school.

IH: And the government took care of it?

AS: The government took care of that. It was a boarding school. So that was a wonderful experience. After that, after I completed that in 1979, I was not allowed to go to university. The government said, "Your skills are too valuable for you to continue. We need you in the field, so you have to go as a technical help. You have to go to work for the government in the agricultural department." And at the time I was not ready to go to work, so as a result, the only option I had was to leave the country. I worked with the family business for a couple of years—actually for one year for my brother who raised me to go to hajj [Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca] and be able to do things he has never done before. And then after that, I worked for the UNHCR, which is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

IH: In Somalia?

AS: In Somalia, in Hargeisa, actually. I worked in a refugee camp as a farm manager since I was agricultural background.

IH: Who were the people in that camp? Because we had a government then.

AS: In the camp were people who fled from Ethiopia, Somalis who fled because of the war.

IH: Somalis, okay. So like there was war between...

AS: Yeah, 1977 war.

IH: And they were Somali Ethiopians.

AS: Somali Ethiopians. The camp was half a million people.

IH: Wow, that's a big number.

AS: Yes. This project was designed by the UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to set up vegetable plots for the camp, so that besides getting corn and oil and all the other foodstuffs, they also had a source of vitamins and nutrition. So they're able to grow their own vegetables. I was the manager of that project. And they had at the time, which was high-tech, had solar pumps to pump water out of wells and to irrigate the fields. And it was a very

successful project. I worked there for a couple of years, and then I was ready to leave for the United States when I got a passport and documentation and everything together.

IH: And that was...

AS: That was 1982. And I came through Saudi Arabia for two weeks to get money exchanged from Somali currency to US dollars, because hard currency was not available in Somalia at the time. So I stayed in Saudi Arabia for two weeks with people I knew—a friend of mine who used to be my classmate—and then I flew from Jeddah to New York. But before I left, actually, the way I got the visa was also very interesting. There was the American Embassy, across from the American Embassy in Mogadishu, there was an American library. So I went to the library and I looked for higher learning institutions in the United States, and then I learned in the process that the only way you could get a visa is to come through a language school. So I found one of the language schools and I applied the admission.

IH: Right. And that language school was in New York?

AS: No, that was actually in Boston.

IH: Oh, okay.

AS: In Boston.

IH: So how was it—I mean, you're in Somalia...

AS: I am in Somalia.

IH: Trying to learn about the educational system in the United States. And there was no internet.

AS: There was no internet, but there was a library. The American library was really very resourceful. They had everything you can imagine at the time. That was amazing at the time. So you go through the books. They have a section where higher learning institutions, even language schools, how you can get in touch with them, their information. So I wrote to—and you can only write. There was no phone, no internet.

IH: No text message.

AS: Yeah, no text message. Snail mail was the only option, so I wrote a letter and they sent me an application. Filled out the application. And they required twenty-five dollars of application fee, which has to be in dollars, which I didn't have at the time. So I had one of my friends who worked for the UNHCR—he was from Gambia. I remember his name was Lamin Sidibeh. He was a Muslim.

IH: Gambia is an African country in the west.

AS: West African country, West Africa, yes. It's within Senegal, right next to Senegal. And he was working for the UN. He was international staff, so he had an account in New York. So he wrote a check and I paid him in Somali. He wrote a check with that account in New York. That's how I got the visa. And then I went to the embassy and they asked me if there was anyone who could be responsible for me, that I am able to support myself when I got to the United States. And I had a relative who was a rich guy and well known in Mogadishu, so I took him there. He vouched for me, and that's how I got the visa. [chuckles]

IH: That's a long process.

AS: Absolutely. And so I came through Saudi Arabia. My family was relatively rich within the context of Somalia, because my family had a construction material business—you know, like bricks and stuff like that. That's the business I used to manage. I used to supply a lot of government agencies as well as private construction firms. So I was given like five thousand dollars, and that was a lot of money. So the money that I exchanged in Saudi Arabia turned to be five thousand dollars. That was a lot of money, a mind-boggling amount.

IH: In the 1980s?

AS: In 1982, yeah.

IH: That's a lot of money. It's a lot of money right now! [both chuckle]

AS: Yes. So I selected the school, the language school. They had branches in all the big cities of the United States. So they sent me information regarding each city, their qualities, their schools. So I liked Boston. It seemed like a place where—you know, even though it's a bigger city, it's similar to Mankato—it's a university town there. They have more students than anything else. So I liked the environment there. And then they give me information of the hotels, the breakdown of society, how things are, the culture and everything. So I liked Boston more than any other city. So I flew from Jeddah to New York, landed in the [John F.] Kennedy Airport. My flight was actually wonderful. I had a helicopter ride from Kennedy Airport to LaGuardia [Airport], which is the national airport, so I can catch another flight to go to Boston.

IH: Was that true for everybody, or that was a special flight?

AS: For my flight, anyway, my ticket. New York—helicopters were part of it. So instead of taking a taxi between the two airports, I had a helicopter ride and I flew over the city. It was really mind-boggling at the time. It was amazing. So then I flew to Boston and I got there. I was really very tired. I didn't know anybody, but I had a hotel address. The school was very helpful. They gave me hotels with high prices, middle, and low prices, so I could select whatever I wanted.

IH: And that five thousand dollars was for how long?

AS: Well, that was it. I had to kind of be resourceful, just for me to get set up, and then do whatever I need to do to continue from there. So that was it.

IH: How was the transition like?

AS: The transition, it was not bad. But initially, it was a culture shock. Boston is very cold, and when I came it was in November. So you couldn't tell the day from night. They have the lights on twenty-four hours, because it's winter. There's not much sun.

IH: And you're coming from Somalia, which is like ninety degrees all the time.

AS: Absolutely.

IH: To a very cold place.

AS: Very cold place. And when I first came I was very tired, but fortunately I spoke English very well. And they also gave me even the distance between the hotel I was going to and the LaGuardia Airport, how much taxi fare will be, how much I need to pay as a tip. I knew everything, so when I came out of the airport...

IH: You were prepared.

AS: Yes. When I came out of the airport I just read the address, said the address to the taxi driver, and he didn't even notice I was coming from another culture. So he took me to the hotel, and the hotel was in a Jewish neighborhood, on Commonwealth Avenue. It's the kind of area, well known. And at the time, in 1982, I was actually very fortunate to be in a Jewish neighborhood, because there were racial tensions at the time.

IH: Yeah. And you were aware of it when you were in Somalia?

AS: I was not aware of this. You know, it was between blacks and whites. It's mostly Irish, Italian neighborhood, Irish. It's a black neighborhood. For me, personally, it was very tough to fit in in any, so the Jewish neighborhood was the ideal place because there was no discrimination there.

IH: Were they at least welcoming?

AS: Welcome, very welcoming, absolutely. But if I went to the white neighborhood, I was a black man, and if I went to the black neighborhood, I was a foreigner. Every night you look at TV and somebody's getting beaten up or killed.

IH: How did that make you feel?

AS: It was really scary. I only had one phone number to a relative of a friend of mine, who lived in Boston, so I called him after I settled into the hotel. The hotel was really reasonable. It wasn't very expensive. It was like a family-run hotel. It was very small. So I was able to settle in. The first few times, when I landed there, I just found my room and went to bed. I was really very tired because of the transition. When I woke up in the morning, I went down to the front desk

and asked the guy what time it was. He told me it was seven in the morning, so I adjusted my—I had a watch then—I adjusted my watch and asked him where I can find something to eat. He pointed to a drugstore across the street. You know, drugstores used to have a little side restaurant in those times. So I went to the drugstore. Even though I spoke English, I didn't know the names of the food.

IH: It's totally different.

AS: Totally different. The only thing I knew was a sandwich, so I asked the lady, the hostess there, to give me a sandwich and coffee. So she got me a ham sandwich. [chuckles]

IH: Did you know the difference in it?

AS: I could see it was, yeah. And since it was due to my ignorance, I didn't give her a hard time. I just paid for the sandwich. And then they had coolers, so I went to the fridge and got a lot of cornbread and milk. So I took that to my hotel. [chuckles]

IH: And for the people who don't understand this, Muslims can't eat...

AS: Pork, yes, or pork products. And so I was able to live off of my cornbread and milk for a couple days until I ran into another Somali who was more knowledgeable in the environment. So that phone call that I made, it was to the guy, the only guy I had his number. He told me another family who was closely related to me. He gave me their number, so I called them, and they said, "Oh, there are three of your cousins visiting from Washington, DC, tomorrow. They are having lunch at our house, so take this address and come join us tomorrow." So I did that, and sure enough, there were three of our cousins, and they advised me to leave Boston and come to the DC area.

IH: Oh, for school.

AS: For school, because Boston was not, at the time...

IH: And they were from DC?

AS: The DC area. They lived in Maryland, but they called DC area. So I was able to get a transfer from my language school to the one they had in Washington, DC. So I went there. The school had seven levels of English, seven classes. So I took a test, and they put me on the last, seventh class, the last one.

IH: The most advanced.

AS: Yeah, most advanced one. So I did that, and they said, "You are your own. Now you can go to university. We have nothing else for you." And then I went to University of the District of Columbia. It's a government institution in DC. And eventually I was driving a taxi in DC, and I am going to school at the same time.

IH: And that was the only way...

AS: That was the only way you could support yourself. And I was sharing an apartment with other Somali guys. There were eight of us sharing a two-bedroom apartment, so it was quite an adventure. [chuckles]

IH: What was your major? And was that counted as a graduate school or undergrad?

AS: It was actually undergrad. And at the time, you know, the Somali tradition is your parents, they tell you what you need to. They told me to be an engineer, so I was trying to be an engineer. But after I finished two years, Somalia was changing. My brother, who was my surrogate father, passed away in '83, a year right after I left, and so the family needed help. So after two years of going to school, I couldn't sustain it anymore. I also got engaged socially. We started a nonprofit organization in DC called Organization for Somali Affairs—OSA—Organization for Somali Affairs. And we started to help people who started to come, you know, flee from Somalia.

IH: So you basically bridged between Somalia and the USA.

AS: Absolutely. And also I started to organize demonstrations against the government of the time and lobby Congress.

IH: Tell me a little bit about that government for those who don't know a lot about it, and why were you demonstrating against it?

AS: We were demonstrating against the then government of Mohamed Siad Barre [Maxamed Siyaad Barre], who was the president, and he was a military guy. I mean, if I look back now, he was a nice guy. But at the time, we were looking for something better. Because comparatively speaking, it was not bad, but you don't know what the future holds. So at the time, he was a dictator, and we wanted something better for Somalia. So the Somali community in DC at the time, we felt that the United States should stop supporting the dictator and we should have democracy and freedom for people of Somalia so they are able to do things for their own.

IH: And those demonstrations were held in DC or also in Somalia?

AS: In DC. I mean, you couldn't hold that in Somalia. In DC, in front the embassy. Or also we used to lobby with Congress and attend hearings about Africa. So we got to know, especially, committees on Africa, whether it's the Senate or the House side of the United States Congress. Besides working and supporting my family, I was also very active in...

IH: You were politically engaged.

AS: Yeah, engaged. And we used to celebrate the independence days of Somalia. We used to block off like blocks in Washington, DC, and hold Somali flags.

IH: Can you remember how many people were there? I mean, how many Somalis?

AS: When I first got there, there were not a lot. The people I knew were about ten or twenty, maximum, between ten and twenty. They lived in DC, Maryland, and Virginia—the metropolitan area. But people started to come, and they were expanding very quickly. And Washington was, at the time, a very popular place for people to come. Because it's the seat of government, that's where all the embassies are and the federal government is. So it's a cosmopolitan, international type of city.

IH: So your journey from DC to Minnesota. When did you come here and how did you end up here?

AS: Then while I was working with the Organization for Somali Affairs in Washington, DC, one day I was—that was in 1992—I was actually at Capitol Hill where Congress is. I was talking to a congressional staffer, and he told me that the US Department of Defense is looking for individuals as consultants and interpreters to go to Somalia. He gave me a number, a phone number. So I called the phone number, and they said, “Yeah, we need you. Will you come?” So I went to their office and interviewed, and they said, “We want you to go right away to Somalia. The United States Marine Corps is going to Somalia, and we need Somali individuals to go with them.” So I told other people about it, and there were thirty of us that were recruited in that process. We were given preparation, shots, you know, a lot of shots. We went to a military camp in Aberdeen, in Maryland, Aberdeen Proving Grounds. And we got a lot of shots, and uniform, and military gear—everything. You know, boots, helmets, flak jackets—everything. Bulletproof vests and bags to carry your bed. You know, your own foldable bed, a cot.

IH: And that was when the USA was getting involved for humanitarian reasons.

AS: Yeah, it's called Operation Restore Hope. That was the name of the operation, and that was in 1992, December, we went to Somalia. We were the first people.

IH: In '92?

AS: In 1992. So the government wrote to my then employer, and you know, they gave me an excuse—services are needed by the government.

IH: And that was at a time when the United States was trying to capture the warlord [Mohamed Farrah] Aidid.

AS: Trying, yes. And it didn't start. The reason they went was there was a drought because of the civil war, and people were starving to death. Especially people in Baydhabo [Baidoa] were always on national TV in the United States, and journalists were showing children and mothers that are dying, and walking, trying to find food. And it was very impactful to the entire nation of the United States. And I remember one story, particularly. There was a baby, Somali child, that went to a food distribution center and he got food, and he came back to his mom who was already dead, and he was trying to give his mother food. It was very impactful. So the reason they went is to intervene. So that food deliveries became impossible because of the warlords and people with guns, period. It's not just warlords. Everybody had guns, and they were robbing international organizations that were trying to deliver food to the starving people. So the United

States, along with other governments, went to intervene and provide protection for the food deliveries. So that was the reason.

IH: And also you left Somalia when it was peaceful and had a government, and all of a sudden now you're going back to a totally destructed Somalia.

AS: Absolutely. And by that time I was in the United States for over ten years.

IH: How did that make you feel when you first saw all these sights?

AS: When I first went to Somalia, it seemed like a different country, because everything changed, even the appearance of the people has changed. There was a lot of destruction and neglect, you know. And you could see, it seemed like I went to a different African country rather than Somalia.

IH: No institutions.

AS: Yeah, no institutions. First impression was really very impactful. And also very hot. We went the time of the year when it's very hot, and we were wearing military gear.

IH: Where did you spend your time, in that time?

AS: At the time, first we went to the US Embassy, and I stayed there for maybe a couple weeks. And then I was assigned to the port, the Mogadishu port, and then I helped establish administration where at the time the navy and the army were trying to establish. So I helped them establish administration there in conjunction with the Somalis who knew how to manage the facility. It was very hectic, the first—so I stayed there a couple of weeks, and then I went to another camp, which is a support battalion on transportation who were based in Medina [Mediina], a place called Hoosh. And then I stayed with them for some time, and then I was sent all over the country. I went to Beledweyne [Beletweeyne], I went to Kismayo [Kismaayo], I went to Marka [Merca], Brava [Baraawa].

IH: Was there a time when you were scared for your safety?

AS: Absolutely. But you know, the soldiers and the leaders that I was working with, the people who came from the United States, have no connection to Somalia, the culture or language. So I felt I had more to gain by helping Somalia then. I had more reasons to sacrifice, so that didn't bother me at all. If somebody who was born and bred in the United States was there to help, then I should do even more, more than that. So I didn't see the risk, you know. I only saw the good things that could come out of it.

IH: And also the Somali people there, there were some who felt that the US invaded them, and they were fighting them. And then here you are, you are an American and at the same time you are a Somali. So did that change the way that you were thinking?

AS: That didn't change, because I could see the dynamic as a Somali and I was talking to the people as a Somali. But when I'm with the military, I have a uniform, so I'll be shot at like everybody else. And several times we were shot at. I was almost, you know—I had to duck down into the Humvee. And one time all the glass of the Humvee were all destroyed because of bullets. Nothing but just glass on me. I didn't get hit or anything like that. But we were shot at quite a few times. So it didn't differentiate. When you wear the uniform, they don't care.

IH: Whether you are a Somali or not, you are the enemy.

AS: Yeah, you are the enemy. But I didn't take that personally because I realized that the people who were interrupting the food delivery, they were not happy as a result, so they were trying to re-establish themselves. Initially the US government and the US soldiers were—everybody was afraid—they thought they could see through everything, and they could see what's buried in the ground, they could see through walls. They thought they were like exceptional, high-tech force. But after a while they realized they were just like human beings, they were just like everybody else. And they became very bold and started to challenge and try to fight and everything. So things have changed. Especially when the US government has changed hands from a Republican administration, which was George Bush, Senior, and then [Bill] Clinton took over. So the policy has changed already. The Republican Party to the Democratic Party have completely different foreign policy agendas. That affected Somalia, and that kind of slowed down the definition of the role of the—

IH: The operation started in 1992.

AS: Ninety-two.

IH: All the way to when Clinton came.

AS: All the way to 1994.

IH: Okay.

AS: And I was one of the first to land in Somalia, and I was one of the last people to leave Somalia. So I stayed throughout the whole operation.

IH: The two years?

AS: Absolutely. From 1992 to 1994.

IH: Wow. And then...

AS: After, I came back. When I went to Somalia, I went and saw my relatives and the people I was sending money to all these years. And I found out that my nieces and nephews, some of them were married to two or three wives and having a lot of children. And I don't even have one wife because I was supporting my family. Then I realized that I needed to get married.

IH: And that was 199...

AS: Nineteen ninety-two.

IH: That's when you woke up.

AS: Ninety-three, you know. Ninety-four. So I got married in '94 in Nairobi, during the operation.

IH: How did you meet her?

AS: In Nairobi. Every three months—because you're in a combat area and it's a very stressful environment—they used to give us one week to go to Mombasa or Nairobi, and they pay for everything, the hotel, expenses, so you get to rest. It's called R&R trip. Rest and relaxation. Because I'm a Somali, I go to Somali neighborhoods everywhere in Nairobi. So I got to meet my future wife, and we got married. So right away. I realized I'd lost a lot of time. [chuckles]

IH: Right, exactly, that's right.

AS: So by the time I came back to the United States, I had two children, and then, you know, eventually had a third one.

IH: In Kenya?

AS: In Kenya.

IH: And then you leave them...

AS: And I left them there deliberately, because I wanted to get other culture besides the United States. And I even sent them to Ethiopia, sent them a ticket to go from Nairobi to Addis Ababa, then to a small town about ninety kilometers outside—Nazret [Adama], you know—outside of Addis Ababa. And they lived there.

IH: Which is the capital city of Ethiopia.

AS: Yes. And they lived there for some time, and they went to Quran school and everything. Tried to give them a similar experience like I had in Somalia. And then eventually they joined me in the United States.

IH: Because you thought that was the best option.

AS: Absolutely, that was the best option. Children who were born and bred in the United States usually have no capacity to understand those who are without material wellbeing, and they lack culture and connection to their history and to their ancestors. And I didn't want—my mother is still living and I didn't want my mother to—you know, she doesn't speak English. So I want my children to be able to communicate with my mother, you know, to continue that generational

relationship and learn from her, and so that's why I kept them there. And so when I came back in '94, I actually went back for a year and stayed with them in Nairobi and traveled in Africa, all the way to Rwanda, which at the time there was genocide going on. I knew some of the leaders. Actually, the current president, Paul Kagame, I met him in Kampala. So I went to there. And just wanted to know Africa, so I drove from Nairobi all the way to central Africa and then back, and spent several months. And then came back to the United States and moved to Georgia.

IH: From DC.

AS: From DC to Georgia.

IH: And why did you move there?

AS: I thought it would be good for my children to start at a warmer place.

IH: And you were planning to bring your kids there.

AS: Bring my kids. So I was preparing for them to come. So I moved to Georgia. And it's family-friendly, better than—DC area, usually it's diplomatic, diplomats and federal government workers. They don't have much of other industry. But in Georgia there are a lot of industry, a lot of opportunities to work. I got a job as an electronics technician in Atlanta, so I worked there. Then I eventually brought my family and lived in Georgia for fifteen years.

IH: So when did you bring your family?

AS: In 2004, 2005. My son was required to go through a DNA test, so he was behind, but my two daughters came first. So we lived in Georgia, in different cities. When they first came and joined me, I was living in—

IH: And how old were they when they came?

AS: My oldest was probably nine, and then the other one eight, and then my son was six.

IH: Okay, that's a good age.

AS: Yeah. But by then they were formed, at least, and they were speaking Somali fluently and they were speaking Amharic, fluent Amharic, as well.

IH: They were already bilingual by the time they came here.

AS: Absolutely. Bilingual, and they also understood some English as well, because they were going to English school as well in Addis Ababa before they left. So we lived in Georgia all that time until 2009. I only had two different jobs all that time in that fifteen years, and in the same industry. I was working as electronics technician for Cannon Products—you know, office machines, that type of thing. And I was regional representative in Atlanta area, technical representative. So I used to, basically, have a company car and drive around, and I was

dispatched to different offices where the people have problems. So it was family-oriented. I could go take the kids to a doctor or something like that if I needed to. It was a very flexible job. Before I moved to Minnesota, we lived in Duluth, Georgia, and we lived in a nice house, in a nice compound, and had a good job. My wife was also working at the time.

IH: What did she do?

AS: She was working for this company, they provide women's cosmetics and stuff like that. Actually, Avon, their name is Avon. She was working for Avon there. They had a warehouse, so she used to work in the shipping department, ship products to people who order stuff. So what happened was my two youngest children had problems with the environment because Georgia has a lot of industry, and also Atlanta area is—traffic is way too much.

IH: They had health problems?

AS: Health problems, respiratory problems. And so we went to the doctor. One of my youngest two daughters was premature when she was born, and the other one also had problems, even though she was a full-term baby, and the doctor said, "If you don't move out of Atlanta, they will become asthmatic, most of them will develop asthma." So as a result, I called around the United States for people I know, and I happened to know a friend of mine who lived here in Mankato. I called him. He also used to live in Virginia. I knew him from there. He also used to live, as well, in Atlanta. So he just happened to move here before I did. So I talked to him and he said, "Yeah, you should come for a visit." And I came for a visit after school was closed for the kids, in 2009, and I liked it here. I rented a house in Eagle Lake, and I drove the family here. [chuckles]

IH: That's awesome.

AS: Even though I moved up here, I was still working in Georgia for a few months after that. And eventually the company that I was working for, I was working for them for a long time. I couldn't get a job. I was trying to get a job before I moved here.

IH: In Mankato?

AS: In Mankato. It was difficult to get a job.

IH: And did they have a company?

AS: A lot of companies I spoke to, they said they couldn't afford to hire me because of my experience. They were looking for somebody who is just getting started.

IH: So you were overqualified, as they say.

AS: Yeah, overqualified. So eventually I spoke to the company, and they said they will lay me off so at least I could get unemployment for some time while I make the adjustment, and that's how I came.

IH: And that was when?

AS: That was in 2009. And then when I came and I was on unemployment for a while, and I decided to go back to school. And then they said you have to wait for about a year to become in-state, so I helped establish a nonprofit organization here and I became the director of the nonprofit. It's called African Family and Education Center. And the role of this organization is to advocate on behalf of the African immigrants who are mostly southern Sudanese and Somalis.

IH: And how many would you estimate, the African immigrants in Mankato?

AS: About two years ago the estimate was five hundred families and more. And you know the typical family is seven or more.

IH: And that was two years ago.

AS: That was two years ago.

IH: Probably now it's more.

AS: Now it's probably double. Because I go to the Mankato Islamic Center on Friday—and I am someone who is engaged with the community every day—half of the people I don't know that are coming to pray on Friday.

IH: That means there are a lot of newcomers here.

AS: They come every day. Every week there are new family looking for a house. And because Mankato has a lot of attractions when it comes to higher learning institutions, it's a small town, it's a safe place to raise a family—and a lot of times Somali families are settled in big cities, and then they realize it's not safe for their children or there are a lot of bad influences. So for different reasons, they move here. Somalis, through oral tradition, we call each other, we compare notes, and say, "How we doing there? How's things? How's the school?"

IH: In the same way that you got here. You called up a friend and...

AS: Absolutely. Because in the nomadic way of life in Somalia, because it's not a settled life, so nothing is preserved in material. You know, you don't write books or...

IH: And the reason why it's not a settled life is because you have to go to places so that you can find water...

AS: Absolutely. There are always either camels or cattle—generally those are the two major ones—and you have to constantly move from one place to another in search of grazing and water, and, as a result, there's no permanency in life. Everything has to be temporary. The houses are dismantlable, put it on the back of a camel, and move to the next pasture, and stay long enough as the animals can find resources, you know, grass and water, and then you move on

to the next. So everything is temporary. So things are preserved in the oral tradition, whether it's storytelling or poems. Stories are passed down from one generation another through storytelling.

IH: And that lifestyle has been applied here.

AS: Absolutely. Still, and we still use that, and it's very much useful. Because that's a resource that the Western-style families, they don't have. In the West, you know, people say that in the West you can survive without a family, but you cannot survive without a job. In Somalia and in Africa in general, it's the opposite. You can survive without a job, but you cannot survive without a family. So that's how valuable the family is.

IH: It's possible that somebody leaves behind his job for a family member.

AS: Absolutely. And that happened to me. When my wife had the premature baby, she had to stay in the hospital for two months. And we had young children who couldn't take care of themselves, and her sister, who lived in Denver, Colorado, quit her job and came and helped take care of the family until my wife came out of the hospital. And then she went back to her life. So that's how important a family is. But you wouldn't do that if you were American.

IH: Yeah, I know. Or if you were Americanized.

AS: Americanized—that's not part of the equation. [both chuckle]

IH: Yeah, no, not at all. Wow, interesting. So now you're living in Mankato. So you were saying that you went back to school. What did you do?

AS: I went back to school. I just finished a degree in international relations and political science, and I'm doing an internship this semester with Legal Aid, which I regularly work with here in Mankato.

IH: Is that your bachelor's degree or your master's degree?

AS: This is a bachelor's degree, because I never...

IH: Finally you're done. Congratulations.

AS: Yeah, bachelor's degree, and I'm planning to go to law school, an online law school with William Mitchell after I'm done with the internship, Legal Aid. And I feel, at this point, you know, I'm close to retirement, so I'm following my passion. Up to this point, I was taking care of things as best I could.

IH: Right, you were raising kids and all that.

AS: Yeah, so I couldn't do what I wanted. But now that my daughter is also second year here. My second daughter is just graduated from high school. She is starting at South Central College as well. My son is a senior. He's at high school. So at least part of the family is, they already

have part-time jobs and they support. My wife works for the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], which helps women and girls, especially immigrant families, cope with life and also keep their identity and their culture and also learn to survive in the Western environment. So the family is coming together. It's self-sustaining, so now I don't have to do the things. And most of my brothers and sisters live overseas, including my mother, who is living in London now. So I can follow my passion now, and my passion is to help others. With a law degree I feel that I can, especially in civil rights, I can advocate for people more effectively than I am now.

IH: And where do you intern right now?

AS: Intern? Legal Aid.

IH: In Mankato?

AS: In Mankato, but it's a statewide institution. Their main office is in Saint Paul, and I'm also a board member of the statewide so that I can contribute the immigrant perspective, how to apply the law, the experience of the East African immigrants, whether it's Somali, Ethiopian, or Sudanese. You know, we are a cultural group. Even though we are different within ourselves, still we are very similar, and we are having similar experiences and similar barriers when it comes to southern Minnesota.

IH: And one more question. I'll let you go soon. So you ran for school board?

AS: Yes. I ran for school board two times.

IH: And that was in Mankato?

AS: In Mankato. And the reason I was running for school board is because education is very important. It's the number one equalizer. For someone who came, who was uprooted from Africa, from tropical Africa to southern Minnesota, there are a lot of challenges. Not just the weather, but also culture, religion—you name it—skin color. Everything is different. So the challenges are many. So the best way to get ahead and to be successful is to get a good education. And our children, you know, the African immigrant children, they have no one that is advocating for them in the education system. The school board are people who were born and bred here, school board members. Even with their best of intentions, they cannot understand what we go through, and what our children need, and for that reason, I ran for school board two times. And the people I am running against are people who are born and bred here. They have been in the school board forever, ten years or so, so they were very well established. So first time, I got about five hundred votes. Second time, I got fifteen hundred votes. So if I run a third time—and it takes about two thousand votes to win—and so if I run another time... And my running is not just to impact education, but also to show the young generation of Somalis and Africans that this is a system that is open to everyone, and you can participate, and you can take matters in your own hands and advocate for yourself, for your community, and for the larger community, and make a difference in people's lives. So it is very satisfying, and I got to know a lot of people, and people got to know me. So it is getting better all the time.

IH: And one last question. How do you see the future of the minority groups in Mankato, Somalis and Africans, the next ten years, five years?

AS: I see a very bright future, especially the Somalis. The Somalis are very flexible in terms of adjusting. Comparatively speaking, when you talk, like, the Southern Sudanese, they are having a lot of difficulties. A lot more, even though a lot of them are Christian, and they get support from churches like the Lutheran Church. But they still face a lot more difficulties than the Somalis who are Muslim, and who are able to establish Mankato's Islamic Center exclusively by the Somali community. So the Somalis are very active in attaining the so-called American Dream. They are very active, and we have a lot of bright young people who are coming up through the system, well educated, who will take over from the older generation like myself, will have more successes than we had. So it is getting better all the time.

IH: Sure, sure, yeah. Anything else that you'd like to add?

AS: You know, it's been a wonderful opportunity to talk to you. Hopefully, I inspired others to advocate and work for the successful integration. Integration doesn't mean that you have to give up your identity and your culture or your faith. But successful integration to the larger community—so you are part of this country, and you feel a sense of ownership and belonging, and so you can be successful and practice your faith and retain your culture and have a successful life and feel a full-fledged American.

IH: Sure. Well, thanks a lot. I appreciate your time.

AS: My pleasure.

IH: Thank you so much.

AS: All right.