

**Interview with Maryan Del  
Confederation of the Somali Community in Minnesota**

**Interviewed on June 21, 2004**

**Interviewed Outside at the Brian Coyle Community Center**

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

**Interviewed by Sumaya Yusuf and Andy Wilhide**

Maryan Del - MD  
Sumaya Yusuf - SY  
Andy Wilhide - AW

[during this interview conducted outside, the wind blows in the microphone and other noises often making it difficult to hear the conversation]

SY: What is your name?

MD: My name is Maryan Del.

SY: Where do you work?

MD: I work for Confederation of the Somali Community in Minnesota.

SY: What exactly do you do?

MD: I am a community mental health worker. I also, I run Somali Girls Power.

SY: What's that?

MD: That is pretty much what we do. We help girls learn the importance of math, science, and technology.

SY: How long have you worked there?

MD: I work at it a year.

SY: What family do you have here?

MD: I have relative here, but I don't have immediate family here.

SY: How long have you lived in Minnesota?

MD: I lived in Minnesota since 1996, eight years, in fact.

SY: Where else have you lived in Minnesota?

MD: Just Minneapolis.

SY: Where were you born?

MD: I was born in a place called El' Baradale, which is further down in Somalia.

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

MD: I came to the United States because of the war in Somalia. I came to, actually, Virginia, in 1992.

SY: Please tell me what the journey was like from Somalia to the U.S. What obstacles did you face?

MD: Coming from Somalia to America, it wasn't really that hard. I think the only obstacle that I faced was the language barrier. That was my main obstacle that I faced. I think anytime you come to a new culture, new country, you have to try to adapt to their culture, to their language, to their system. That was the hard part, but, in the end, with the help of a lot of people and education, I think I have processed through it.

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

MD: I think good. [chuckles] I think coming from a war-torn country and you come to a place that is peaceful, you tend to settle for it, even if you have difficulties in the long run. At least you know you are safe. You don't have to deal with guns flying around.

SY: What were your expectations of the U.S. and what is the U.S. really like?

MD: I really didn't have a lot of expectations. I think my vision was to learn the language and the culture and become somebody who can actually be beneficial to my community or to any...

AW: Hold on a second. Expectations like...think back when you first came...you came here in '92?

MD: Yes.

AW: Twelve years ago?

MD: Yes, almost thirteen.

AW: What were you thinking on the plane, like what it this going to be like? Minnesota, what had you heard about Minnesota?

MD: I came to Virginia, so Minnesota wasn't even my thing. There wasn't a whole lot. I think because my cousins were here, I didn't feel so much threatened by getting my things going around the city. I think my only expectation was I wouldn't understand the communication.

I remember when I went to the school first day, I'd be sitting there, and, I mean literally, you're deaf. That's how I felt. You'd be seeing teachers talking, doing math or ESL [English as a Second Language] classes. Can you imagine just sitting there when I know not what they are talking about? You can obviously tell they're writing something on the board. You'd be thinking, okay, I have no idea what that is, but I'm just going to copy it exactly how it is. But otherwise, I think it was good.

SY: Did your expectations exceed what the U.S. was really like?

MD: Yes, I think so. Yes.

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

MD: I came Minnesota when I was a senior here. I went to a half year of school.

SY: Senior in high school?

MD: Yes. I came when I was senior, so that was 1996. I graduated in 1997. I came here for vacation in summer time. I wasn't planning to stay here. But when I came in, I realized there was a bunch of Somali people here. In Virginia, there is only a few of us who are actually been here twenty, thirty years, or fifty years. So it was a little bit different. But when you come to Cedar Riverside, there's a bunch of Somalis, the Coyle Community Center, so I figured maybe this is maybe the right place for me to stay, because they have a lot of my people where I can reserve my culture, my religion, and my traditions. I figure, "What the heck, I'll just stay." So I went back, got my stuff, got my school transfer, and I moved here. Minnesota has been good to me.

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

MD: I think my obstacle would be not having my family here. That was the hardest thing. I think if you don't have support system from your family, it's a little difficult. You have to go school. You have to work because you have to support your family back home. I think that's

my most obstacles. I don't have that support system. I don't have that push, so everything, I have to do on my own. I think that's the hard part of all being in America. I think you feel like you're lonely. I'm not saying you're lonely, like you don't have any relatives, but you feel that loneliness of not having that compassion for family, the support and the love you need to strive your goals.

SY: How can you overcome these obstacles?

AW: Hold on. So where is your family?

MD: My family are in Somalia. They're spread all over Somalia. Some are in different cities. Then I have one brother in Pakistan.

AW: Who is here?

MD: Just me.

AW: Just you in Minnesota?

MD: Yes. I came with my aunt. She lives in Virginia.

AW: You are here and your aunt is in Virginia and your cousins are in Virginia?

MD: I have some cousins here, second cousins. But in America, you don't see each other. It doesn't matter if they're your first cousins because you have to go to work, school, and you have your own family sometimes. So you don't even get a chance to see each other. Really, I don't consider that as family. I consider family where you come home and you see people are home. You don't just come empty home.

AW: How do you stay in contact with your family?

MD: Phone. I send them money every month. We just keep it up with the whole communication. That's what we do.

AW: Do you have any family in Kenya?

MD: No, I have no family in Kenya. [unclear] Somalia.

AW: Have they tried to come over here?

MD: No.

AW: They want to stay there?

MD: Yes, stay there. Most of my brothers are married, they have their own families. Their life over there is okay.

AW: What do they tell you about life there?

MD: Some of them, ideally, they want to come to America, but the possibility is little, you know. It's a long process. It's a lot of money. There's a lot of financial things you need in order to process all that. I think every foot you move is money. Ideally, they want to come, but if you look at it it's beneficial for them to stay in Somalia because they have their family there at least.

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

MD: I say America is good. America will offer you a lot of opportunities if you take advantage of it. If you don't take advantage of it, I think it's your loss. For me, I think America has been good for me. I went to college.

AW: Where did you go to college?

MD: Metropolitan State University. I got my education. I work. I adjust to the whole country, the system, the culture, and everything. So it has been good. That was my aim, to learn everything. Because if you're not open-minded, the world will shut on you. You have to give yourself opportunity to learn more. I think it's good to learn other cultures because you have more opportunities to go around.

AW: What other cultures have you learned here?

MD: I've come to terms with American culture. I have a lot of Asian friends.

[airplanes passing over during this interview. The noise is distracting, so they take a break in the interview as they wait for it to pass.]

MD: Go away, plane.

[chuckles]

What were we saying? Just kidding. [laughs] Cultures?

AW: Different cultures. Describe in detail what you appreciate about their culture or what you've learned.

MD: I think I appreciate American culture because people are nice. They're friendly. If you ask them any question and you want to know about their culture, they're willing to tell you. Comes to the Asian culture, I have a lot of Asian friends, which is very good because I feel like more I connect to them. I think I have that connection with them because they're immigrant people.

They're like me. It seems a lot of times, we can talk about struggles, immigration, all these issues that concern us. There's something to learn about their food and things. We talk about race. I think a lot of times, even in our own cultures, we discriminate our own. I think that's good to know, because I think Somali people discriminate each other. Asians do. Americans do, so... I think there's things more to be aware of for your own good.

AW: When you talk about race, explain that a little bit.

MD: In some cultures, if you marry a certain group, I think that's not allowed. But if it was meant to happen, it's going to happen. It's kind of like we tend to discriminate some tribes. We don't treat equally. I know Asian people do that, too.

AW: Do think that kind of discrimination has increased or decreased since people have been coming here?

MD: In my opinion, it decreased. We don't see it as that way anymore. I hope so. I hope people will not look at it that way.

SY: Do you plan on returning to Somalia?

MD: Actually, I did return to Somalia last year. I returned in February 2003, and I *loved* it. I didn't want to come back to America. [laughter] It was just fun. You feel at home. I don't know; you have that air. Something comes over you that you keep thinking, okay, this is my home, this is my culture, where you don't have to worry about speaking English. There's a lot of people speak English back home, because a lot of schools are right now offering English. But you have that feeling you're home. You know how you feel homesick sometimes and you have to go to your parent home? That's how it is. It's very nice. I think in the future, I'm going to go back.

SY: To live there?

MD: *Yes!* That will be my retirement. [chuckles]

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

MD: Yes, absolutely, because this is where I live. It's my home. I have a lot of friends. I have two homes: my American home and my Somali home. I have two cultures, two languages, so this is part of my life. I grew up half of my life here, and I invested a lot, and I think Minnesota invests in me a lot. I hope so. This is my home. I consider this is greatly my home. Yes, absolutely.

AW: What parts of American culture have you adopted, specifics? Be it food, or music, or..?

MD: Food. I eat a lot of junk food. [laughter] I never cook, right? It's true; I never cook. I used to cook, but not anymore. You don't get a chance to cook because you come to work nine

to five and go home. You just something grab to go. Pizza, I think! [chuckles] I eat a lot of pizza, that tells you.

Music is part of it. I'm not a music person, but I just turn the radio on and listen to whatever is on. I listen to all kinds of different music.

I think the people, to be honest. I have a lot of good American friends. They're very sincere, honest people. I think people are very respectful. They respect my culture, and I respect theirs. They don't judge you. They know I have accent. English is my second language, but it's good they always correct you. Which is good, because if you don't get corrected in life you might make a lot of mistakes. Once you get corrected, if people correct you, at least you learned from that. Next time it's better, so...

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

MD: I want people to know that even though there's a lot of us here, I don't want people to look at the negative side of Somalia. We might do certain things wrong in the system, but we're people contributing to Minnesota. We have a lot of businesses. We have a great economical impact on Minnesota with our businesses. We're people with ambitions. If you go around, you'll see a lot of Somali stores, malls. We have a very rich culture that people should learn about us, and we're willing to learn about them. I think exchange... People should not jump to conclusions if they see something. They should just investigate it, learn from it, and maybe then they can make their own judgment of what it is. I think you guys are doing excellent job of doing this video. I hope anyone who sees it, how all the videos you guys did, will get the chance to take a moment and just learn about Somali culture because you might gain something from it, you know.

AW: Do you think Somali people would stay here for a long, long time?

MD: Yes.

AW: They'll become a permanent part of Minnesota?

MD: I think, yes, absolutely. We have a lot of generation. We have kids who were born here. People are settling here. They're buying houses, some are buying houses. People invest in businesses. Because Somalia is not a safe place to be in right now because there's no government, there's no bank, there's nothing stable right now. Everything is still...people are fighting over each little area, I want to be president, I want to be this. So I think people are willing to invest their life here. They want their kids to be educated, to be somebody. I think going back to Somalia, it doesn't offer you a lot of opportunities Minnesota offers you. I think Minnesota is a good state to invest...so we're all like moving here, you see? [chuckles] [unclear] the reasons.

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

MD: Ummm... Our culture; that is very important. Religion, that's number one for us. Everything we do involves our religion, Islamic belief. So really whatever we do, number one is our religion. Number two is preserving our culture. Because without culture, you're nothing. You have to have something to claim, to grab, to tell your children, to tell your grandchildren and let your grandchildren tell their own children. I think my third one will be we have a great respect for our elderly people, because they are the ones that are our builders. Without them, we would not have our history. We might not be a written country, but if you'd sit for five minutes with elderly person, they'll tell you everything oral, the history, everything. We have a great respect our elder people because they're the ones who contribute. They're the ones who are actually keeping our culture and making it that our young ones hold onto their culture and beliefs and all that stuff.

SY: What would you say is the most important thing that makes the Somali culture unique?

MD: The hijab, I think. [laughter] What makes it unique? Ummm...

SY: What about the hijab?

MD: Hijab is very important because it makes us different from other people. Hijab is a way of preserving your religion. Also, it's a way of... [pause]

AW: Identity, maybe?

MD: Identity. Thank you. That's the right word. Also, I think hijab protects you. For me, hijab is a protection. It protects me from a lot of things, like certain things. You don't attract certain people. I think most people who see you are covered, they have more respect for you because they figure you're... I think you should be a religious person, but I think there's a greater respect involved. People will not approach you like that. I think that's what unique to have, because then you don't have to deal with every streetwalker, you know. It's part of the whole culture.

SY: What are the ways that Somali people in Minnesota are keeping cultural traditions?

MD: I know Abdiasis Warsame, he holds Somali culture history class for youth, the boys. I don't think we have a girls' yet. Pretty much what they do is every week, every Thursday, he gets all the boys, he teach them Somali history, and talk about the culture. They do a lot of comparison between the Somali culture and the American culture, which is very good because that's a way of saying, "Okay, I know. You're here. You live here. You have American culture, but we want you to keep your own culture because it's very unique. We want you to pass that later to the children, the young generations." Then also, we have the women's support groups where they talk about a lot of issues in the community and the culture and other stuff. Those are two things.

AW: Can you talk about Somali Independence Day celebrations?

MD: Okay, now, I don't know the history of that. [laughter]

AW: Well, you can tell us what they're planning here and that you do this every year. I know they've done it at Coyle at every year.

MD: Okay. Somali Independence Day is going to be Sunday, June 27 from one p.m. to, I believe, it's seven o'clock. The theme is going to be family affair events. We're going to have it in the park back here. There will be different organizations will be here, different booths. The celebration is when we got independence from Italy. Italy used to control Somalia. That's when we got our independence, that's the reason we're celebrating. Everybody is invited to come. There will be great speakers.

AW: The actual Independence Day, is that July 1?

MD: July 1, yes.

SY: What are some ways that Somali people in Minnesota are losing their cultural traditions?

MD: Ummm... I have no idea. [whispered]

AW: Umm, let's see, some specifics...

MD: You know what? I don't know how they're using it though.

AW: Losing.

MD: Losing? Is that what you said? Losing? Oh, my God, not they're using it. Okay, losing. My honest opinion: I don't think Somali people are losing their culture. That's my honest opinion. We might dress up... We might wear jeans, wear hip hop clothes. We might do a lot of things that American people do, but when you go to a Somali home, you're Somali. In home is spoken Somali. It doesn't matter what you wear outside, but when you go back home, you have your thing. I don't think we're losing our culture, maybe a little bit, but I think we're still intact. I don't know, maybe five years to come something might change, but, at the moment, I think...

AW: You touched on something right there, speaking Somali? So is language one of the important things?

MD: Yes. Maybe that's only what we're losing. For me, I think seventy-five percent of my time, I speak English. I think that is maybe part of where we're losing a little bit of our culture. I don't blame the kids if they lose their language because when you go to American schools, you speak English *all day!* [unclear] but, otherwise, I think we're getting there. There are Somali schools that are open right now. There are kids who learn how to read and write Somali. I think that's another one that can be...

AW: That maybe shows that people are already seeing some people losing their language.

MD: Yes, I think so, absolutely. Yes.

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

MD: Education. When they finish high school, a lot of them go to college. Right now, it looks like the percentage of going to college is the girls—less boys. That's very good. Hey, hey!

[laughter]

AW: Well, she's going.

MD: Yes. I think, as a Somali woman, we're taking advantage of the opportunity we have here. If you go the University of Minnesota or if you go to St. Mary's [University, Winona, Minnesota] or you go to Metro [State University], or if you go to any campus in Minnesota, you will see a Somali woman, I mean girls, young ladies, that are going—less boys.

AW: Why do you think that is?

MD: Ummm... I think the young women have more ambition than the guys. They go to school not just for them. They go to school for their whole family. Maybe they are the first person that went to college in their family, who actually want education. They'll go to school and benefit for their family and for themselves, to be a role model to the young ones.

SY: What obstacles or hardships do Somali teens encounter in the U.S.?

MD: For us, I think the most difficult thing they encounter that I see is...I think we have a problem with the police. That's my thing. It's not a gang. The Somali youths, they all stand in one place. They look like they're fighting or doing something, but that's Somali culture. You're loud. You're talking with fingers. You know you move your hands. A lot of times, police might be thinking this is a bunch of gangs trying to kill each other, but that's not the point. It's just kids who are hanging out, talking loud. I think a lot of times, they harass our kids, and we don't want them to do that. All the kids live this building, they don't do anything illegal. They don't drink—some might, but the majority don't. I think a lot of them get harassed by the police, and they get arrested for minor things. I think, for me, that is most frustrating for our youth. They're very good. They're A student. They're good student. We're working with the police so they will not harass our kids so much. I think kids are kids and you need talk to them slowly and tell them... If they do something wrong, just tell them they're doing something wrong and don't do it again.

AW: Do you think kids are getting enough at home of, like, their parents being around? Sometimes teenagers here they maybe only have one parent here. Maybe they're living with aunts and uncles. Does the family situation factor in here?

MD: Yes. I know that when we have youth events, when we have important thing about youth, when we have our girls' parent or our boys' event, we have a very difficult time to include parents to come to support their kids. A lot of time, you'll be giving award to kid and we want their parent to be there. The parents support simply is not there, maybe because of the cultural part where parents don't support their kids in a school way. I can understand that, because a lot of parents are, maybe, at work. I don't blame it on the parent, because some of them might be at work and things are happening. I know that a lot of them don't get involved in their children education and activities. Maybe there's other barriers why that is. I know a lot of them have to support other families, and I know a lot of kids, they don't have a parent here. They either came with cousins, first uncle, and all that stuff.

AW: Is there an age then, kind of like around fifteen or sixteen, when boys are kind of considered to be old enough to be responsible?

MD: Yes, yes, absolutely.

AW: At least I've heard that from other people.

MD: I think once you're fifteen, you're a responsible person. But in America, you have to be eighteen to be considered adult. A lot of these kids, they have responsibilities. If they're sixteen, they work because they have to support some of their families back home. If they don't get that push thing, "You know what? I know, you got to go school and work, but, you know what, you can do it." If you don't say that to these kids—the little support we need—they're going to fall apart. They're going to fall into the cracks, you know, like their own crowd. It doesn't matter if you stay with your parent, if you stay with your cousins, if you stay with a relative, have those relatives support that kid. It doesn't matter what they do with their life, you know. Kids just need sometimes to be embraced, say, "You can do it. Go ahead." I know there's rough times, but I hope a lot of people will learn to do that.

AW: How much do you work with teens?

MD: I work about, I'll say, seventy percent of my time. Even though I do community mental health work, I get involved with a lot of youth. Youth, there's a *lot*, and there's less staff, so you have to help around. Even though, it's not your program, you still need to. You see when you work for community, you work all the time. [chuckles] You just have to help around. You have to be flexible. Kids are..they may have problems.

AW: Do teens come to you with like issues and wanting to talk?

MD: Yes, some kids they do. Some kids they have problem in schools, you know. When you come in the morning at eight-thirty, you see a bunch of them who missed the bus. They're like, "Can you give me a ride to the school?" You're like, "Okay." Things like that, you know. A lot of times, they have problems, they might be expelled or you have to actually go into the school. Abdiasis does that mostly. He's the one who helps out youth and works with the school system, kind of.

AW: Your organization then helps them?

MD: Yes.

SY: What advice would you give to Somali teens who are adjusting to life in America?

MD: Ummm... I can tell them that America is hard. [chuckles] Because you have to learn the language, the culture. But you can do it. You have to go to school, try to learn the language, and preserve your own culture. I'm not saying you leave your culture and language behind. You keep that and your religion. But if you're going to think you're going to live here the next ten years, fifteen years, twenty years, I think you should go to get yourself educated and learn the language, take the good part of America, and leave the negative part of it. Only the positive will take you somewhere. The negative will hold you back. I hope that I will do it for me. [chuckles]

Anything else yet Andy? Andy's like... Anything else? Anything you want to ask me?

SY: What would you say are the negative things about America?

AW: Good question.

MD: Negative... Ummm...

AW: Hold on, you can think about it. We have an airplane first.

[pause while plane goes over]

MD: All right. You said I don't have to worry about [unclear]. You'll edit all this so it's good. [laughter]

What are the negatives about America? Okay. Number one, the most one is nursing homes. I absolutely...putting your parent in nursing home? That's totally a no-no. Think of it. Your parent raised you. They carried you nine months. They were there with you the bad times, the good times. When they're unable to take care of themselves, you just shovel them somewhere, somewhere where they're consider... To me, a nursing home...consider you're throwing somebody in the garbage. Your parent are not getting the love and the care and nutrition that you're supposed to give them. They're not getting that from the nursing home. At a nursing home, the person who is there is somebody who's getting paid by the hourly. Really, they're just there to do their job. It's not there to take care of, you know, to give that love and all that nutrition, all that stuff. And I hope...

AW: What's going to happen with a lot of Somali elders now? Do you see them being taken in with their families or are they being sent to nursing homes?

MD: I only encounter one elderly lady who been put in nursing home. I don't know what the situation of that was. It might have been she didn't have family, I'm not sure. I advise that, "Please, Somali people, don't put your elders in nursing home." Because it's not fair. It's not our culture.

AW: What typically happens here and in Somalia what would happen?

MD: You'd take care of your own until you die. The daughter will take care of mom. She lives with her until her time is to go. That's what you're supposed to do; you're supposed to care of your own parents. I hope that the new generation that's coming up, who's going to come up now and who's going to be born later, I hope that they'll reserve that part of Somalia because that's a very important part.

AW: That's part of the respect for elders?

MD: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

SY: Anything else about negative aspects of America?

MD: No, that's pretty much it.

AW: That's a surprising answer. I haven't heard that before. We hear about a lot of losing the culture or people are getting into wrong crowds or whatever, but nursing homes, I had never heard that before.

MD: You see, I always watch *20/20*. That's me. I see how they abuse the elderly, you know. I'm like, God! That's somebody's mom or dad. You have no right... You're there to get paid, to do the job, not to abuse them. I think you cannot trust your own blood with somebody else, because you never know what's going to happen behind those closed doors. I know there's a lot of things going on right now, people stealing their money and all that stuff.

AW: All right.

MD: Good? Anything else?

AW: Thank you.

MD: Thank you ladies, and gentleman.

[End of the Interview]

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