## **Interview with Hared Mah** Wellstone High School Student

## Interviewed on June 3, 2004

## for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project Project Andy Wilhide, Project Director

## **Interviewed by Andy Wilhide**

Hared Mah - HM - AW Andy Wilhide

HM: My name is Hared Mah, I'm from Somalia. I came to this country 2001, September 26. I started school here at Wellstone [High School]. Now, I'm a senior and I will be graduating this year. I'm planning to go to University of Minnesota. I'm accepted there. I, also, received a scholarship, Wallin Scholarship. I don't know what I will study, but I think I will study electrical engineering. I think the future is bright now for me.

AW: Yes?

HM: Yes.

AW: Why do you want to study electrical engineering?

HW: I think I'm good at math. I'm just interested. I'm not sure yet, but I think, I will. I'm just, you know, thinking about it, not real sure if I will study it, but I'm thinking about it.

AW: When do you graduate?

HM: June 7.

AW: That's next week, right?

HM: Yes.

AW: Are you excited?

HM: Yes, I'm excited. I'm more excited, more than...

AW: Do you have everything you need?

HM: Yes, I have everything.

AW: You guys got caps and...?

HM: Yes. I already paid money for the gown.

AW: Do you have people coming with you? Tell me a little bit about how people are going to come to see you graduate.

HM: My friends will come and my sister. My mom is not in town. She's out of town, but she would have come if she was here.

AW: I'm sure she's very proud of you.

HM: Yes, she's very proud. I told her about it. She's very proud, yes.

AW: Tell me a little bit about when you came here. You came here in 2000?

HM: 2001.

AW: Okay, 2001. Where were you before that?

HM: I was in Kenya for two years, I think, I was in Kenya. It was a difficult time when I was in Kenya, not very difficult, but it was, you know, the police and everything was, you know... We had no protection when we were in Kenya, just have to survive. You have to pay price to their police.

AW: What kind?

HM: They would ask you if you have any identification to stay in the country. We were in the country illegally, you know. We just came in and Somalis stay there. There's an ID [identification] that if you are Kenyan citizen, you have to have that ID. Otherwise, you have to show something why you're here. The police will just ask. They need money, so we have to give them some out and then they will let you go. When you give money to one police, another police may catch you later on, and then if you don't have money they will take you to jail. You will not go to court. You will just stay there. If they take you to the jail, then you will meet bigger officers that need more money. Like maybe if you have to give two thousand Kenyan shilling to the police officers on the street, when you go to the jail, then you will meet this big boss and then you have to give him ten thousand Kenyan shillings. So, it's very difficult, you know. You don't know which to choose...to go to jail or... It was challenging.

AW: How much, to help people who don't know how much a Kenyan shilling is worth, how many dollars would that be?

HM: One thousand would be twenty dollars.

AW: So if you had to pay two thousand, that would be forty dollars.

HM: Forty dollars. If you have ten thousand, it would be...

AW: Which isn't...that's not...

HM: Yes. It's big money. One thousand dollars in Kenya, you can buy T-shirt, everything. pants. It's a lot of money. You can give dinners for twenty people for ten thousand dollars in Kenya, so it's big money. The police were getting more greedy and greedier. One thousand tory ciet dollars became nothing. It was hard.

AW: Where did you live in Kenya?

HM: I was in Nairobi.

AW: Did you live in a neighborhood?

HM: Yes, there was a neighborhood called Eastleigh where Somalis live. It's like Mogadishu, but the police are different, everything, the stores. You don't need to know Swahili to stay that neighborhood. Also, Somalis who came from Somali, but they have big businesses out there. The police was just difficult. But in other ways, it was similar to Somalia.

AW: In what way?

HM: In terms of the language. You don't have to speak other language. You see your people, and you see the customs, the food also. It's almost the same, no big difference. It's okay, but the police was a little problem.

AW: Were there any other problems besides the police?

HM: We were refugees. That was also a problem. When you're not in your home, you don't have maybe the same, how would I say...? You're not the same one like the citizens. You're kind of isolated. Maybe you want to go to school, but you cannot go there. It's hard.

AW: In the neighborhood were there schools that Somali kids could go to?

HM: Yes, they go to the schools, but, you have to pay money, and it's very expensive. You will be high school in Kenya. You have to pay for the high school. When I was there, yes, you had to pay, like, maybe fifteen thousand Kenyan shillings, which is like one hundred and fifty maybe, every year, if you are ten grade, every year. Many people cannot afford that. Maybe one family will get two hundred dollars for one month, for their bills and house they live, you know, it's not yours. So life still was hard. You cannot get basics sometimes.

AW: You were there for two years?

HM: Yes, two years, almost two years.

AW: What were some of the good things, if any?

HM: The good things? Maybe...

AW: Maybe tell me a little bit about when you left Somalia.

HM: When I was in Somalia after 1991, there was no government. Then I was young; I didn't know. I grew up in a system where there is no government. There is no police. Everything is in chaos. Also, now in America someone who was my age maybe had access to the outside world, but I did not have. There was no television then. Maybe the radio people listened, but I wasn't paying attention to radio. I didn't know what was going on. Even the neighboring countries...I heard of Ethiopia, Kenya, but I didn't know. I thought the whole system was that way: the militia men running in the streets killing, you know. You don't know what will happen. You just have to stay there. Sometimes there are clashes between two groups. They're using these big gangs. It's very hard.

When I came to Kenya, I was kind of thinking, oh, things are different in Kenya than in Somalia because there's a government. Even though the police were doing something wrong to the Somalis, it was different. There was a system of government in Kenya. It was good for me to come in Kenya before I came here, because it would still be a very hard transition, you know, if I had come here through Somalia. I didn't know about police, but when I came here, I knew it was police. The first time I came to Kenya, that was when I saw police and I was kind of scared. I didn't know whether they would shoot you out. I didn't know about it. I was kind of scared. Also, the different faces of people, different language...it was very hard.

AW: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up in Somalia.

[break in the interview – equipment change]

HM: I grew up in a small town in Somalia. I came to Mogadishu later on, but when I was young, I grew up in a small town.

AW: Where?

HM: It's called Afgooye. It's close to Mogadishu, not too far from Mogadishu. I grew up there. It was nice to be with the neighborhood. I wasn't worried about whether there was government or not. I was not worried about it; my parents were, because they have to face all the challenges. They have to feed me, feed all the children, and they have to feed themselves. At the same time, they have to be safe and try to make us safe, too. It was not easy.

Then when I came to Mogadishu, the town, there is no big problems. Sometimes, yes, the militia comes and they make problems. You see all the stuff but when you compare with it, the big city would have every gun...all these young people, the teenagers who come have the guns and, you know, they just do what they want. They have no conscience. They don't care whether they die. They chew this what they call khat. That's what they fight for. They think they will get maybe less than a cent, and to get from you, they will kill you. They don't care. Even if you wear good clothes and maybe you are in the jungle... All these big buildings are destroyed. You have to watch out where you are going. You have to stay on the street where people can see you so you can call for help. My parents were trying very hard to keep us at home. There was no education. I didn't go to school. My father did not let us go outside like other kids used to when they have to go outside and do... We were like, "Why? Why you keeping us?" He goes, "No. I don't care." It was about safety not education. There was no such thing. If you could keep yourself in a safe place, that was the priority. It was not like, "Can I have education or not?" It was tough living.

AW: So the priority was to...

HM: Be safe, yes, just to be safe, not to get education.

AW: Did you go to school at all? Did you have any kind of schooling?

HM: In Somalia, no. I came to Kenya, then I had just a little bit. There was another man who had... There were guys who graduated from high school. They used to help me write like alphabetical and all that stuff. Not a very big thing, not very much, maybe two words of English. Like I would say, "How are you, how are you doing?" Or "girl", "boy", just basic things. I learned a little bit how to read Somali when I came to Kenya, because there was newspapers that people used to read. I could read slowly, can't look at the paper and just read quick. You have to go slow, have to spell out every...Because it was my language, it was a little bit easier to learn it.

Then when I came here, I did not know English then. First, I was transferred to New York. We slept there one night. We were just following where they said, "Come." You know, you cannot say anything. You're just like deaf. It was hard when you cannot tell these people, you cannot say anything. I was like, oh, I wish I grew up to speak any language that these people understand, you know. [chuckles]

AW: So you first came to New York?

HM: Yes, we first came to New York and then Chicago. We are being helped by the immigration officers who were, now, with us all the time in every airport that we came. We did not need that much help for language, but when I came to Minneapolis, then was a little bit difficult, that I have to face the real life here. It wasn't easy.

AW: It easier when you got to Minneapolis?

HM: In terms of the language, no. Everything...it's kind of like you have to...even eating your breakfast, everything you need, you have to ask for. You have to say, "I need this." "I need this." You have to ask someone to translate, so it was kind of like you cannot do anything. You are like a little kid that cannot even speak. There's no big difference. Maybe I was a little bit stronger then, but not in terms of speaking, of saying something.

The first time when I came to the airport, I didn't know which airport I was... We tried to ask if we were in Minneapolis or not then. I came to a lady. I don't know what I asked. I was trying to ask, "Where's Minneapolis?" She said something so fast. [chuckles] I was like, "What?" I was just staring at her then. My friend...people who are to pick us up from the airport came to us. Then they took us from the airport.

Then I decided to go to school. There was no other alternative that I could turn onto. They said, "You have to learn the language." I was very serious about it. There are some people who I know that went the same time to the school that I went, who went to school at the same time, or maybe they went before me but they still cannot speak. Maybe they don't know as much English that I do. I'm not saying that I'm better than them, but it depends how much effort and the passion you have. You should really think, "Yes, I need this. I need to learn." You are thinking about... Even when I was Eastleigh, I used to dream about it, you know, I want to learn English. Maybe the words the teachers taught me in school, I was thinking a lot about knowing English. I have this, like, yes, one day, you might speak to everybody. But still, no. Still I need to learn more English. Now, it's all basic stuff. I don't need help with...maybe I can fill out application. I can talk to anyone. I can call phone. But to talk to, maybe, all native English speakers, so it's not hard now.

AW: How does English improve your life?

HM: Oh, I can say English in America, if you do not know the language, I don't know how people support their lives. It's hard. My mom doesn't know English, but I help her, you know. Maybe she gets papers from the government, and I read for her, all that stuff. I fill out with her. It's hard, it's hard. Maybe if you're older person, you can live, but a young person that doesn't know the language, I don't know how. It's hard. Everything depends, I think, on the language. Everything. Getting job depends on the language. You could get a job, but in tough times, you may not get job. Everything, I would say—not everything, but almost everything...

AW: Tell me a little bit about your family here in America. Who did you come with and where are they living now?

HM: I came with my Mama. She was here for the last two years, but, now, she's in Detroit, Michigan. She will come back. My sister and my brother are here, too. He graduated from Roosevelt [High School], yes. My sister, she also graduating this year. They are doing well, too, so we are making some progress.

AW: You're the youngest?

HM: No, I'm the oldest in my family.

HM: Who graduated from Roosevelt?

HM: My brother. We came the same year.

AW: I should ask you this: in Kenya, you said you kind of went to school or some people taught you?

HM: Yes, they taught me the a, b, c, d, all the alphabet thing. But it wasn't a school. They will come to my home and I will ask for them when I had free time. They were Somalis, Kenyan Somalis. There are some parts, states, where Somalis live. It's part of Kenya, but it's also Somali area where Somalis live. They went to school normal, with the Kenyan kids, and they learned Swahili and they went to high school and they graduate. They also speak Somali. They can help you out with the language. So they taught me alphabet, how to write a, b, c, d. Then I just try to read Somali by knowing the alphabet, you know. It's the same alphabet.

[break in the interview]

AW: So you came here with your mom and your brothers and sisters. How many people are in your family?

HM: We were three of us. My sister and my mom came here. My father came earlier here.

AW: Where does he live?

HM: He's here now.

AW: When did he come over?

HM: He came in 1998. He sponsor us, through the immigration, so that's why we came here. Cause he did.

[extraneous conversation about recorder]

AW: He came in 1998 to Minneapolis or to somewhere else?

HM: First...I'm not sure if he came to Atlanta. Then he moved to Minneapolis.

AW: Why did he come to Minneapolis?

HM: Oh, I don't know the reason. Many Somalis came from other states because maybe there were jobs here available for the Somalis. Not for the Somalis, but you know, available, that they could get, than in California or maybe in Georgia, where they first came. There were more opportunities that they could get from here, so I think that's why I think they came here.

AW: You came here in 2001. What were some of your first impressions of America?

HM: My first impressions? I already heard some maybe stories, not bad stories. I was thinking, yes, life will be easier. You will have much money. There will be no more difficulties. But things were not the same I was thinking about. Still, you know, you have to face some difficulties. Life is not easy. It was quite different than what I was thinking about.

AW: Give me an example, maybe like in fashion or in music or food.

HM: In fashion, I already see how westerners dress, so it wasn't a big surprise to see that.

AW: You saw that through movies?

HM: Through movies and just when normal people come to Africa and I saw. That was not a big deal. I don't know; I can't explain what I felt. It was seeing new things or buying them. The first time...I just had to see people. I could not talk to them. I did not know what they were thinking of. 'SI HIS

AW: You knew English...

HM: No, none.

AW: This is only after two years?

HM: Yes. I couldn't even ask like where to go. Whether I was in Minneapolis or not, I didn't know. I just knew how to say, "Hi." I knew how to write the alphabet, but not English. The teachers know that. Even my first paper that I wrote, it's terrible when I look at it now. [laughter] They give us to write...they show us a picture and they say, "Write about it." I just said something, a sentence, I don't know; maybe I said something, but I don't know what I said. I didn't know English when I...I knew a little bit, but I could not speak. Nobody would understand me if I tried to speak. I couldn't even understand. The way even Americans even spoke were different than how people in Africa and Kenya... The accent, you know. It was very fast, brrrrrr. Then I was, like, "What?" Sometimes I try to say something. Maybe I'm saying the word but nobody is understanding me. What? What? What? Forget it, trying to speak to them. They ask me, like, three times, "What are you saying?" It was a little bit frustrating when you don't know the language. But it went fine.

AW: When I hear Somalis talk, brrrrrrr.

HM: Yes.

[chuckles]

AW: I don't know what it's about.

HM: Yes. It's hard when you don't speak.

AW: When you first got here you didn't know English.

HM: Not much. Little bit.

AW: Was this your first time out of Africa?

HM: Yes.

AW: You were in Somali, then Kenya, and then America?

HM: Yes.

AW: Or did you go to Canada?

Project HM: I was transferred to some other countries, but, not...other countries, no. I was transferred to Saudi Arabia then to Italy, but we didn't have but two hours, four hours then to America. It was different; it was a little bit different.

AW: What did you think when you first saw the streets, the cars. Was everything really big?

HM: Oh, oh, that was a scary feeling when I saw the cars. [laughter] Also the bus was funny; the people put their money in the machine. In Kenya and Somalia, you have to give to what they call conductor. He collect the money from the people. You give the money; he will give you the change back. When I came here and the first time that I had to take bus, I didn't know what to do. Should I give the money to this man or just put it in the machine? In Kenya, you will tell him to stop, stop, and you would get off. You won't have to know the schedule, you know. You will just stop on the bus. I was like, whoa. I was really smart. I was watching what the people were doing. If I was first person that had to go inside the bus, I would go back and watch what the other people are doing. If they put the money there, then I would put the money in the machine...the card, too, when you are using the card on the bus.

The streets, the walk and stop. They had that in Kenya but not many. You just had to cross beside the cars. It's not safe. But here, I have to wait on the...it's a little bit scary, you know, when to go. Also the big highways. When I was coming from the airport, we took the highway to home. Things kind of scare us. We may get off now, the cars, just see us. It was a little bit scary.

AW: But Minneapolis is smaller than Nairobi, right?

HM: Mmmm, the buildings, the downtown, they are the same, I would say. I don't know how much in terms of the buildings. Nairobi have a big downtown, but it depends. It's not like you stop when you come to the stop light. It's not that organized. It's not organized. This whole bunch of cars going after one another and they try to find ways to go. It's a big city, Nairobi, but it's not safe to cross. You just have to find a way to cross. You may get killed. The way things are here, it's different than Nairobi. Of course, there's big buildings, not like the streets how full, this stuff, no. They don't have that.

AW: What about the first time you went to a shopping mall or the Mall of America?

HM: Oh, Mall of America. It was Sunday the first time we went to the Mall of America. We got lost. It was me and my brother and other friends. Each of us got lost. I was trying to get out and then I went to a floor that was not the right floor. It's not the first floor, so there's no way you can get out. [laughs] I was trying to get out and catch the bus, but I was like maybe second floor away and then I went to the parking. I figured out I wasn't on the first floor, then I went back to the mall. My brother was looking after me and we could not find each other. Then, later on, we found each other. I was like, "Where did you go?" Then we had to get out; it was hard... It took me like one hour to get out from the mall. [laughter] It was crazy.

Mostly in Kenya they have, but also when you're shopping, you just to go the counter where you buy things. It's different, a bit, for us. The whole system over again. Everything, we have to learn over.

AW: I wouldn't worry; I got lost the first time I went to the Mall of America. Everybody gets lost the first time at the Mall of America, and I've lived here my whole life. It's a huge place.

HM: Yes, so huge place.

AW: When you were walking around the mall, what did you think of people?

HM: People? First, people even look different to me. You see a whole different people, you know, same skin color. You don't know their language. You don't know the culture and the customs, all that stuff. I was trying to stay away from people the first time. I didn't want to mess up with the people. I was a little bit scared of them.

AW: How did you learn English so quickly? And how did you learn to live here? You just looked at what people were doing? Did you have friends or family that helped you out? Was a lot of it just on your own?

HM: I learn English because I had good teachers and, also, I was working very hard to learn English. I was focusing a lot to know the language. I had a lot of pressure by trying to get to memorize what the teachers say and all this stuff. It came after when I have to learn how to write everything. It was good. I just do by my own, I think. Yes, I received help from my family, of course. I believe if I came here alone, there was no way I could go to school, because I have to first support my life on everything. But, in terms of knowing, learning the language and maybe all this other stuff, it was pretty much by my own, I think. Because I had to help my mother, you know. She will not help me learn English. [chuckles] She didn't know English. She couldn't help me drive because she didn't know. So I have to learn by my own.

AW: You've been here two years. Do you feel like you've learned...I'm sorry, three years.

HM: Less. It's two years and seven months, almost three years. I still feel I want to learn more, but so far, I'm satisfied how much I learn. I'm not saying I learned everything. I need to learn a lot. It's the way to go, you know. If I can go to school, I can read my books. I can do homework. It's going very steady now. It's not bad.

AW: Good. Tell me what some of your favorite classes are here.

HM: My favorite classes? Mmmm... My favorite classes are, I would say, are math and social studies. I like all classes, because I feel I need to take them, but math and social studies are my favorite classes.

AW: Why math?

HM: I think, it's...I won't say easy. But I like doing it. I feel like I'm doing something scientific when you're doing math. I feel like it's very important doing it. Also, it's not hard for me. I understand what the teacher explains, the system. When you understand, it's fun, like you can do it. I like it. Social studies, I think it's a great way to learn this country, what it's done, what it stands for, the history of America. If I wouldn't learn the history of America, then you don't know the people if you don't know their history. How would you find out who these people are? When you know the history, it helps a lot...who these people are, where they're from.

AW: What's been some of the interesting things you've learned about American history?

HM: American history? I think interesting is how America formed. Many of the people are immigrants from other countries, like Europeans came and then the Japanese and all that stuff. So you feel, like, well, I can also be one of these people. They were all immigrants first—not all of them. The Native Americans, they're not all immigrants. It's a good opportunity where everybody can make his own life. It's not like you're an immigrant. There are no classes, like, here you are an immigrant, so you stay here. Maybe first time, the first ten years, twenty years, but, later on, you can move off everything, politics, everything. If you want to, I think you can. It's open to everyone. That's the first important thing that I learned about America.

AW: Do you think you'll be here in twenty years?

HM: Yes, of course I will be here in twenty years. I may go back to Africa, but not permanently. I may visit, you know, maybe Somalia and other countries that I want to, but I think I will be here. If something... Maybe God knows what will happen, but that what I'm plan for. Yes, I will be here, yes, I hope so.

AW: Since you've been here, what are some ways that you think...? You kind of talked about the challenges that you faced learning English, getting to know the system, like the bus system, and how to get around. What are some challenges about culture?

HM: The culture? I would say, generally, the culture that Somalis, the culture that we are a Muslim community, a Muslim society, and the culture are different. We live according, not always but most of, like religion. The culture are a little bit different. Sometimes, it's very hard. You have to pray and you have to follow your religion. The environment is different, so it's very hard. Especially if you're going to school or maybe working someplace. Yes, it's very hard. Because many Americans may not know about what's... Yes, everybody has religion, but the requirements are different for each religion. For Muslims, there are also certain foods you have to avoid. You have to explain all that stuff. That's a challenge. That's the most, I think...

I would say, also, like there are some other things that maybe people do in America that most of the Somalis or people consider un-Islamic, so a little bit conflict maybe sometimes between parents and their kids, what they do and all that stuff. It's very hard. They have to make some accommodations. Some people are not willing to make it. It's very confusing, little bit. Yes.

AW: Do you feel like you've held onto a lot of Somali culture? Or do you feel like you're taking on some American culture?

HM: Mmmm... I do feel like I have taken on some American cultures. There are some things that we may not even...there's no way to hold on it. In terms of my belief and all that stuff, yes, I would hold on it, because I feel it's important. Some other stuff that I think that's not important, why should...?

AW: Like what?

HM: Let's say like... [pause] Let's say, Somalis, maybe they divided. They're divided. Maybe they think in terms of the community, like this one clan, the clan division. I don't think that's important. Why should I believe that? [pause] I don't remember all the stuff I feel like, but there are some things. I know what I think I should hold on to, but all this other stuff that I don't think is important, I don't mind if I leave it. [chuckles]

AW: What are some ways you see yourself doing American things? Going to the mall or some music you listen to? Do you like pizza?

HM: Yes, I do like pizza. The food, yes. Pizzas, maybe not McDonalds. The first time I just think it is good but it is not healthy, so I left alone. I don't mess up with it—not mostly.

The ideas, you know, the way people think, so and so parts of the culture—not the culture, maybe part of the system, the modern system, I would say. It's also very important to accept other cultures or maybe tolerating. They're not being like, "Oh, you're doing the wrong thing," because what you're doing is different than what they believe. That's mostly what I accept, I would say, to be tolerant, to let others. Yes, you can explain what you believe and what you do,

but not force other people to do, or maybe being prejudiced against them, and knowing others, being multicultural.

AW: You see that as American?

HM: Yes. Yes. Many people might not believe that. Some people in America, maybe they don't like other cultures or maybe they kind of like, "Hey, you are out of here." [chuckles]

AW: I agree with you. I think in Minneapolis, you can see a lot of people from all over.

HM: Yes.

AW: I guess some of the Somali kids I talk to, the teenagers, when they first come, that's what they're surprised about is how many people are from different places in their schools, especially like this school where you have kids from all over.

HM: Yes, it's a good experience.

AW: What are you looking forward to this summer?

HM: This summer? I think I will just get some rest, stay around, have fun. Maybe I will be working, too, sometimes.

AW: Where would you be working?

HM: I will work in a Target.

AW: Have you been working there already?

HM: Yes, I work there.

AW: Which Target?

HM: It's in St. Louis Park.

AW: I know that one. Then you go to college in the fall?

HM: Yes, University of Minnesota in the fall.

AW: When do you start?

HM: August, I think, the end of August. August 25? I don't know.

AW: Are you going to live on campus?

HM: No, close to the campus, but not on the campus.

AW: Are you going to live with people you know?

HM: Yes, people I know.

AW: And you think you're going to study...?

HM: Electrical engineering. I may change my mind a little later on, but that's what I'm thinking of right now.

by Bev AW: Good. Thank you very much. I think we should get you in here for a little bit. I'd love to come back and do more. We could go get lunch sometime and we could talk sometime in the summer.

HM: All right. Thank you. Nice to be here.

AW: You did very good.

[End of the Interview]

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