



Collection Information:

Item: English translation transcript of oral history interview with Hashi Shafi, January 16, 2014.

Collection: Somalis in Minnesota Oral History Project.
Oral History Interviews of the Somalis in Minnesota Oral History Project.

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Hashi Shafi
Narrator

Ahmed Ismail Yusuf
Interviewer

January 16, 2014
Minneapolis, Minnesota

English translation of the original Somali recording¹

Hashi Shafi **-HS**
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf **-AY**

AY: Hashi Shafi's bio. Hashi Shafi is a Somali-born activist and a community organizer who, among other things, advocates for the awareness of the power of ballot boxes, voting rights. He is the executive director of Somali Action Alliance, an agency that takes pride in informing Minnesotans, especially Somalis, of their rights in political participations.

In the name of Allah the merciful the most compassionate. This is Ahmed Ismail Yusuf. I am in Minneapolis on January 16, 2014. I am here with Hashi, Shafi Hashi. You will actually correct the whole thing. Oh, sorry. Hashi Shafi. But I am going to conduct the interview in Somali. So we're just going to start.

Shafi, peace be upon you. Welcome to this interview that is being conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society, and I thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

HS: Ahmed, thank you very much for having me. I am delighted to be with you.

AY: Brother, why don't we start out our conversation with this—although I am aware that we Somalis would rather avoid it. Tell me when were you born and where were you born?

HS: I was born in Hamar [Xamar, Mogadishu]. I was born in January of 1971. However, I was assigned January first as my birthday because of the cumbersome way the immigration system works. There were lots of people that did not know their birth date. For us in Somalia, historically, it did not have or make that much sense since birthdays were not celebrated. Since we came to other countries that celebrate those days, we should celebrate those dates as well. I was assigned my birthday as January 1, 1971. The month is accurate, but the date is inaccurate. That is how it is recorded and I am going to keep it that way.

AY: Okay. I forgot to ask you your full name, and spell it in English please.

HS: Hashi Shafi. It is H-A-S-H-I. That is my first name. My last name is Shafi, S-H-A-F-I,

¹ Somali transcript is also available.

which many of the Somali people know me and call me Shafi.

AY: That is what I call you.

HS: My last name is my nickname

AY: Okay, how many siblings do you have? Or you do not know how many?

HS: I forgot how many sibling I have. Most likely I don't remember them all. There are many of them.

AY: [laughs]

HS: There were five sisters and four brothers. Nine siblings all together.

AY: Did all of you grow up in Mogadishu? Did you yourself grow up in Mogadishu?

HS: Some of us grew up in Kismayo [Kismaayo] and stayed there until they completed high school. Some of us grew up in Mogadishu.

AY: It seems you never ventured out outside of Mogadishu, and you probably never visited those of us in the north or in the center of the country. You were one of those people who would hide themselves from us.

HS: That was one of my biggest regrets—that I did not become acquainted with many parts of the country although I was very interested in doing that. After I graduated from high school, I enrolled in the Political Science Department of the National University and was a teacher in the afternoon for beginner students at an Arabic school in the Medina [Mediina] district as well. Therefore, I did not a get chance to visit those areas of the country.

AY: So you are telling me that you were born in Mogadishu, and you stayed there until you were chased away from it.

HS: I did not venture out outside of Mogadishu until the war began.

AY: [laughs]

HS: I was very much interested in going to those regions. The furthest I had gone in the north were towns of Balad [Balcad] and Jowhar [Jowhaar].

AY: Are you one those people who would say, “Where are the northern parts of the country?”

HS: That is it.

AY: Okay. Just briefly go over for me your childhood life in Mogadishu when you were growing up. What do you remember the most?

HS: Honestly, one of the things I remembered the most about my youth was when I was in high school. I remember when I was still quite young, I would attend governmental conferences as well as important meetings. I was very active as a young man. My father was a merchant, and he was also somewhat involved in politics. He was also a religious leader. So I was raised in that kind of leadership environment. After I finished, I had a chance to attend the Political Science Department of the National University. One of the things that I still remember about that was I was in high spirits. I felt like I could conquer the entire world after I completed my education. Although politically I could see the country and the things were not going well, at the time there was lots of good progress being made. The public collectively was making progress. The government began a little bit to privatize the economy. In the education front, there was an increase of privately-owned schools where students could go to learn technology. At that time, I was thinking about what I wanted to do after I finished my college education. One of the things that was a big deal to me and I still fondly remember was that as a youngster I had a chance to teach.

AY: What years are you talking about?

HS: It was 1986 to '87. I had an opportunity to teach. I became a teacher at a private elementary/middle school. The students at the school were very diverse. I never dreamt that I would be a teacher at a private school. I had never seen a private school. I attended public schools that were free of charge. Here I was teaching private school where the parents of those students were paying for the students' education. The curriculum and the language with which the students were learning their materials were Arabic. Students were learning technology and other materials in Arabic. Then I was encouraged by that, and I began to dream to expand this sort of learning facility in the country. I was planning after I finished my college education to open my own private school to educate students.

The next thing that happened was the outbreak of civil war, which was really heartbreaking for me. I had never thought that this massive war would break out. There were some militias operating in the countryside, and there were some expectations that conflict could reach us. The civil war had already devastated the northern regions of the country, and that pain of the devastation had already been felt in Mogadishu. It was apparent that the government probably would fall and there could be some conflict. However, no one predicted the ferocity, capacity, and the level the conflict had reached. It was a painfully devastating experience for all of us. Then, I and my family left the country. By the grace of God, no one in the family had become a causality of the war.

AY: When did you leave the country?

HS: In 1991.

AY: Nineteen ninety-one.

HS: By March of that year we were in this place called Utange [Utanga]. We were one of the first refugees that Mombasa refugee camps were established for.

AY: When the war broke out in Mogadishu, did any of your family members suffer as a result of the war?

HS: Luckily all were safe. We did not suffer any losses. Thanks to God, we safely fled our homes.

AY: Did your entire family flee?

HS: Yes, the entire family. We went to Kismayo initially, and we left there for the refugee camps.

AY: When you reached the refugee camps in Kenya, there were lots of hardships that the refugee populations were faced with. How have any of those hardships impacted you?

HS: The biggest pain for me was losing my country. It never occurred to me that... Before the conflict, I thought the whole world would be mine. And all of a sudden, I lost that hopeful future I had dreamt, and I found myself in a strange land with its border checkpoint security personnel. Everybody you encounter sees you as a lost soul. I had no power to do what I would like, and I have no power to even protect myself when people are committing injustice against us. The police officers, for example, would accost us out on the street and ask our legal status. Sometimes without anything wrong, they just not only accosted us but they would physically abuse us by hitting with sticks and other objects. I felt degraded, and my biggest disappointment was not of the war—it was when I came to the refugee camps.

AY: Were you searching for meaning and purpose for your life? Or were you just feeling homesick? How did the new life you had entered impact your psyche?

HS: To be honest with you, that new experience had impacted me greatly. I was just having lots of internal soul-searching, and I was trying to determine if I had any role in the collapse of our state. Collectively, all of us despised the military government.

AY: Have you yourself had any hand in the destruction of the state thereby ushering in the catastrophe that followed?

HS: Yes, I asked myself that. Have I had anything to do with bringing about the calamity? Many of us were cheering for the rebels. We were not cheering for war, but we certainly wanted Mohamed Said Barre's [Maxamed Siyaad Barre's] military dictatorship to go. We did not care how it would go. We just wanted it gone by any means. But we did not deeply think about what the replacement would be. I personally did not have the power to stop what was going on. I was still a relatively young man. I was not involved in any kind of armed conflict. I had never handled a weapon. I had never seen armed civilians before that point. The only people that I would see with weapons were government soldiers. At the same time, I felt that the vast majority of us, the Somalis, did not like the government and just wanted it gone. After I fled to a nation with a stable government, I felt that the sufferings we endured were our comeuppance because we destroyed our nation. There, I was in a foreign country where there was a stable and functioning government, and as a newcomer refugee I felt marginalized and not valued.

AY: They saw you as a poor refugee who was beneath them.

HS: Not just a refugee, but I was beneath refugee because I was stateless. I was just a lost soul.

AY: Then at that point, you realized that you were at the mercy of someone.

HS: It was the biggest powerlessness and frustration that I had experienced. It was an infuriating thing. Here I had a situation that I could not do anything about. I was not allowed to even try to do anything to better myself. If I wanted to work to support myself, I did not know how to do that. I felt my life was not under my control.

AY: How long were you there?

HS: If you were to try to earn food for subsistence, you could not do that. It was the United Nations that would distribute food rations among the refugees. If you wanted to work, you do not know where you go to find work. You would not know where to go to earn a daily living. The people I was associated with, some of them are refugees just like me and some of them you did not even know where they are at. Death and diseases were common. I would hear with some regularity that so-and-so passed away. Friends, associates, and family members were dying. It was carnage, and there was pain and suffering everywhere. That year, 2001, was the downside and painful for me personally. And I realized that I needed to rediscover and adjust myself to this kind situation I found myself in. I had a pride and sense of personal worth to begin with, and I wanted to regain my pride.

AY: Your pride and self-worthiness.

HS: To gain back my pride and personal worth. One way to regain that was to become active at the refugee camps, and thanks to God, I was able to do what I could. For example, the living conditions of the camps were squalid. There was a lack of drinking water, and there were no sanitation facilities. I did not want just to sit under a tree and get daily rations. I wanted to do something to improve the refugee lives. I organized the refugee community, and I did what I could do in my capacity, albeit limited.

AY: How long have you lived in the refugee camps?

HS: I left there in 1993.

AY: In what month?

HS: I was mostly staying in cities, Nairobi and Mombasa, though. Eventually, I became acquainted with the country, and I learned the local language. I mean, I could move around. At times, I lived in Mombasa. And by end of 1991, I went to Thika, which was a refugee processing center near Nairobi, and I lived for a while.

AY: Is Thika a city?

HS: Thika?

AY: Yes.

HS: Thika was one of the closest cities in the Nairobi area. It used to be a refugee camp. It was home to Ethiopians, Ugandans, and Sudanese as well as the Somali refugees who fled from northern Somalia in the eighties.

AY: Okay.

HS: It was a base of operations for all of those peoples.

AY: I got it.

HS: Since it was a recognized refugee camp, when the police in Nairobi conducted search operations to flush out undocumented people, we would flee there. At least there we had some legal status and protection.

AY: With all that humiliation and marginalization you had experienced as a refugee, you did not get discouraged and it did not actually take too long for you to really adopt and adjust to the Kenyan life.

HS: No, it did not. In fact, I taught myself the local language, Swahili, and I began to act as a translator.

AY: Ah ha!

HS: I mean, I learned to how to navigate my life. By the grace God, I began to work there as well as going to private technology school. That's where I learned my computer skills.

AY: At that point, you were feeling that you could interact with the citizens of the country.

HS: Yes, of course, definitely, yes.

AY: When you left there in 1993, where did you arrive initially?

HS: I had an opportunity, I was one of the hundreds if not thousands of Somalis in the refugee camps who had gotten an opportunity to come to the United States. Those refugees were resettled in the United States under various programs. Some of them were sponsored by family members who were residing in the US. For example, in our case we were sponsored by my brother who had already been in the United States.

AY: Where was he at the time?

HS: Arizona, Phoenix.

AY: I got you.

HS: That is how I ended up going to Phoenix. I arrived there on November 29, 1993.

AY: I got you.

HS: As soon as I had gotten legal papers, I began working. Within a month upon my arrival in Arizona, I had landed a job. I knew what I had left behind and the sufferings of my family and my friends. I was determined to find work.

AY: What was the first job that you found?

HS: I began working at a woodworking plant.

AY: Was it an assembly type job? [chuckles]

HS: It was a plant that manufactured various products. I found this job about a month upon my arrival. I was still new to the country.

AY: I got you.

HS: I underwent a pre-employment test and I was hired. I would get up at 4:00 a.m. to get ready to go to work. I would take a city bus to work. Everything was new and strange to me—the language, the habits, everything.

AY: How long would you be riding on the bus before you got your job site?

HS: The bus ride was about twenty minutes long. But I needed to get up at 4:00 a.m. to get ready and prepare breakfast.

AY: I got it.

HS: We learned new habits. Before, breakfasts and other meals were prepared for us. Now, we had to do for ourselves.

AY: [laughs] I got it. There are no such things.

HS: Those things are obsolete. They no longer work. We had to prepare our own breakfast in the morning and put it in your lunchbox. Then I would take a city bus to work. Then I would get off in the afternoon and come home and prepare my dinner at night. I mean, we just entered a different way of life.

AY: I got it.

HS: Although many of my family members came with me and others were already in here, still

life here was different. This was not the life where we would say, “Oh, female members of the family should cook and clean for their male counterpart.”

AY: You were not saying, “I am sitting here, bring my meal to me.”

HS: Those things, their period had ended. This was a new experience for us.

AY: [laughs]

HS: I lived there until May of the following year, 1994. About a month earlier, my job had ended, and then I got a call from Minnesota. At the time, everybody was headed to Minnesota.

AY: When you say a call, do you mean you heard from someone there?

HS: I mean friends called me from here.

AY: Yeah!

HS: They said Minnesota was booming.

AY: They said it was like spring rainy season in here.

HS: And we were just looking for work. We came from desperately poor places.

AY: Were those friends saying Minnesota was like a paradise?

HS: And in order to take care of poverty, you needed to work.

AY: Yes. Yeah, a paycheck was needed. It was a paycheck that replaced the spring rain for us.

HS: We immediately began to refer Minnesota as the new Saudi Arabia.

AY: Saudi Arabia.

HS: Yes. When Saudi Arabia was being built after oil was discovered there, lots of Somalis went there to work in that country as day laborers.

AY: Early seventies and late seventies, yes.

HS: Lots of people went there to work, and they brought back lots of wealth that built Somalia.

AY: We called them the heavenly people.

HS: The heavenly people. So Minnesota became the new Saud Arabia for us.

AY: Yes, Saudi Arabia. Okay.

HS: Because it was the only place where you could find one hundred Somalis working for one single employer in the whole US. For those people who had arrived here in 1992, 1993, and 1994, it was the only state where there were such opportunities.

AY: So that was what brought you to this place.

HS: That is how I got in here.

AY: So, where...

HS: I remember my friend, Shino, picked me up from the airport.

AY: Yes.

HS: Shino used work for the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] Somali language service.

AY: Your friend.

HS: And he still works for the BBC. He picked me up from the airport. At the time, they were living in Marshall, Minnesota, which had at the time the largest number of Somalis in the state.

AY: Here you go.

HS: In Minneapolis, jobs were scarce at the time.

AY: It was one of the places that low-skill starter jobs could be found.

HS: Marshall, Minnesota, it was one the places that jobs were found easily.

AY: Yes, yep.

HS: It was told that historically the first wave of Somalis who arrived here in 1992 and 1993, they were not even allowed to rent places in the city. They were a virtually unknown ethnic group, and their looks were different than other people.

AY: [laughs]

HS: They did not even look like the black people who the locals were familiar with. On top of that, they spoke a foreign language and they had strange outfits. So they were problematic, and landlords said to them, "We do not know you, and we are not going to rent places to you." They were refused to be rented places.

AY: I got it.

HS: Then what happened was the meat processing plant general manager had made a deal with a

big university in the town called Southwest Minnesota State University. The university had allowed part of its campus facilities be rented to Somalis.

AY: I heard it was summertime when this happened, when the students were not in school.

HS: Maybe it was winter. I think it was summer, and I think students were not in there yet. But the winter was coming.

AY: So the winter was approaching...

HS: When they finish their shifts at the plant, they did not have a place to sleep. It was worrying, so the guy had helped them a lot. Then he found other facilities for them, and the townspeople and Somalis got to know each other a bit better. I remember staying and working there until October 1995. When I left, other groups of Somalis had left as well. I remember, the communities that we lived in, when we told them that we were leaving, there was a gathering and townspeople were saying, "Please do not go." They are saying to us, "Stay with us, please, because we get to know each other well, and you people are good people."

AY: Yes.

HS: So my experience in the state began there.

AY: So when you left Marshall, did you leave for Minneapolis?

HS: I arrived in Minneapolis in October of 1995. I took advantage of two weeks of vacations that I earned at the plant. My plan was not to go back there, though. I put my luggage and all belongings in the car. My thinking was I needed to find a job and residence in Minneapolis in two weeks.

AY: Was the money in the bank, or were you carrying it in your pockets? [laughs]

HS: The money was in the bank because at the time we learned how to open a bank account. Prior to that, though, we typically did not have bank accounts.

AY: All right.

HS: We just started having bank accounts. Before that, our monies were kept in our pockets. Prior to that, we did not trust the banking system.

AY: By the time you got to Minneapolis, at least you knew... You would trust the banks?

HS: I opened an account just last few months that I was there. I trusted it.

AY: Yes.

HS: In fact, by the time I got here, I had had a bank account. I mean in Minneapolis.

AY: Do you now have a bank account?

HS: I do.

AY: [laughs]

HS: I have had one ever since. Thanks to God, we are burgeoning now.

AY: Do not answer that question. [laughs] They called it an account. When you arrived in Minneapolis, what did you encounter? What was the sentiment?

HS: At the time, there were lots of people who were unemployed, and in fact, the Somalis were particularly complaining about that. In any event, there were few employers that the Somalis mainly were working for. One of them was a plant that produced jeans that was on the outskirts of town. There was also another music CD producing plant.

AY: What section of the city was it located in?

HS: We were told the plant's owner was the pop singer, Prince. I do not know if that is true or not. It, too, was located in the outskirts of town. I think it was in the vicinity of Chaska. For me, I found an employment opportunity at a company that did not have other Somali employees.

AY: I got it.

HS: As far as my residence, I found a place to live in northeast Minneapolis. There was a Somali family that was living there that I was stayed with.

AY: Okay.

HS: Then I tried to find work there in that neighborhood. I found work at a place that was about three minutes away. The location was Broadway and Industrial Boulevard. After I had found that job...

AY: What was it?

HS: The plant was producing boards and computer chips.

AY: Oh, assembly line.

HS: It was an assembly line that produced bolts. It was a nice part-time job, and eventually I found decent fulltime hours with overtime. That time, I was expecting my wife to join me. I had left her in Africa.

AY: When you say "Africa," please clarify the word "Africa" for me. I am allergic to the word "Africa."

HS: I left her in Kenya.

AY: [laughs] East Africa.

HS: I had left behind a wife. I left for this country right after our wedding. I was determined to be self-reliant and move away from the group that I was staying with. I rented and furnished my own place and waited for my wife because I had a good job and I was able to afford that. Then I became a pioneer for a lot of young Somalis. I will let them know the job openings at my employer. I was giving them the same job leads that I was given myself in the past. The employer began hiring Somali workers, and finally the number of Somalis working there reached in between twenty to thirty.

AY: How long did it take you to reach that thirty number?

HS: Within six months.

AY: Okay.

HS: Soon there were almost twenty of us there. Then we just moved to different levels. I continued to work for a while and switched jobs based on my needs and interests.

AY: I got it. How long did it take you to become politically active? I remember that you were even one of the people who were campaigning for Paul Wellstone, the great guy.

HS: I was not just campaigning for him, but I was able to arrange a meeting between him and his opponent.

AY: [Norm] Coleman.

HS: There was a big event that we organized that they both attended.

AY: And you were responsible for that?

HS: This was the first event we held to establish Somali Action Alliance. It was the genesis.

AY: Was that the genesis and the beginning of Somali Action Alliance?

HS: Absolutely.

AY: What had you been doing up until that point?

HS: Like I said earlier, in my youth, I was politically active. I was also active when I was in the refugee camps or in Somalia. Those prior experiences helped me when I came to America to be active again.

AY: Okay.

HS: And not just in Minneapolis, but when I was in Marshall, Minnesota. There were only a very few of us there, and most of people that were there at the time were working night shifts. So I attempted to organize them by telling that we could say our Friday prayer services in one location and there, at least we could see each other to exchange information.

AY: I got it.

HS: People did not see each other that often. We were working different shifts, and everybody was running around. So at least that was a way to organize and see each other and also fulfill our religious obligation. But we did not have a place to congregate. So I converted my living room into a mosque. So it became a meeting place as well as a place to say our Friday prayers as well as a place to socialize and have cups of tea together. That was where my activism started in this country.

AY: I got it.

HS: Then, after I moved here to Minneapolis, I continued it. And at the end of 1996, I organized an organization called Somali Communities of America. The idea behind that organization was to provide vital services to our people. I and group of my friends and anyone else who was active in the community created it. It helped us for a while temporarily. The organization provided lots of services until 2000, 2001.

In 2001, when the September 11 disaster took place, it impacted me greatly. And the reason was, the country we fled to, America—that I saying to myself, “Thanks to God, I got another home”—was under attack. Just until about two years prior to the event, my thinking was one day I would go back home. However, two years prior to the event, I was convinced myself that I would stay here forever.

AY: Prior to that, you were in a travel mode and had to demobilize yourself?

HS: Before, I had all my belongings in a travel bag ready to go back.

AY: [chuckles]

HS: In 1996, I began to change my mind and thought about demobilizing myself. By 1997, my demobilization process was underway, and I decided to live here forever. By 2000, I was one hundred percent convinced myself that America was my home.

AY: And then...

HS: I was in that dream when this explosion took place. I saw people blaming Islam for the tragedy. It was individuals who did that. It does not matter whether they were claiming to be Muslims or not. Who knows what their confession was. The acts of those individual had impacted my life. That was what prompted me to organize, to show or share with the Somali

Minnesotans the idea that this country belongs to all of us, that we can be part of its political process and the elections. By getting involved in the political process, we can have voices and hold the politicians accountable and put on the table our concerns and issues that we think are not addressed. That is what prompted me to be politically active. By 2002, I sought to get any program that I could get that would elevate my skills in terms of how I could become someone who was civically engaged. I was someone that had never experienced any kind of democratic process before. I knew this was a democratic country, I have heard about the elections and voting, but we did not know how the process actually worked. In 2002, it was an election year and it was the first election since 2002.

AY: Well...

HS: September 11 was in 2001. It was a major tragic event. It impacted the populace hugely. I mean, post-9/11. Then I made a decision to better myself. Then I sought how I could move those people forward.

AY: I got it.

HS: I sought to attend trainings related to community organizing. For example, how to create relations, how to make power analysis, how to win your issues, and how to build coalitions. Since I have had a good relationship with the community at large and the leaders—like religious leaders, business leaders, various intellectuals. Ahmed was one of them. I decided to meet one by one just the way you and I are meeting today to share with them the vision and dream I was envisioning. It was based on the experiences of the other immigrant groups who came to this country before us. The only way those immigrant groups were able to effectively address their concerns were through participation. And in order for us to be part of that earlier experience, I established a project called Somali Voter Participation Project.

AY: Somali Voter Participation Project. Absolutely.

HS: Okay, Somali Voter Participation Project. So our community can participate in the social and civic activities of this country.

AY: Okay.

HS: I knew at the time the number of Somalis who were US citizens was limited. However, we reached out to those who were citizens and we knocked on the doors in order to register them.

AY: And then...

HS: We knew the kind of backlash that we may encounter when we engage and reach out to the community. For example, some of the people we were reaching out to were really nostalgic about going back home and were not really interested in our efforts. Others were claiming that what we were doing was religiously immoral and unacceptable. Knowing all of those things, I continued my efforts. I made contacts with my contacts and met them initially one by one, and then I called for forum.

AY: Yes.

HS: I brought people together in a conference hall located on Sixteenth and Franklin—thirty-five individuals to be exact. Those individuals included politicians, clerics, traditional community elders, and teachers, and I shared with them my vision and experience I gained from my trainings. The people that trained me were also represented at the meeting in order for them to meet my own community. At the meeting we discussed whether or not we needed to have civil civic power in this country, politically speaking...

AY: To have our voices heard because we are here.

HS: At the beginning of the conversation, the sentiment was, “No, we don’t need that. We are going back home.” At the end, we were convinced that power and the authority to act is not something in the hands of one individual but in fact in the hands of the populace. Whatever the populace wants, they will get it, but through the cooperation and consensus of the larger community.

AY: Okay.

HS: By the end the discussion, we agreed, “Yes, we need to do it. Let’s do it.” That day was a Wednesday. On the following Friday I had my cards ready, and I and other volunteers that I could get, we distributed those cards at mosques and homes. Fortunately, the clerics we contacted gave our efforts their blessings and okayed it. Initially, most people believed what we were doing was immoral and unacceptable. Some were even saying we should not be voting one nonbeliever over another. Others were saying we were not in an Islamic country, that this is not our country. We had dealt with that kind ignorance. But thanks to God, the senior clerics had declared that those beliefs were wrong and it was in fact allowed to participate in the civic activities of the country.

AY: Is voter participation allowed?

HS: I just want to particularly mentioned and thank Sheikh Abdirahman Sheikh Omar, the current imam of Abubaker Mosque, because he publicly stood up at Imam Shafici one day and equivalently stated he himself would be the first to register.

AY: What was his name again?

HS: Sheikh Abdirahman Sheikh Omar.

AY: Sheikh Abdirahman Sheikh Omar, yep.

HS: He is also known as Sheikh Abdirahman Ahmed. He is a teacher as well.

AY: Oh, yes, yes.

HS: He stated publicly that he himself would be the first to register, and we should vote and voting is important. Most people were waiting to hear that kind declaration from a senior cleric, and until they heard such a declaration blessing our vision, they were reluctant to get involved.

AY: Really?

AY: No one wanted to get near it. Many of us thought those sort of activities were immoral.

AY: Really?

HS: Ninety percent of us have been to Kenya where some Somali clerics used to say that it is immoral to participate in voting. We came here with those attitudes, and some of the community still held them. There are some clerics that still believe that it is immoral to vote, which absolutely has no basis in the script.

AY: So, how you overcame that resistance was the one-on-one meetings you have had and relationship you have built with the clerics?

HS: The relationship I have had with the community leaders and the respect they had for me was what prompted them to come to the meeting and the training that I arranged, which lasted for hours.

AY: I mean, your personal relationship and the respect they were bestowing on you was bigger than the other issues that came to the forefront later.

HS: The issues I brought up were not issues that pertained to only me. There were issues that were of common interest to the community at large. I wanted the Somali Americans who were US citizens to leave a legacy behind that the next generation could benefit from over the next one hundred years. We also wanted to point out that still a hundred years from today, there will be Somali Muslims who will be living in Minnesota.

AY: But the important thing that you established was a pathway forward, and the good relation you have had with the community made it easier for you to do so.

HS: The relationship that I had with my community's leaders and the respect we had had for each other had made it easier to trust each other, and then they accept my invitations to come to the meeting to talk about those issues. We sat down and they listened to me, and finally they were convinced of the benefits of what I was talking about. Then the registration had started, and then we held a conference, or what you may call a public forum or community meeting. This was a large gathering, and the two candidates were invited to attend. And we wanted them to give us their opinions toward the issues that were important to the community. Those were issues identified at the earlier meetings. Some of those issues included raising education funding so our children can get quality education. Also at the time, there were a lot of deportations of our people. Regardless of who ultimately won the election, those politicians agreed to put a stop to that and to work with us on a range of issues from housing to stopping deportation proceedings. And everybody could see that the issues that were being discussed were issues that touched

every one of us. That actually made everybody agree to be part of those efforts. One of the skills that I gained from my community organizing training was the concept of leadership development. In other words, I was not just standing in front of everybody and telling the rest of the people what to do. We were all equally participating in the decision making process.

AY: So your role was to facilitate the forums and meetings, and then everybody can opine about the issues.

HS: Not only that, but to assign tasks for each one of us and to identify in terms of who is doing what.

AY: So those tasks can be assigned.

HS: There were about thirty of us. For example, one person would be assigned to meet and greet as people entered the conference venue. One person might be doing the registrations. Others might be assigned to speak on the behalf of the group. So we had our work cut for us. Some of the notable and highly regarded people that spoke at the venues we sponsored to convince the community of the importance of this included Sheikh Abdirahman, who was senior cleric, and Abdirizak Haji Hussein, the former prime minister. Said Salah Ahmed, the renowned poet and playwright, also spoke on the microphone, and we actually used his oratory in our campaign messages. Those respected people urged the community to support our efforts. Our campaign finally generated interests in the broader community. Even some ladies got involved in the campaign. Like Qamar, who recently moved away, and Sainab, Raho Warsame, just to name a few.

AY: Qamar Ibrahim, Sainab Hassan.

HS: The people who were engaging in the efforts were the stars of the community. You were there, too. Thanks to God, all respected people in the community were there, and we even had a feast. I mean, it was really a valuable process. People saw that we can create a vehicle that is going to be moving forward in the future and the need for the organization. Plus, we organized and directed our communities [unclear] were important. Those were the two things that came out of that process. We invited the local media as well as local politicians to the event, so they could see how we empowered people.

AY: You mean, people who are politically alert.

HS: Today, it is gratifying to see young people running for office. I am not saying that I should get credit for that, but thanks to God, that is the legacy. Yesterday, when I was being pushed aside and people were saying, “This guy was talking about politics,” and doors were closed to us...

AY: Yes, and today, the first Somali is elected...

HS: The fact that a Somali is elected is a good legacy for me, and it is also good for every Somali, thanks to God.

AY: That really is something to be proud of. I also remember, historically-speaking, although I was not there at that time, I was aware that the first day that...

HS: In any event, I remember you were at one of the meetings on one occasion.

AY: Yes, I was at that meeting myself, and I remember that. But I am talking about the historic day that you brought together...

HS: October 15/18, 2002. That day it was seared in my memory. I still have it and still remember it.

AY: The day Wellstone was saying...

HS: "Haa [yes]."

AY: He was speaking in Somali, and he said the first Somali word in Minnesota when he was running for the Senate.

HS: He was running for the seat for the third time.

AY: He was running for a third time.

HS: A Senate seat.

AY: Yes, he was running for the senator or office.

HS: Still this was his third time.

AY: Yes.

HS: Even the media had asked him...

AY: Yes.

HS: One of the strangest things that happened on that day for me was the question that Paul Wellstone was asked by the mainstream media. The question was, "You're a senior senator running for a Senate seat for the third time. How come those newcomers asked you questions in their native language?" We were asking him those questions in Somali, with a headset. "You were able to give yes or no answers to their questions in their native Somali language."

AY: The word you're referring to in order for the others for understand, I should clarify...

HS: Yes. He said "yes" in Somali.

AY: Yes. It was the first time...

HS: We asked him five questions.

AY: Yes.

HS: Five issue-related questions.

AY: Issue-related questions.

HS: They were, “If you get elected...”

AY: If you got elected, yes...

HS: “Would you work with us to stop deportation? Yes or no?”

AY: I got it.

HS: He said, “Haa.” “If you get elected, would you work with us to secure funding for English Language Learners?”

AY: Okay.

HS: Which was coming from the federal government at the time. And his answer was “Haa.”

AY: In the Somali language.

HS: Yes, he answered in Somali. I mean, he answered those five questions like that. Housing. Then the last question was, “If you get elected, would you meet this community ninety days after your election? Yes or no?” He answered, “Haa.” Coleman as well, we asked the same questions that we had asked the other guy.

AY: He answered...

HS: He was speaking in English.

AY: In English. [laughs]

HS: But it was the other guy who was more energetic and created really some fireworks.

AY: Yes. [laughs]

HS: Wellstone unfortunately five days later, he died. I learned that the man who had that energy yesterday and created that good relation with the Somalis and really helped out the Somalis in here... When he died, I had received hundreds of phone calls. And at the time we were still new to politics. Many thought he was my uncle or friend or something.

AY: Close friend.

HS: Somehow. They were sending their condolences to me.

AY: Condolences.

HS: It was personal condolences. [laughs] It was really, I was his best friend. By the grace of God, he was a great leader and he was a great friend for us. He was the voice for the voiceless people. I could say that without any hesitation.

AY: Yes.

HS: I am talking about the level in which our political maturity was at the time.

AY: I would like to know, on that day when you were to able to invite the two US Senate candidates to your forum, both seeking the Somali vote...

HS: And the Somalis were new to country and their numbers were small...

AY: And Somali community was a small community. Did you feel or realize the importance of that event on that day or was it something you realized subsequently?

HS: To be honest with you, for me, in terms of realizing the significance of the moment, the answer is no.

AY: Yes.

HS: I decided to understand this country and why certain things work the way they work. In this country someone becomes something all of a sudden. There are reasons as to why...

AY: Reasons.

HS: I became convinced that the reason things happen was when someone has enough self-respect for him or her, and decides to better themselves by understanding what is going on, partner with other like-minded people, I become convinced that person would reach where they want to reach. There is no limit as to where you can reach. That is what I became convinced of. I was also convinced that I may not reach where I want to reach now, but one day my own son or my grandson can become a Minnesota senator or congressman. I mean, I believe that deep inside me. I don't believe his skin color or immigrant background may limit his potential. This is something that I deeply believe in. My son or son's son will be able to be whatever he wants to be.

AY: Did you realize that on that day or was it something that predated that day?

HS: After I had made extensive analysis in this country. I have made analysis on the background of many prominent politicians. For example, I looked into the history and the experiences of the Jewish people in Minnesota. I learned that in the city of Minneapolis, fifty years ago, no one

would hire them and no one would rent their properties to them.

AY: Nineteen forties up until Hubert Humphrey came to power, Minneapolis used to be called the capital city of anti-Semitism.

HS: I learned that history of the way they overcame those prejudices, and look where they are today. They got where they are today not because they're Jewish and they are loved by someone, as Somalis believe. There is no such thing. They got there on their own merits.

AY: They got there because they empowered themselves.

HS: The empowerment and the relationship that they had established with other communities.

AY: The other communities that got here before them.

HS: They made them understand they're humans just like them.

AY: I got it.

HS: But that message did not come from the other people. It did not come from the other people acknowledging their humanity and just welcoming them. It came from within the Jewish community's efforts to accept and impress other peoples. They established services and outreaches in the neighborhood that they lived in. I was a believer in their model, and I believed that we can reach anywhere we want and there are no limits to our potential. I believed that we needed to create the necessary conditions now for reaching our full potential so that, if God wills, the next generation can take advantages of opportunities that were created for them.

AY: When such ideas were established in your mind and you were convinced of their benefits, what were the next steps you took that you would say increased your dreams?

HS: After the basic concept was agreed, then it was not just up to me to decide how to proceed. There were up to seventy-five elders and intellectuals who were present at the forum. Some of those people never had collaborated on any project before. Thanks to God, this process brought them together and made them to work together. The people who spoke at the forum included notables such as to Abdirizak Haji Hussein, Sheikh Abdirahman, Sheikh Abdi Salam, Uncle Said. I mean...

AY: Said Salah.

HS: And Said Salah, Hassan Jamaci and, I mean, who else... I mean, it was who is who. Oh, Said Fahye.

AY: You mean the clergy, the politicians, community leaders, poets, women's organizations, and teachers were represented at the forum.

HS: Those diverse groups never came together and collaborated on a project like this. They

might have come together occasionally when there was a problem or emergency event in the community like when someone got killed or something like that. But never before did they have had this kind forum to talk about how to address our communal challenges. Seventy-five of those leaders collaborated and worked together on our efforts. Each one of those individuals was assigned to a specific task. For example, there was an elderly gentleman whose task was to go out and knock on doors to register the people. I mean, it was really a historic event for me and the other people who came up with the concept. It was a good legacy for all of us. Thanks to God, it was something that brought us closer to each other as well. Up until the present time, the relationship and friendship that we established at that time are ongoing. Whenever we need each other, we get together, help each other out.

Thanks to God, that was what galvanized us to create a vehicle. We did not know ultimately what that vehicle may turn out to be. Then, six month from that time, after we have had many debates, meetings, and community conversations about this new organization and its mission, Somali Action Alliance was created. We invited many Somalis to come to our forums to get their input. The issues we were grappling with included what sort of vehicle do we needed? What sort of name do we call our new community organization?

AY: I got it.

HS: Since there were some organizations that were providing some services to the community, we did not want to be doing the same services that those other organizations were providing. Said Fahiye's organization called Somali Confederation was already operating. There was Somali Community of Minnesota as well. We also did not want to compete against those existing groups at all. Our goal was to empower the community. We don't provide help. The words "service," "help," or "need" were not included in our language at all. Our mission was to empower community. Empowerment and sustainability.

AY: People empowerment.

HS: People empowerment and leadership development and to stand up and fight collectively for issues that were impacting our lives. Just a few months after the organization was established, there had been some controversy regarding some school closures that were proposed. The city of Minneapolis used to have nine schools that were known as bilingual sites.

AY: Okay.

HS: Bilingual Somali teachers and bilingual assistant teachers taught at those schools. There were eleven accredited bilingual teachers as well as thirty other teachers. Altogether, there were just about over forty people including teachers, assistant teachers, and support staff working at the schools.

AY: I got it.

HS: Whenever there was a graduation ceremony at Roosevelt High School, it used to be a big media event. One time, former Minnesota Governor Jesse Venture attended one of those

graduation ceremonies where the majority of the students who were graduating from Roosevelt were of Somali origin. The event was televised worldwide. It is a phenomenon.

AY: I got it.

HS: We were in a daydream and reverie, and at the end of 2002 when [Tim] Pawlenty became governor, immediately bilingual education funding was cut back. And the closing of those nine bilingual schools, which most served Somali families, has begun and the teachers were issued layoff notices. We lost our great hope that our children would graduate high school and go on to colleges.

AY: So, immediately, the impact of that would be felt by the children?

HS: Yes. It was the Somali families that had children attending those schools that suffered. Many of those families' children were born in refugees camps, and the children did not have school experiences before they came to this country. For example, there were children who were ten years or twelve years old when they came to this country and never had been in a classroom before.

AY: Not only did those ten-year-old children have a language barrier, but they lacked basic schooling.

HS: They did not have educational background at all. Since they were already behind when they arrived here, they could not be without individualized education for even one day.

AY: Yes.

HS: Thanks to God, the only thing that those parents were counting on was that their children would get a quality education to secure their future and the future of the community. When those children were enrolled at the main schools, they were not asked their academic skills but they were asked their ages. And that child, for example, is twelve years old, they would just put the child in classes that other twelve years are attending regardless of the child's academic skills. The student then could not handle the class's academic work because of the lack of prior education. But by the grace of God, the city of Minneapolis was the first city in America that offered Somali bilingual education programs to Somali-speaking students. That in turn helped the Somali-speaking teachers being hired at those bilingual schools in 2002, 2003. When the implementation of those bilingual policies was adopted, some of the first teachers hired included Said Salah, Mohamed Hassan, Ibrahim, Fariid, and many others. Some of best professional educators were hired.

AY: Were they professional people who had prior teaching experiences?

HS: Yes, by God's grace, there were lots of professional educated people who were respected in the community. Those programs were securing many students' future, and when the funding for those programs was cut, it was a disaster for the community. There was lots of uproar, confusion, and headaches. The parents and the community did not know where they could take their

children to for schooling. That's when the first big waves of charter schools opened by the Somali community began. The first school was called Ubah.

AY: Ubah Academy?

HS: Ubah Academy formerly was a school that offered adult literacy classes.

AY: Was it adult education?

HS: It was for adult education.

AY: Okay.

HS: Then, because of the great needs that the parents had to find a place where their children could get an education, this school was opened. It was the first Somali-run charter school. Prior to that, we shared Higher Grounds Academy with others in Saint Paul.

AY: In Saint Paul.

HS: I was the first guy who sat down and established a relationship with the school. I fought hard for that, and I wanted the Somali parents to use the school, so at least we could have a school that may secure their children's future. Many children's futures were secured by the school. Many other students who were sent to regular schools could not keep up with other students. This fact led to the biggest wave of drop outs by students of Somali origin.

AY: So that was a major disappointment.

HS: A major one. Prior to that, our children were not dropping out of schools in such as a massive way.

AY: Yes.

HS: Our children were learning their educational materials, including subjects that were more challenging like math and science, in their own native language and they were taught by Somali-speaking teachers. Those teachers were dedicated professionals whose mission was to help raise the academic achievement of the students.

AY: So Pawlenty's education funding cuts are still being felt.

HS: We are still dealing with the negative impact of those education funding cuts. Then all kind of charter schools have sprung up everywhere, and with that, the quality of the education has gone down significantly.

AY: Yes.

HS: One of the schools that was slated to be closed was Sanford Academy or Sanford Middle

School. At the time, Said Salah and Sheikh Abdirahman were teaching at the school as well as another gentleman by the name of Mohamed Salah and another guy by the name of Abdullahi. In any event, there were good, well-respected Somali teachers at the school, and the school was one of the best academically. The school's principal actually traveled to Africa to see with her own eyes whatever challenges and the success the youngsters of her school had experienced in the past.

AY: Did she go to East Africa?

HS: She went to the refugee camps in Kenya as well as Nairobi schools. Said Salah referred her to visit those schools. She came back with a unique experience that enabled her to give the Somali students special considerations, and there were many Somali students in her school. People would not attend parent-teacher meetings. It was not in our culture and it was not something that we were familiar with. This school was the first school that held its parent-teacher meetings in the Somali neighborhood where the parents were residing. The teachers and the principal would come to the neighborhoods and meet the parents there. That flexible and dedicated school was slated to be closed. That was when I asked myself the question, "What is wrong?"

AY: I got it.

HS: Immediately, I tried to find out who was behind the school's closure. I contacted the school district, and I was told by the district that there was this group called the planning committee which was tasked to recommend to the board the schools that would remain open and the schools that should be closed. I contacted the committee, and they told me that the board had three weeks to act on their recommendations to close the school. But administratively, this school was slated to be closed and dismantled. They said that another school would be built in the future near Hiawatha to replace the school.

AY: They will build in the future another one, but this one will be closed?

HS: They said they had signed a contract with the company that will be building the school. I asked how much money it will cost for building of the new school. They said thirty-eight million dollars. They also said that the new school will be K-8 [kindergarten through eighth grade] whereas Sanford School was only sixth through eighth. I asked them if the new school would have the programs that our children were getting. I learned that the new school would not have those programs and access to school buses also would not be available. I made contact with the school principal and school teachers, including Uncle Said, and they all made clear to me that the school had been a success. I also went to the district to get school's year report. As a whole, the school's academic progress was also excellent. Then I could not figure why they wanted to be closed. They told us that the state economy was doing poorly and the funding for the schools was not available, and therefore some schools had to be closed. I could not reconcile that thirty-eight million dollars will be used for building another school at the same time.

AY: Thirty-eight million was allocated for building another place.

HS: Then I decided to go to people who had expertise in economic matters since that was not my strong area. I wanted those experts to calculate if Sanford School is extended to K-8, how much money would that cost? I learned that it would only cost eight million. That would save the district for thirty million. I arranged a meeting with the planning committee, the same planning committee that told us earlier they had recommended the school's closure. We met them. And when I say "we," I mean our Somali allies, the community leaders, and the neighborhood people, including some white folks. And we shared with the committee our concerns. We also held hearings at the school in order to galvanize area people for support.

AY: The area people and the neighbors, were they supporting you?

HS: The neighborhood people, who were ninety percent white, were supporting us. They were supportive because they would see the Somali kids going to the school every morning and they were happy to see them there. They were decent people. We got to know each other during this process, and they were always supporting us. Together, we protested. In any event, when we brought forward our figures and showed how our plan could actually save money for the district by turning the existing school into a K-8 school, they acquiesced and they thanked us for our tenacity. They forgot, though, that the board, which was an elected body, would also weigh in and the board would have the final decision. It could reject the administration's recommendations. I requested that the community as a whole meet the school board of directors. The school board was made of eight members, and we were told that we could not meet with them at all at once and only four of them are needed for a simple majority decision. It is almost like a court.

AY: Yes.

HS: Then we said, "Okay, it was up to us how we're going to meet them." We had made contacts and met them one on one or two at once or even three at once. It was not just me that met them but our elders and leaders as well. We put our concerns on the table.

AY: Were you the lead person, though, for the rest of the pack?

HS: Absolutely. I was the lead organizer of the event and all of those things, the organization, the entire thing. And then we got together, all of us—the elders, the teachers, and the parents. I always practiced transparency, and I shared with them every minute where things were, so they would know what was going on. I did not want people to get the impression that I was perusing something that I alone would stand to benefit. I wanted them to realize that what we were seeking was something that belonged to all of us. By God's grace, our efforts paid off, and we were able to meet them all, or I should say almost all seven of them to be exact. They all respectfully listened to what we had to say. They welcomed our efforts. They said that it is unacceptable for a school that had such a dedicated staff and principal that had provided excellent education for its student and was highly valued by the community to be slated for closure. They also said that there was no funding or saving justifications for the closure as well. They pledged their support for us one by one. Then we all went to the school board meeting where the final hearing about the school's future was debated. Hundreds of Somali parents and elders as well as some neighborhood white people with whom we had had a good relationship

had attended the hearing.

AY: Where was it held?

HS: The school hearing was held at 807, the school district headquarters.

AY: That is where it was held.

HS: We went to the hearing venue.

AY: Minneapolis schools...

HS: Minneapolis School District.

AY: Okay.

HS: We all went to the venue. We gave passionate testimony about the value this school had for us as community. Finally, the board made decision not to close Sanford School. It was the only school that was saved from closure out of the nine bilingual Somali schools that were slated for closure. It was not only us. Other minority groups like the Latinos and the Hmong also suffered the same fate.

AY: And the reason it survived was...

HS: Because of our protest.

AY: The protest and fight you were able to put up.

HS: The protests and the fight. Definitely.

AY: And the organization and coalition...

HS: Organizing and our understanding that our efforts could make a difference.

AY: The unity...

HS: And the importance of organizing.

AY: How you were able to gather important information and put that information on the table.

HS: How we were able to put that information, and how we debated about it, and finally how we were able to enlist allied expert opinion to buttress our case. We also built allies and a coalition across communities. Those allies were working with us closely and provided us crucial tactical support.

AY: And when you brought your information forward, you enlisted the experts to make your case

for you before the board, and I would imagine those experts spoke the same language as the board.

HS: We would prepare talking points beforehand. Every one of us was part of the leadership. We did not allow anyone to sit in the back as a layman. The process that was in place was that all had been assigned to some leadership role that we were to play.

AY: Were all of you of Somali origin?

HS: All attendees were of Somali origin, except the last day where the testimony of the neighborhood was needed to support us. The rest of the time, the people that were attending the meeting and forum were us. We spoke in our native language as well as English. By the grace of God, one of the positive things that came out of this experience was to demonstrate that the leadership roles are not just limited to one individual.

AY: That everyone can play that role by speaking out.

HS: Collectively as a group, we could organize ourselves. That each person could be a leader and has an intrinsic leadership capacity. It is a gift from God. In this situation, we all respected and saw each other as equal leaders. And to develop that intrinsic leadership, we gave everyone of us a leadership role to play. Even when someone shied away to play that leadership role, at some point we would manage to give that person a chance to exercise a leadership role by allowing the person say something about a matter. For example, if the person says, “Oh, I don’t know the language.” We would say, “Oh, we could provide you an interpreter.” The point was to demonstrate each person had an intrinsic leadership quality, and we as a group valued his or her leadership. Almighty God had destined each person to have a role to play and God had made our efforts a success. After that in 2009, we helped save another school in the vicinity. There are a lot of stories that I could talk about if you may.

AY: The narrative of the story was very important and needed although it was quite long. Since that time though, you have experienced a great deal of elections, haven’t you?

HS: The process we had started became an ongoing legacy. Since that time, we were involved in every election ever since, knocking on doors and urging our people who are citizens to come out and vote. We also urged those who were not US citizens yet to assist the voters—for example, by giving them a ride to the polling stations or by providing interpreter services. I mean, it is an inclusive process. After the elections are over we put our issues and concerns to be addressed.

AY: I got it. The more prominent local politicians that were involved in their elections were Mayor [R.T.] Rybak—one of them.

HS: Definitely.

AY: The new mayor.

HS: The legacy is still ongoing.

AY: I mean, Keith Ellison.

HS: One hundred per cent.

AY: For which one of those local politicians would you say the Somali vote was crucial in their election victory?

HS: I mean, they were part of those elections.

AY: They were part of them. [laughs]

HS: First, the Somalis numerically are very small.

AY: I got it, even [Mark] Dayton.

HS: Altogether, the Somali numbers are very small.

AY: I got it.

HS: When it comes voting, if, for example, all of us were living in one location, maybe then our vote will be significant.

AY: Got it.

HS: But anyway, in this country, one single vote makes sense. If you look at the election results of Coleman versus Al Franklin, the spread was only three hundred votes. That showed the value of every single vote. It was a very tight number. It was really a phenomenal.

AY: I think one after that was even smaller. How much was Al Franklin and...

HS: Al Franklin, I am talking about Al Franklin and Coleman.

AY: You're right.

HS: The difference was only three hundred votes. It was a very tiny number.

AY: You're correct.

HS: Very tiny.

AY: Very tiny number.

HS: What I mean by that is we, the Somali Action Alliance, had made our practices for each year to make contacts with non-Somali national as well as local agencies to enhance and upgrade our skills. We are human beings and we need to improve and learn new skills. If you just sit and

don't do anything, you are not going to improve your skills. Your brain needs to be attuned to current events to gain knowledge about what is going on, to take advantage of the information that is out there in the world.

AY: So now here in the state of Minnesota where the Somalis have political power, there is a perception and awareness out there among the public that the Somalis are politically engaged and active. Is that perception something that the political class is aware of?

HS: Thanks to God, the Somalis are recognized today as a powerful voting bloc.

AY: Okay.

HS: Thanks to God, that is not something that happened by happenstance. For example, we regularly network and collaborate with other advocacy groups. Every year, we send out about ten part-time employees as well as about thirty volunteers. They knock on doors from Saint Cloud, Willmar, Rochester, and Minneapolis. Every city that we go to, we create volunteers in that city.

AY: Has the number of volunteers increased year by year?

HS: I have had the opportunity to network with a group called Voter Activation Network—VAN.

AY: Voting Activation Network.

HS: Voting Activation Network—VAN. It is a national group, and that gave us an opportunity to get in touch with their network. We collaborated with a local advocacy group called State Voice or Minnesota State Voice. The second group gave us access to state voter registration lists in order for Somali Action Alliance to pull out all the Somali names from the voter registration lists. The leadership of our organization had embarked to pull out the Somali names from the voter registration lists.

AY: Yes.

HS: Regardless of where those voters lived. It was a very tedious undertaking.

AY: Yes.

HS: It was a hard work. When we secured the lists, we succeeded in every election season since to send volunteers out in the community to knock on doors, especially the usually suspected neighborhoods that we thought had a significant Somali population. Every election season, those volunteers go out to knock on doors. We would gather large numbers of mixed names. We would then isolate the Somali names from the other names. I think today the Somali Action Alliance Network voter database contains nineteen thousand Somali voters.

AY: Nineteen thousand Somalis.

HS: Nineteen thousand, all of them citizens.

AY: Are they volunteers?

HS: They're not just citizens, they are registered voters.

AY: I mean, voters, registered voters.

HS: Registered voters who voted before one or two times.

AY: Oh my goodness.

HS: And it is not something that is just for one single year. Now we are in 2014 and already the planning process is underway, God willing, to reach out to those nineteen thousands. We plan to register again for this election season at least ten thousand of them.

AY: Yes.

HS: We also plan to increase the numbers. Some of them may be on lists already but need to be re-activated or activated to vote.

AY: Therefore, party-wise, is your organization nonpartisan?

HS: We don't do this for a political party. Yes, we are strictly nonpartisan. We are not affiliated with any one party.

AY: Yes, I mean...

HS: Nonpartisan.

AY: Yes, okay.

HS: We are nonpartisan. What we do is we knock on the doors and urge them to vote because we say to them voting and engaging in the political process would empower them. After we do that, we ask them what are the issues or the concerns that impact on their daily lives the most that they would like to be addressed during the election campaigns. Those issues could be related to health care, education, and so on. And we document the responses we get from the voters on the voter registration forms. And after we finish the registration process, we go back and analyze the issue-related responses that we got from the public and we then identify the issue or issues that are of most concern to the community. At that point, we go back to the community and call for a public forum to discuss and talk about those issues that are of most concern to them. At the public forum we get input from the community about those issues that are of most concern to them, and then during the elections we advocate for those issues. Over the last three years, some major issues that our community wanted to address were education, education issues. The second issue was the matter related to money wiring services, or as it is known, the hawala. I don't know if you had seen us, but there was great mobilization and protests related to that issue.

AY: Okay.

HS: And now we have that issue before the Congress to be addressed. Congressman Ellison as well as Al Franklin were a tremendous help in terms of advocating and advancing this issue. We are hopeful, God willing, in the near future we will be able to address it. As far as the issue of education, since our inception, we had been involved in fighting for it and that fight for a quality education for our children is still ongoing.

AY: Now, when you get to your home at night and you do a little bit of soul-searching about your life in general before you drift to sleep, what are the fights you could honestly say to yourself, “Okay, I actually won on those consequential fights?” Of those fights, name the two most consequential ones.

HS: I am going to give three. First, it is a delight for me when we saved those schools that were about to be closed. It was for the teachers. Especially that school, Sanford Middle School. Yes, it was a historic school. It was the first recognized bilingual Somali school.

AY: I got it.

HS: The fact that we played a role in saving that school is one of the things that when I look back on my life at night make me very happy. I, Shafi, take great personal satisfaction in the fact that the Somali Action Alliance has become a role model and mentor for the Minnesota Somalis. The civic engagement-based model that we created and electoral organizing...

AY: Yes.

HS: We were able to create something that became a model or example for the entire US and the world. For example, to make my point, at the election seasons, I receive calls. We produce lots of educational videos, and I receive calls from Seattle, Washington to Columbus, Ohio. I get those calls from organizations and individuals as well, and they are all seeking advice and mentorship to reach our pinnacle level in terms of organizing and galvanizing a community. On many occasions, we were able to help Seattle and Ohio by sharing with them our expertise. We shared with them the curriculum and tactical information we employed to win some of our most important fights. One of the things, thanks to God, that I take great satisfaction and solace in is the fact that our work had reached global levels. Last year, I was working on a project called global engagement. Last year, 2013, I visited five European countries. God willing, I intend to visit Canada next month.

AY: [laughs] I thought the community’s arrival and settlement in Canada began before us.

HS: It may have begun, but it was not active.

AY: [laughs]

HS: I also learned that among the communities in diaspora, the Minnesota community was recognized as the most active and most engaged community in the local political processes than

other communities, and that is very gratifying.

AY: Do you think that we are the most influential and organized community outside of Somalia?

HS: I would say ninety percent, yes. The only thing that is missing is...

AY: Yes.

HS: And it would be nicer if we could get that... And for me as a community organizer, it is of particularly great importance to me when a community gets together and talks about things that matter to them that impact their lives, then that community move on to try to solve many other matters.

AY: All right.

HS: I would like to see more community forums and consultations. At those forums, the discussions should not necessarily be about Somalia and its current situation, but issues that impact our lives daily. When the diaspora communities see they are able to come together to address those mundane issues, perhaps then it would be easy to tackle the issues plaguing Somalia.

AY: I think I would conclude our conversation by asking you this question. Now it has been twenty years since our presence here Minnesota has begun or maybe just a little bit over twenty years. Over the next twenty years, what is your prognosis in term of our progress and social mobility as community?

HS: I personally believe that history will be kind to the Somali experience in America. At most, we have been in here just over twenty years, and we have over ten individuals who are in the law enforcement community. We have young men who are in the police force. We even have a sergeant and deputy sheriff. I mean, not to mention other professionals like professors, doctors. I expect over the next twenty years, the integration process of the community will be complete and we will be a real part of the legendary American mainstream society. I believe that the Somalis will be remembered as a decent, hardworking community. I also believe the community's experience here will be a model and could also be used as a case study for seamless Somali community integration all over the world.

AY: Amen. Thank you very much.