

**Interview with Abdisalam Adam
English Language Learner Coordinator, St. Paul Schools**

Interviewed on [month and day?] 2004

**For the Minnesota Historical Society
Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project
Andy Wilhide, Project Director**

Interviewed by Sumaya Yusuf and Andy Wilhide

Abdisalam Adam - AA
Sumaya Yusuf - SY
Andy Wilhide - AW

SY: My name is Sumaya Yusuf from the Minnesota Historical Society. I'm here with Andy Wilhide and Abdisalam Adam. Let's begin. What is your name?

AA: My name is Abdisalam Adam.

SY: Where were you born?

AA: I was born in a village in the western part of Somalia near the town of Dhagahbur. That's the closest town to the place where I was born.

SY: What was it like in Somalia when you grew up?

AA: I grew up in what's known as the Ethiopian part of Somalia. In my childhood, I grew up in pretty much a country life, a Somalia pastoral life. We moved from place to place. We had lots of camels and cows and sheep, so when I was growing up, I was a shepherd. I used to look after the sheep and the baby camels. It was very much a typical pastoral country life in Somalia that I grew up in.

SY: When did you leave Somalia and why?

AA: I left Somalia quite young, at about the age of eight, in 1974. The reason was to go to school. I left Somalia at that time, and I went to Nigeria to go to school. I started elementary school there and I went to middle school and high school in Nigeria.

SY: Where in Nigeria?

AA: It's a town called Ibadan, and it's in the western part of Nigeria.

SY: When and why did you come to the U.S., and, eventually, to Minnesota?

AA: Yes, I came to the U.S. in 1991. To go back a little bit, after finishing high school in Nigeria, then I went to Saudi Arabia. I started learning Arabic. I went to a two-year Arabic language school, and then to college. So I majored in English as a second language. After graduation, I taught English for one year. Then I applied for a master's degree in the United States, so I came with a student visa in 1991. Of course, the main reason was for education, to get a degree in education.

SY: Where in the U.S. did you first land?

AA: I started at Washington, D.C., the Virginia area. I lived there for four years. Then at that time, I was working as a translator/writer. Then I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and I worked for a magazine. I was managing editor. Then when the Somali refugees started coming to Minnesota, I felt the need that probably my services and my experience would be needed more in Minnesota. So I moved to this state in 1996.

SY: You said that you were the editor for a magazine. What magazine would that be?

AA: This was an Islamic magazine called *Aljumah*, or called *Friday*. It's a national magazine that goes all over the United States. I was the managing editor preparing the articles and editing and was in charge of that magazine for one year at Madison, Wisconsin.

SY: How was Wisconsin? How did you like that area? Were you the only Somali person around, the only Somali family there?

AA: Madison did not have as many Somalis as are in Minnesota. So we were a few families. There were some families there before me, and we kind of found a small close-knit community. We used to socialize together. Of course, we miss this more vibrant Somali-like lifestyle that we have in Minnesota. Since Wisconsin is so close, it felt natural to just move over.

SY: Were there any obstacles or hardships you faced coming to America?

AA: Not so much, since I already lived in Saudi Arabia at the time, and I already had my bachelor's degree. The process of getting the student visa and applying for college was not difficult. I was able to get my visa and come to the United States. There weren't the typical hardships that the refugees have gone through, of going through the fighting and through the refugee camps in Kenya and, eventually, coming here. I did not go through that experience. Mine was pretty straightforward, a more easier route to the United States.

SY: Of course, I'm pretty sure you probably had family in Somali when the war was going on? How did you feel being in another country away from them?

AA: Right. My family is all over. I have some relatives still in Somalia, some in the Somalia region in Ethiopia, some in Kenya, in Nairobi, in Garissa, some in Saudi Arabia, so my immediate relatives, brothers, sisters, people that are related to me directly, are in all these countries. So when the real fighting started in Somalia, part of my family lived in Mogadishu. So we had to help them flee to Kenya. A group of my brothers and sisters and relatives settled in Kenya, so we were supporting them and helping them. Others are still in Ethiopia.

SY: When you came to the U.S., what were your first impressions?

AA: My first impressions...definitely the level of progress and, of course, the major streets, the high-rise buildings. It was pretty overwhelming even though coming through Saudi Arabia helped me a lot, 'cause Saudi Arabia is a rich country. They have also more infrastructure, streets, highways, and so on. So that was pretty overwhelming. Also, the productivity and the rate of speed with which life goes on, that was quite overwhelming to me. I mean, there was so much pressure on everything even though we have so many things that make life easy for us. We have cars. We have the elevators, the telephone, the cell phone, so many things. Yet, I always feel that we're under pressure and short on time. That was very much a change from the pace that I was used to, which was kind of slow and people spend more time together. People, for example, will eat lunch together, sometimes sleep in the afternoon and then wake up and go back to work in the evening or socialize with relatives. That immediate change of being productive and work and school started to overwhelm my life right away.

SY: What were your expectations of Minnesota and what is Minnesota really like?

AA: Of course, when I was in the Washington, D.C. area, I used to hear about Minnesota as a very cold state, the snow and the ice. That experience, I heard about before coming. But, also, I heard that it's a state that's very welcoming. Its people are friendly. It has good education. It has very understanding people who, you know, are tolerant of other cultures and values and so on. When I came here, I did find all that to be true. We all did witness when the Somali community came here, how Minnesota received them with open arms. There was help in the school system. There was help with housing. People were able to find jobs.

So the question that people always ask us is, "Why did the Somalis choose Minnesota?" What happened was when the people in the refugee camps heard about the early arrivals came here and they were well received, they reported back to their relatives that this place welcomes you and you can find jobs and you can find school. So that's how the word spread and Somalis are oral society, as we know. Things spread by word of mouth. Then people started coming. Right in the refugee camps, they knew about Minneapolis, St. Paul, names of places. So this affected more Somalis to come. Then people in other states, like myself, also started moving. I told earlier I wasn't living here. I was in Washington, D.C. Then I moved to this state. Then also many of our immigrants, what's called secondary immigrants, come from other states in the United States.

SY: How do you feel that you have adjusted to life in America? What has it been like to adjust to life here?

AA: Well, it's quite challenging. Even though I already had a degree and pretty much knew what I wanted, still, there are major differences, especially when it comes to practicing your religious practices. This is just a huge difference. Then also, coming from Saudi Arabia where everything is based on Islam and you see the Mosque every few steps and you hear the *Adhan*, or the call to prayer, five times a day. I began to miss all of those quickly. Then, also, the opportunity, of course, education and work and the value of time, these were some of the good things that I learned in the United States. The snow and the cold also was another thing that took me a time to adjust to. I had never seen snow. Coming from Somalia, that's tropical and then Nigeria also tropical, Saudi Arabia is very hot. So coming to the United States was totally different in terms of weather. So that also required major adjustment.

SY: What have been some obstacles or hardships you have faced while adjusting to life in America?

AA: Of course, the main ones were the religious practices, like where do you pray? You're driving or you have a meeting or you're somewhere or you're in a classroom and the time of the prayer comes, that was the biggest challenge that we had to struggle with. A lot of times, before leaving home, I have to plan ahead to go with my ablution or I'll do it before I leave home. Also, a lot of times, I'll step out of where I am and have to look for a small corner to be able to pray. That, of course, required, you know, a lot of commitment and patience.

You did not ask me about this, but when I came to the country, I was a bachelor or I was single, as they say here. I got married in 1993 and that, again, is a big challenge. You become more responsible. You have to provide for a family. Now, I have two children. That, again, was another shift in my life that I had to make as I lived in this state. That family gave me more responsibility, make my life richer, make me more stable and more focused. That, again, was, of course, new challenge of course of raising kids in the United States, as we all know.

AW: How about a quick question? Compare back when you first came and how hard it was to find a place to pray to now. Do you find that people are more aware of, if you say, "I've got to go pray?," they're like, "Oh, okay." That more people are aware of what you need to do and what it means to be Muslim now and follow those five prayers five times a day?

AA: That's a good question. Of course, when the Somalis started coming to Minnesota, many mainstream Minnesotans had not had much contact with Muslims, so the idea of prayer, of fasting, of not eating pork, the woman's *hijab*, wearing the head cover or *hijab*, all this was totally new to many Minnesotans. However, as I said earlier, as we say, "Minnesota nice." As I mentioned earlier they're very welcoming and open to understanding and finding out why you are doing this or why you are requiring this. A lot of the schools, for example, the school system, the social services, many of the employers all began to ask about who these new immigrants are, and we're able to explain to them why we are doing this and how important it's for us. Once they understood that, they provided accommodations. It's much easier in some buildings and some places where they are many Muslims and many Somalis, and they provide a room where prayer can be performed. And the fasting, also they know about that, when it's time

to eat at the end of the day they do have arrangements for people to break or take time off. All this has been quite positive. So, today, I believe many Minnesotans do know about Muslims. They do know about the requirements. They have been very helpful and very understanding and very accommodating. I'm very grateful for that.

AW: Second question: tell us about the wedding ceremony. Were there any differences from the wedding ceremony that you had here versus what you might have had back in Somalia? How did that whole process go, if you could explain that?

AA: Yes, definitely. When any community moves, there are variations. I mean, even through the marriage ceremony and the way it's performed, it's not one way. So some people do it in one way; others do it in another way. So some are more traditional and still full of the religious and traditional way of seeking a spouse or the way the ceremony itself is performed. Even in Somalia, it was not one way. That same trend has moved here, too. So in some weddings, we have the traditional way whereby the man will come in the early part of the day and eat lunch and then the wedding or the marriage contract is officiated by the Imam. Then the men, they all have food together and leave. Then the women will come in the evening to that same place or even a different place and then they will have fun with the *Buraanbur*, and food and singing with the bride. That's one way. There are other Somalis who follow the more western way and they reserve hotels and they have bands and they spend a lot of money on it. [chuckles] We have both trends here. I followed the traditional way.

SY: What do you tell your family or friends back home about America?

AA: Well, I tell them both positive and negative. I tell them, yes, America is a highly developed country. There are many opportunities. It's many years ahead of us in terms of technology and education and so on. So there are great opportunities for people to who want to make use of that opportunity. At the same time, there are many dangers, too, like if one is not focused and they don't know what they want, they can easily be distracted. Even in America, there is violence. There are many values that are not similar to what the Somalis used to do, the marriage, for example, the dating, many of the experiences that the youths go through here, the pressures that they go through, the family not being so tight and everyone just kind of struggling to survive on their own and work. It's more individualistic. I do tell them both sides of the story. Some choose to come. Some choose to stay. I tell people to really think about that if you can find livelihood in Somalia and are not really in the line of fire, that's fine. I don't really say, "Come over, everybody." That choice has to be theirs. They have to know what you're heading for and not to assume that when you go to America, you're going to paradise, as we say. Many Somalis assume that once you get to America, then it's just blissfulness and enjoyment and fun and easy life. That's not the case. Many refugees when they come here, they find it's not that easy. There are many dangers. There are many things that you have to be aware of. You need a lot of experiences. There are many obstacles. There is the multicultural, the ethnicity, people of different backgrounds, you know different races. In Somalia, we knew only Somalis. We did not interact with other peoples. But when you come, you have people from *all* over the world, so you are just a part of that process. Sometimes, there is discrimination, as we know. There could

be religious discrimination. There could be racial discrimination. So all those, we have to be aware of and don't just assume it's one way.

SY: Do you plan on returning to Somalia ever?

AA: Yes, I do plan on returning to Somalia. When exactly, I'm not sure. As we say, "God knows." [chuckles] We believe God plans and it's not really in our hands. Personally, I would like to contribute to the development of Somalia, and I really always pray for the formation of a state and a government, because we have lived in this chaos for more than fourteen years. No one thought it will take this long. People thought that maybe there will be a few years of people being angry and revenge or whatever, but it will come to an end and we'll all come together again. Well, now after fourteen years, and still we don't have a government, so that really has a lot of burden on me and I really would like to see a Somali government. If there is peace, I would like to go back and teach and organize the school system there, the educational system. If that's not possible, then probably when I retire, then I'll settle in Somalia and help the peoples in improving their lives maybe in the major cities or even maybe back to the village where I came from. I do intend to go back.

Just to share with you, even though you have not asked me the question, I went back to Somalia last summer [2003]. This was really a moving experience that I will never forget in my life. How this came about was through the St. Paul schools and what's called Fund for Teachers. Every year, the school district, along with the St. Paul Foundation, gives scholarships to a number of teachers to go abroad or go to other places and gather materials that will be used in the classroom. So I applied for that grant and I was awarded, thankfully. I went to the Somali region in Ethiopia, to a town called Jijiga. I went to Boorama and Hargeisa in northern Somalia. I went to Garissa and Nairobi. I went even to Saudi Arabia to perform *Umra*. It was a month and a half. I went to many places seeing family members, some that I have not seen, as I told you, since 1974 when I left, so they knew me as a kid. When I went back, they saw me for the first time. Also, I took my family with me, so, for my children, this was their first time to go to Somalia. They had a good time. They saw how friendly the people were. Even though they are poor and they don't have much in terms of material resources, but the feeling and the happiness and how they loved them and cared about them made a big impact on my kids. We used to go to the animal market. I have pictures of my son in the middle of the camels and the goats and the sheep. [chuckles] This, also, was a good experience.

I do see that it's not altogether negative. There's a lot of good that's still in Somalia. Sometimes when we're here, we see only the fighting and the death and destruction. There are lots of positives. There are schools. There are people who are staying in the country and not leaving and still trying to make things better. I thank them and I congratulate them. They are better than us who ran away.

SY: Did you go to Gaalkacyo?

AA: No, I didn't go to Gaalkacyo. It was just the northwest in Kenya. I didn't go to Mogadishu, too.

SY: Do you consider Minnesota or the U.S. to be your home?

AA: Yes, I do consider it my home. Of course, whether forever or not, that I don't know. I mean, the future I do not know about. Right now, I'm here. What I believe is while I'm here, I have to make the best use of it. In the work that I do for the St. Paul schools as a teacher, I will try to do my best to help the young students. Whether Somalis or non-Somalis, I'm going to help everybody that I work with. My children are going to school here. I have just purchased a house last month after thirteen years of renting, so that's a big step. That shows that I'm kind of settling more and more. What I believe is while we're here, we should be positive, do whatever good we can and help as much as possible. If it happens that I go back someday, then I go, but well, I have done my best. I'm not a supporter of the idea of assuming that I'm here temporarily, and I'll be leaving next year. If you stay here for thirty, forty years every day saying, "I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm leaving next year," and it doesn't happen. So you don't invest. You don't plan anything. You don't make long-time planning. This has happened to many refugee communities. So what I think is the Somali refugees as they settle here, they should focus, make the best of what's in the United States. If they go, then there's no harm. They can sell their houses. They can always maybe go and come back if they want to. That channel is open for them. I do consider Minnesota home now.

AW: A follow up question: do you think many people now are starting to consider it their home? Or do you still see a lot of people who continue to rent and always say that they're going to go back in the next couple months or a year? Have you seen a shift at all? It's been maybe ten years since everyone first started coming here.

AA: Right. The debate still continues. I mean, there are still many people who say, "No. I'm just here temporarily. As soon as the government is founded in Somalia, I'm leaving." There are others who say, along what I was saying, that we don't know when we are leaving. So while you are here plan ahead and make something useful for yourself and for your family. The debate continues. But I do know many Somalis are now beginning to make long-term plans, establishing businesses, more home buying.

Luckily, for the home buying... The main obstacle was the interest or dealing with *riba* or buying a house through interest. That was the main obstacle, why many people could not buy homes. But, now, some companies—there's two companies—have begun to help people purchase homes with *riba*-free system that complies with the Islamic ruling. So this is going to make many people more confident to purchase. We are now seeing many people who are beginning to buy homes. This is a new trend that started in the last few months.

AW: The people who are buying, what age are they?

AA: They tend to be midlife, in their thirties and forties, and so on, yes.

SY: How do you think of your story as part of Minnesota history?

AA: Well, I came to this state in 1996, as I said. I've been here already eight years. We are going through a point in history with the Somali immigrants being the first generation coming to this state in such large numbers. We are establishing many institutions. We are going through lots of transformation, change that we are observing in our kids, change that we are observing in our values, family values, the relationship between neighbors and relatives and so on. So I think this history is important and, who knows, maybe we'll look back at what we are doing today in another fifty years or sixty years and see the changes that we have gone through. So I think it's really significant what we are doing today being the first generation, what we establish. The kind of message that we pass on to our children is very important. Maybe in a number of years when we look back, we'll see what mistakes we made or what good decisions we have made for our community and for our families. So I think it's very important.

SY: What would you say are the three most important parts of the Somali culture?

AA: For the Somali culture, it has some basic components, and there are others that varies from region to region. The general major components, I would say right now, of course the faith is probably the most important that everybody wants to preserve and wants to maintain. It really determines the person's outlook on life and identity. So religious faith is very important.

Family values is also very important. We still practice extended family system with large families, many children, and people helping each other. And as you all know, our viewers know, the Somalis who are here generally support somebody back in their country. That's one positive value of the Somali people, that you stand for your people even though you're not obliged to, but it's just part of that system of support and help and relying on one another and support of one another that we are practicing. So that is very important. It's hard for many people to survive. I mean, many people would not have survived had it not been money coming from outside or their relatives helping them, sponsoring them, and supporting them. This family values also is very important.

Another very important value is the Somali language and how to maintain it. Our children who are born here or who are growing up here, are they going to be able to keep this language and continue speaking it? Or are they going to lose it and assimilate into mainstream and forget about Somalian. That was the language that they spoke or their parents spoke. This is going to be really challenging. Right now, I'm worried that when it comes to the Somali language, we seem to be losing it, and we have not done much about preserving it. I'm not aware of any institutions that the community have formed to teach it. I have not seen material being written to preserve it, so I see a real challenge there. Definitely, English is the number one language. Yes, we should learn it. We should speak it, and everyone should be very proficient in the English language. At the same time, it does not hurt, and it's very beneficial, for one to speak another language. So speaking Somali and keeping our Somali makes it even more valuable and more of an asset in a global world. If you speak Somalian, maybe one day you may become U.S. ambassador to Somalia as long as you speak the language and you know both systems. It's always beneficial to speak many languages. The U.S. is feeling that today, the need for people to be able to speak other languages. If you speak Somali, Arabic, Swahili, Italian...Somalis

generally are multilingual. We have Somalis who speak many languages. We should maintain that value and should not lose our language, I believe.

AW: Of many languages, what languages are you talking about?

AA: Somalis, in general, speak...you may find Somalis who speak English, Arabic, Italian, Swahili. They did not speak this before the breakdown of the Somali state, but, as the refugees pass through Kenya, many of them have learned Swahili. In Somalia itself a long time ago, the educational system was in these three languages: Italian, English, and Arabic. So it's typical and quite common to find a Somali who speaks a number of languages.

SY: What are the ways that Somalis in Minnesota are keeping their cultural traditions?

AA: It's a challenge, as I mentioned earlier. We are in a society that is much more powerful than you. I'm not saying it's wrong to adopt many of the positive sides of the American system. There are many great values that we have to learn and we have to adopt. But, at the same time also, there are some good values that we have and we need to maintain them. For example, the family values I respect and I think even Americans or Minnesotans will benefit a lot from this close-knit family and standing for your larger family and not just being a nuclear family, the parents and their kids only and that's it. I feel those are important to preserve.

Some of the things that we are doing as a community is... There are some neighborhoods that Somalis all kind of all live around and are close to each other, so when they need child care, they take to their neighbor or their cousin or aunt or somewhere, like in Cedar Riverside, Forty-Seventh and St. Anthony, this high-rise building. In these places, they are being close to each other and supporting one another and keeping in contact with one another, speaking the language together, sharing their food, borrowing utensils from one another. All this is a way of maintaining their values and culture.

Another one is the kids going to [sounds like Luke-see]. On the weekends, on Saturday and Sunday, many of our children go to [sounds like Luke-see] to learn about the Islamic values and, also, Somali values. That, also, is a system that is trying to give the children to learn the Koran and to learn about their faith and practice it and continue practicing.

In the media, also, there are some radio and TV that are broadcast in Somali, and there are newspapers that are printed in Somali. So these are some of the ways that the community is trying to maintain its values.

SY: What are some ways that Somali people in Minnesota are losing their culture and tradition?

AA: So this is a sequel to the last question. It's natural that some people are losing it and that's true. I think it's more with the younger generations. Of course, the expectation and the understanding that we have of America before coming here is not realistic sometimes. So when the children come here and parents are used to a certain way of raising their children, often there's a clash. So the parents' reference to the past, "I used to look after the sheep," or "I used

to look after the camels,” and “I used to do this,” doesn’t make any sense to the children who are growing here. A lot of time, we’ll find conflict and misunderstanding between the younger and older generations. Then we see kids who are rebelling and running away from the home and not respecting the values that the parents are trying to instill.

I caution, and I always tell our Somali parents, that we need to adjust the way we look at how we’re raising our children. Before, it used to be the whole village or the whole neighborhood raising the child up together. So if you’re on the street, a total stranger will come to you and correct you and tell you, “If you do this, I’m going to tell your mother. I’m going to tell your father.” Here in America, we know you can’t get into somebody else’s business. [chuckles]

Parents need to be more closer to their children. They need to be their friends. They need to communicate with them more, talk to them about values, talk to them about the dangers that are in the youth, and the youth culture, again, [unclear], drugs, and alcohol, all this. Parents need to really have better communication with their children. This lack of communication is leading to kids going away from their family values.

The religious practices, too. It’s challenging us, as I said earlier. Sometimes you’re in a school and maybe you’re the only Muslim there. So there’s so much pressure on you with the *hijab* and why do you have this and why do you do that? If the person did not come up with that strength and support system, then it’s easy to get scared or get intimidated. Sometimes, families or youth not living close to other Somalis, other support system, can lead them to feel intimidated and scared and then say, “Why keep up with all this hardship?” That’s another way that some people are losing their religious practice.

Also, the inability for maybe the employer, if they don’t give them time off. Some people are not strong enough to say, “I need to pray at this time. This is required by my faith.” Generally, what I found out is employers are very understanding, so if you tell them in a nice way and you explain the reason behind it and why you are doing they, generally they will respect you. Also, if you are a good person who does their work well and there’s trust and understanding, generally they will provide with you and give you that time out that you need. We have to respect the laws of the land. We have to respect the system. We have to be productive and honest in our dealings with people; then it becomes a process and both sides benefit.

I lost the track. What was the question?

SY: This kind of coincides with the question I asked before. What hardships do Somali teens encounter?

AW: Let’s take a break before we go on to teens.

SY: Okay.

AW: But, you were on the track of the generation gap.

AA: Yes.

AW: Can you explain more about it? When you were in Somalia, what was your relationship like with your father and how is that different here? Or what are expectations here for father/son, parent/child?

AA: In Somalia, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes, especially the fathers in the countryside did not play much role in the child's upbringing. So usually the child would be born, it was mostly the mother that cared for them. Very soon they grow up and they are manpower or they are needed as a helping hand, so they start herding the sheep and bring the water, fetching firewood, whatever. Even in the cities, the kids will be raised by all the family together. So there wasn't that bond in a father/son. Mother/daughter, it's a little bit better. Mothers did keep hand on their daughters and teach them how to cook and how to take care of household chores and so on. That bonding of communication, it was more of a relationship of maybe a fear, rather than respect and understanding. A lot of times, the kids will be kind of scared of their father or their parent. So you don't see them growing up together and knowing each other very well and communicating. But here, it's very different, as I mentioned earlier. If we're not really close with our children and do not follow step by step where they are and who they are with and what they went through in their daily life, it's very easy for the children to be distracted and to go off the way that you want them to be raised. If you really want to maintain them to be respectful to you and to your family values, to the religious values, we need to really have more communication, better relationship, make them feel comfortable in talking to us and coming with questions and asking for our help. In Somalia, many topics were taboo to talk about with the kids, so we're just not used to it. Current circumstances, I think we need to be more upfront and have better communication with our kids.

AW: That's a big part of adjusting for any Somali that's a parent here.

AA: Yes. So the parents do need to change, for the parent.

AW: Not that everyone would be close with their children, but that you have to... For instance, being a teacher, did you find a lot of Somali parents were really involved with their children and how much homework they got done, making sure they check up? Were they really involved in school or have Somali parents, are they just now getting into school and helping out?

AA: It has been a real challenge, parental involvement in the schools. The assumption was the teacher is responsible for everything. So once I send my child to school, it's the teacher's and the school's responsibility. This was the mindset that the parents came with, and us teachers continue to communicate with them, talk to them, tell them about how they need to be in the building. They need to know the teacher. Of course, I don't blame the parents who do not speak the language, are not used to the educational system, who feel intimidated by this *huge* system. But, gradually, I think the younger parents are beginning to be more involved and more outgoing in knowing about their child's education. This also is a huge adjustment that parents need to make.

What we have seen, also, is sometimes some miscommunication, a misunderstanding about the American system, especially when it comes to discipline and the role of the police and so on. Many parents are of the assumption that if they call the police, their child will be taken away from them. So they feel powerless, or they cannot really discipline their child, chastise them. What we are seeing is many of the teenagers are...sometimes they speak the language and they're the ones who are interpreting and sometimes threatening or even calling the police on their parents. That is happening, but the reality is parents still have power. So communication between the police and the social services, the teachers and the parents needs to be there, also. Once the children know that there's communication and the teachers and the parents are on the same page, then I think they will behave better and focus more on their education and not be destructive or not play games between parent and teacher.

AW: You mentioned a little bit about the pressures that kids feel to assimilate. Even if they have twenty Somalis in their school or if they are only one, still they feel a great pressure to assimilate. How do you think parents are feeling that same pressure, or adults or others? Do you think they're feeling that same kind of pressure or do they have more of a connection to Somali community and culture that keeps them grounded or separated from that pressure?

AA: Can you say it again? I missed the point.

AW: You say that kids feel a lot of pressure, teenagers do.

AA: Yes, especially a few in the school or maybe in the suburbs and they are the only Somali student there or the only Somali child in the neighborhood.

AW: Do feel like adults feel that same kind of pressures? Maybe they see in the workplace that they are pressured to assimilate. Like you said, they skip prayer time because they don't want to ask about it. Talk to me more about how adults might feel pressure.

AA: The adults, of course depending on how... We are observing that the more people stay, the more also their adherence or their—how do you say it?—let's say their pride or strength in speaking up and saying, "This is what I want," becomes less and less. It seems when they come, they're still fresh and they tend to speak directly and say, right from the beginning, "This is what I need." Later on it becomes they are just used to the system of mind your business kind of attitude. So they tend to become less and less. Then, of course, with the Mosques not being so common or the social gathering not being so common and with so many other things, other options, other ways of spending time, it tends to become less and less. This also happened to the adults as well.

AW: One more question and then I'll turn it back to Sumaya. How do you think television is changing any kind of family values in the Somali community, if at all? I know that a lot of people always talk about kids watching too much TV.

AA: Right.

SY: Everybody watches a lot of TV.

AA: Yes. The influence of TV is huge. It's significant. Some Somalis who are concerned about the community, the more educated and the people who want to really kind of direct the community, call the TV "second parent." That's the way they classify it. The influence of the TV is even more than the influence that the parents are having on their children. It's *huge*. It has really made children's attitude to change more to the negative. Many of the role models that they are imitating come from TV. Then as a community, we are not providing the alternative role models, volunteers being with them or somebody adult coming in and helping them with homework, with their work. We have not found real institutions or community centers that are kind of more welcoming and accommodate these needs that we want to instill in the children. All these are happening here. The TV is huge. Some people say, "Don't watch TV altogether," or "We'll not even put TV in our home." That is also challenging, you know. [chuckles] One way or the other, the kids will find out or they'll go to the neighbors. That doesn't solve the problem.

AW: What TV shows do adults usually watch? Are they watching a lot of these Somali TV shows? I think there's like six of them.

AA: Yes, they do watch the Somali...

AW: What do you watch?

AA: Personally, I watch more the news, the news analysis programs, like *Sixty Minutes* or *Nightline*. These are the kind of programs that I tend to watch. Usually entertainment and these comedies and all that, it doesn't click with me much. Maybe I'm kind of old fashioned myself. I don't know. [laughter] Of course, with the teenagers, definitely we know which ones attract them, which are fun for them. I don't think they want to watch *Nightline* or...

SY: I watch *Nightline*.

AA: You do? Okay.

SY: My question to you earlier was what hardships do Somali teens encounter in the U.S.?

AA: Probably I answered this earlier. Some of the challenges is peer pressure, the involvement especially in some neighborhoods, like Cedar Riverside where there are so many bars and there are so many gang-related, older teens who are standing there waiting for them and kind of trying to influence them. That's another huge challenge that they are facing. Peer pressure, whether in school or in their neighborhoods, also it's happening. The challenge of discipline and having focus also is missing. We are relatively new. Many times the parents are not that highly educated or do not know how the system operates. So how to organize yourself and be able to avoid the pitfalls and focus on your education and what you want from life, that also is missing. A lot of times they make mistakes, dropping out of school or skipping some classes, so that is causing problems.

SY: What opportunities do Somali teens encounter in the U.S.?

AA: There are great opportunities. They have opportunities to get education, as much as they want, and as high as they want to get. They have opportunities to be more technologically able...computers and finding the many resources that this country provides. They have the opportunity to learn the English language, which is the language of power in the world today and the economy. Speaking this language and learning it, and really being excellent in it, will help you in wherever you want to be in the world. They have opportunities to organize themselves and learn from the American experience of organization, of planning, of volunteering and helping the community. They have opportunities to even help their relatives in Somalia and make a difference in what's happening in Somalia. We feel that education is the solution. The more understanding people have, the more they are able to see other people's perspectives. We could differ on some issues but still we can compromise and work together. It's not black and white. It doesn't mean if we disagree that we fight every time or we have to settle everything by fighting. The dialog and the democratic system whereby people have to discuss and debate and choose from who is the better candidate, all these are issues that will be helpful to the Somali community during the long run. Youth have the opportunity to learn all this and apply them here and also in Somalia.

SY: What advice would you give to Somali people adjusting to life in America?

AA: The advice I would give to them is to be, first of all, very realistic and to get the idea of going to America is blissfulness and enjoyment only, that's not the case. There are many good and positive things, and there are also many negative and challenges, obstacles that one will face. You have to have the discipline and the focus to know what you want. That should be very clear.

Also, I would advise them to not be distracted by odd jobs or work at McDonalds and make quick money and then drop out of school and drop out of college. I would encourage them to focus on education and get their bachelor's degree. If beyond is possible, fine, but as much as possible get education, higher degrees. Today, high school is not of much value. Stopping at high school is not going to take you far.

Also, as a community, we need to share resources, plan together, and establish institutions, whether educational institutions, social institutions, financial institutions, a kind of a network of support system that we help one another, while, at the same time, being responsible citizens. Also participate in the political system in the United States, that's how you get power. That's how your voice is heard. If we just stick together and do not get involved in mainstream and elections and having a voice, then we'll always be on the sideline. Things that we want, that we value, will never get to public officials. I would encourage Somalis to participate in the political system. This will enable them to run for office. That will also in turn help our community, at least to avoid some negative things that could happen to us.

Then, also, I would advise people to be cautious in how they interact. Especially now, we live in very difficult times with the political system and the war on terror, and us Muslims, there's a lot of focus on us, so we have to be exemplary. We have to be honest and not to engage in any actions that are against the law. We have to be law abiding and responsible citizens.

AW: You briefly touched on something that I'd like to ask you about. Do you think things have changed since 9-11 [September 11, 2001, terrorist attack] for better or the worse, attitudes toward Somalis or toward Muslims in general? Have you seen a more positive attitude...people have come together to support the Somali community? What are your observations since 9-11?

AA: Of course, immediately after 9-11, there were major challenges. There was a lot of fear in the community that there would be backlash from mainstream Americans, neighbors, and people that we work with. But, luckily, that did not happen much in Minnesota; Minnesota was one of the states that there wasn't much of a backlash. Of course, the public officials made it very clear right from the beginning. The governor and the state officials spoke out that this is not mainstream Muslims that are doing this. So that kind of helped ease the tension. But on the general level, of course, there are a lot of pressures. There's a lot of focus and there's a lot of always tying what's happening in the Middle East or in East Africa, always making a link, that maybe the people here could have a link to people there. We had the closing of the money transfer agencies that many Somalis benefited from. We have every now and then a Somali person is detained and is made some kind of link to terrorism. But, generally speaking, the brand of terrorism or exploding things or destroying things is not in the Somali way of dealing with things. Many Somalis are very skeptical when they hear a Somali has been arrested for terrorist related issues. Hardly anyone would say that this is just maybe the government to show an example we have done something, but, generally, there is nothing to substantiate it. Even inside Somalia, all this fighting and all this destruction that has been going on, it's more with conventional weapons. The Somali community is really law abiding and, as we have seen, they are not very much involved in really violent or criminal activities. Of course, there are some young people who are going off track and dealing with other petty crimes. In terms of major national security issues, I think the Somalis are not in the picture at all. We would like the Minnesotans and officials understand that, that we're here and intend to establish our lives and lead a peaceful life in this state here.

AW: I don't know if you talked about this, but your experience with teenagers... If you could talk about being a teacher where you taught and how you had to...

AA: Before I answer that, I think I had another appointment at eleven-thirty. I see somebody standing there. So, maybe we can just wrap it up after this question.

SY: That is actually the question I was going to ask.

AA: Okay. Again, the question again, please?

SY: Where do you work and what is your job like?

AA: I am a teacher with the St. Paul public schools. I'm an ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher. I have worked with the district for eight years now. I taught at three schools, two elementary and one middle school. But, this year, I'm teaching on special assignment, and my responsibility is Somali resource teacher. I prepare curriculum. I give the staff training. I gather resources and materials for teachers to use.

SY: How do you work with Somali teens?

AA: I work with Somali teens both as a teacher and, of course, as someone who is involved with the community. Although, right now, I'm not in the classroom. When I was in the classroom, I worked with teens directly. I was able to talk to teachers about issues and provide insight as to concerns that teachers may have communicating with parents, helping the teens also services that they need, advocate for them, and let the school system know about the needs. Now as a resource teacher, it's more, buildings may ask for my help. If there are issues, they will call me in and say, "This is going on. Can you help us?" I do that. Then in the community, I have been involved in Cedar Riverside where Muslims are living and also in the Afton View apartments in the Highwood Hills area. There, I work with lots of teens on the weekends, in the evenings teaching and in some of the weekend schools, organizing events, summer camps. I do try to communicate with the youth and be accessible to them, answer their questions, organize activities for them.

[End of the Interview with Abdisalam Adam]

Transcribed by Beverly Hermes

Hermes Transcribing & Research Service
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55124
952-953-0730 bhermes1@aol.com