

**Interview with Abdi Sheikh
Wellstone High School Student**

Interviewed on [month and day?] 2004

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

Interviewed by Andy Wilhide

Abdi Sheikh - AS
Andy Wilhide - AW

AW: My name is Andy Wilhide from the Minnesota Historical Society and I'm with Abdi Sheikh from Wellstone High School. Let's Begin. You can start off with your name and where you're from.

AS: My name is Abdi Sheikh, very easy. I'm from Somalia. I live in the United States almost three and a half [years], I think. I came March 23, 2001, to Minneapolis. Then I just go to school. I go to Wellstone International High School. It used to be Icall before. Before I come to this school, I used to go to another school called Abraham Lincoln High School.

AW: Those schools are both in?

AS: Minneapolis, Minnesota. Abraham Lincoln was my first high school I went ever, I think.

AW: What grade were you in?

AS: I started at nine grade. After six months, I changed my mind. After the summer break, I never come back. Then I changed to Icall, which now is Wellstone International High School.

AW: In the same place, right? Here.

AS: Same place, yes.

AW: Where are we?

AS: The high school used to be Icall but now it's Wellstone High School.

AW: In the basement of the...

AS: Yes, in the basement of the big building.

AW: Is this a Minneapolis public school?

AS: Yes, Minneapolis alternative, I think, it's called. It's part of the Minneapolis public schools. But we can call it alternative high school.

AW: So you've been here in this school for three years or two years?

AS: Three years. I started September 4, 2001, so that's almost three years, I think.

AW: When you first came to America, where did you go?

AS: First when I came, when I arrived...

AW: Actually, you can start first with Somalia.

AS: Okay.

AW: Where did you live in Somalia?

AS: In Somali, I live in the middle region of Somalia. Actually, I was born in the country, not in the city.

AW: Northern? Southern?

AS: In the middle region of Somalia, the state called Dhuusamarreeb. That's kind of long. I was born in the country. Then I grew up a little bit until for four years. Then I started going to Koranic School at the age of five. Then I finish the Koran. I think I have been learning the Koran four and a half years. Then I finish.

AW: What happens at Koranic School? Do you go everyday?

AS: Yes, I go everyday. The Koranic was in not a village, smaller village. I don't know what they call it. It is a well that people come to to get water for the animal. It's not a village. It's smaller than a village. That is the place for the Koranic School, there, where I used to go. Then I moved to the state called Dhuusamarreeb. Then I finished my Koranic School. Then I went back to country and to help my father. He used to raise animal. Then I stayed with him until the fighting was beginning to start, you know, the civil war. Then I come to Mogadishu.

AW: What year was that?

AS: I think it was 1997. Then we just moved to Kenya.

[short break in the interview as microphone is adjusted]

AW: Then you went to Kenya?

AS: When I come to Kenya, it was 1998. I come to Kenya in 1998, me and my mom and my sister, and we live in Kenya for two and a half years there.

AW: Where did you live?

AS: I live in Nairobi, someplace hard. Eastleigh. It's called Eastleigh where the Somalis live. Most of the Somalis live Eastleigh. Then we live there for two and a half years. That's the place where I started going to school to learn....

AW: Tell me about that.

AS: Yes. I started going to school in Nairobi. Before, I didn't know any English. I knew some Somali. I knew how to write Somali. I didn't know much. I knew how to write. I knew how to read letters, what kind of crooked, straight. [chuckles] Then I started to learn some English. I didn't go to public schools, just those kind of private. It was a teacher. He graduated from university and then he opened a high school—it wasn't a high school, just a school for language. Then I learn some English, a little math. It was eight months—no, nine months and a half. I been going to that school nine months and a half. Then I learned some language. I learned some Swahili. I knew Swahili pretty much, to speak, so that if there is some problem, you know, with the police, then if they catch me, I can speak to them and ask them what they have... I could communicate with them. I could be able to talk to them. If they ask me if I have ID [identification] or a card they call a *kipande*, I could tell him, "I don't have now, but it's in process. It will come," which wasn't true. [chuckles] I learn a lot in Kenya.

AW: Languages?

AS: Yeah language, yeah. A little math, like addition and subtraction, some multiplication. It was okay. When I came here, I was okay. I was able to add to that, increase, after that.

My life in Kenya wasn't easy. I think it wasn't easy for every party who fled from Somalia, the civil war. There are people already live there, Somalis that we call [sounds like suh-joo]. The word [sounds like suh-joo] means I don't know. So they don't know much in Somali, so they call them [sounds like suh-joo]. They live there. For those people, they have no problem. Sometimes, accident maybe, but for those people, they have no problem. They just live there. They go to school regularly and they're okay. So for those like us who fled from Somalia, life always wasn't easy. We don't have ID. You don't know the language. You're [unclear] and there is some kind of crapshoot in Kenya. Sometimes, people who have a ID, they have a problem still. They ask them some money.

Even me, for example, I get arrested one time in Kenya.

AW: For what?

AS: They just come to me and the police catch me and then they ask me identification. I didn't have it and they couldn't accept me to give them the money I had. It was two hundred. They said, "We need more than two hundred." I didn't have two hundred. Me and my friend...took me to jail. We are there one night. We stayed one night.

AW: What was that like?

AS: It was just terrible. That made just like six months. It was very small room. It was very dark, you cannot see anything. It was like twenty people, [unclear] also, so nobody see. It was just terrible. Sometimes I just remember, I don't know, it's terrible.

AW: And it was only because you didn't have ID?

AS: Yes. Yes. Yes.

AW: Did that happen to a lot of people?

AS: Yes, it happens to some people, spend like weeks, months, years, and maybe they may never come back. Yes, it happens sometimes.

Then my father went to... I don't know which porter it came from, "Just come to the United States." Then he talked to us, "Get some sponsors for immigration." Then we got the news and then he talked to us, and then we went to the JVA it's called, Joint Voluntary Agency, I think. Then we get some process and then get all screened and then March 2001, we get accepted to the United States, to come to the United States as an immigrant.

AW: When you first heard the news...?

AS: That was... I was... We felt really... We felt happy. Cause, you know, when the time is difficult, you always look to something that's better, something better, always. We don't know what's going to happen in America, but we thought maybe it's going to be better than this was. It's going to be okay. Then we hear the news, "Everything is fine in America. No problem." We're hoping to come and then we're very excited to come to the United States.

AW: What did you think of America before you came here?

AS: Before I came? You know, I had an opportunity to know some English, and then I could listen to the radio and the television to see things what's going on in the USA, but not understandable. Everything wasn't understandable for me. But I could at least get an idea of what's going on in the United States. I hope I will come one day and be able to talk to people, to communicate. To be somebody who goes around the world. To me, it's not a good idea to just sit in a place where you know the people. We just felt real happy and then we come.

AW: Did you feel sad about...

AS: No.

AW: ...leaving Africa?

AS: No. Not at all. In that situation, there's no way you could feel sad. Maybe there's something better. Everything was kind of challenging.

AW: What was the biggest challenge besides the police? Was it that you had to leave Somalia? You didn't want to but you had to?

AS: I think the biggest thing is leaving from the country, but in Kenya, my biggest thing was the police. [chuckles] We used to get some money sent by our father. He was working, just living in apartment, which is ordinary life. It's just okay. People, a lot of Somalis, you don't feel kind of isolated. Everybody, you see Somalis. If you go outside, you talk to them.

The only problem is when night falls. You don't see many police going around during the day. So when the night falls, ohhh, things change differently then. I remember one night, me and my friend—my friend was kind of shorter, was a little short—we had the police stop us. They ask us ID and I didn't have any PID, nothing, you know. He look at us and said, "How old are you?" I said like, "Fifteen." They ask him and he's like, "Fifteen." Fifteen, ok, Fifteen. They couldn't get anything. They got a bit of him and took him, and I was older than him. So sometimes having [unclear] is kind of...

[laughter]

AW: Help you out.

AS: So, when the night falls, all the problem begins. During the day, they don't kind of [unclear] and catch you. The police know what they doing wasn't right so during the day, they don't always catch people. During the night, that's when the oppression is. All the oppression occurs at night. Everything else was okay to us, except police in Kenya.

AW: The Somalis over there, was everyone very supportive of each other?

AS: Yes.

AW: And helped each other out?

AS: Yes. It was a big business in that area, Eastleigh. Sometimes, you see police stopping people and ask them money. Maybe those people don't have money and then other Somalis help them and give them some money to policemen. You see that many times. That shows they have that kind of support one to another.

AW: Did you make some close friends while you were in Kenya?

AS: Friends, yes. I have some even Kenyan. I want to talk to them and teach and get some Swahili from them. Everything was pretty much okay, except...

AW: The police.

AS: Yes.

AW: The people that you met in Kenya, did any of them come here?

AS: Yes, a lot of people that I knew in Kenya came before me to the United States and after me. I think the most people I knew when I was in Kenya were good people. When they come, they started going to school. That's kind of a good model, you know. They just started going to school, and then they talk to me while I was in Kenya and said, "We're doing good, everything's ok. We just work and then we go to school. If you come, you'll be expected to do the same." So, yeah, they were good friends there. Still, some of them are here finish high school. Some of them already in college. There are some friends that I knew when I was in Kenya, some of them still are here in Minneapolis. Some of them are in states like... I know two friends in Nebraska, in Omaha. They go to college. They're doing good. So those people are kind of helpful to me, 'cause I kind of follow in kind of a model [unclear]. That was good.

When I arrive in Minnesota, that was kind of... That wasn't easy. [chuckles] Even if you know some English, that English doesn't work here.

AW: What do you mean that English doesn't work here?

AS: I knew some English, so I thought I could be able to be heard. Maybe people would understand me, but when I come here, people seem not to understand what I'm talking about. I thought you knew something. What's going on?" [chuckles]

AW: What you learned in Kenya, it was British.

AS: Yes, it was British. Even if it's British, still people can't understand. There is something wrong.

AW: A few words, [unclear].

AS: Yes. Sometimes, when you see the African people when they speak in English and British, they are still different. It is still [unclear]. Even though the system of English in Kenya is pretty much the same as Brits. The accent is still quite different. But if I knew somebody, I was okay.

When I come to airport, my relatives for me [were] waiting there, and we don't have to talk that way. [chuckles] My father and many friends, they pick us up.

AW: I bet they were very excited.

AS: I was. I was very excited [unclear]. That was very exciting.

AW: How long of a plane ride was it?

AS: It was like two days, I think. Sometimes the time change, you know, when we're in the travel, because the time is different. Sometimes, we just come and then go back to the time we left. The time change. I think it was like two days or one and a half. I wasn't focusing. When you're traveling to somewhere you don't know, maybe you aren't counting time. So I wasn't focusing. I was just on the plane, just review my memory maybe what was going to happen.

AW: That's what you were doing when you were on the plane?

AS: Yes.

AW: Thinking what was going to happen?

AS: Yes, just thinking ahead what was going to happen. I don't know how other people think that way, but always when I'm going, I think what is going to happen.

AW: A lot of people do that. They try and envision like what's going to happen.

AS: Yes, kind of visualize, you know. Maybe sometimes you just have a picture of airport and then be able...

AW: What was that picture in your head?

AS: Yes, I was expecting the airport is going to be busy, a lot of people going in and out, all the people white. [chuckles] Actually, that wasn't true. Maybe there was a lot of different doors. Maybe I will be a little confused...the place where you're going to meet with your family, so I was kind of... Everything wasn't the way I thought. It was just okay. When we arrived, we get somebody who lead us to the place where bags and everything. Then when we come, I saw my father and friends and, ohhh, that was [unclear]. It was good. You know some of my friends, it's been a long time since I saw them, some five, six years.

AW: Since you've seen your family?

AS: Yes, so it was a long time. The last time I saw my father, it was a long time. It was 1991.

AW: That was the last time you saw him?

AS: Yes, that was the last. That's a long time.

AW: When you saw him in 2001?

AS: Yes.

AW: That was ten years.

AS: Yes, ten years. I was sooo happy. But I saw his pictures.

At that point, I think it was fifteen days when my father told me to go to...because I was the age that I can go to high school. Then he said, "You have to go to high school. You have to go to school." I think it was fifteen days I started going to Abraham Lincoln High School where I started at ninth grade. That was real tough. It wasn't easy, very difficult. You know, the system of schools is too...it's first floor and second floor and then a lot of rooms. The first day, I was kind of confused by the rooms. I got a schedule to go to doors [unclear]. I was quite confused. [chuckles] Just later on I catch up and then did okay even though the subjects was very difficult. I think that was the reason I stayed. I thought maybe I have to. The math was very high. It was algebra and I didn't have any idea of algebra. I didn't know algebra. Also physics, biology, everything. I didn't study any biology, any algebra, any physics, any science at all. So it was like wow.

Then, after six months, I didn't tell my teachers and counselor...I didn't come back. I was kind of like, no, no, you're not going to come back to this, can't make it. Maybe you will find school where you can have some kind of basic, you know. If I don't make it to get to high school, maybe you will get to know some basic education programs and do that and then go to regular high school. That's what I was thinking.

AW: How did you find out about this school?

AS: I go to Four Winds on Chicago [Avenue South] and Twenty-Fourth [Street, Minneapolis]. I go to that building and then I told them that I'm applying high school, any high school that I can go. They take me some testing and they said, "There is a school newly opened [unclear]." Okay. Then September first, I come to Icall High School. We were a very small group. I think the whole students were like thirty, very small. It was just the basic, you know, the school at the beginning.

AW: The students, where were they from?

AS: They were from, some Somalia, some Ethiopia, some kind of Spanish, a very small group of students. I wonder when I came, wow. Because I had some experience of learn in high school, you know, I wasn't the same as students who come to that school for the first time. I kind of have some idea how high school look like.

AW: Having the smaller classes, did that make you feel more comfortable?

AS: Yes, it made me comfortable. Everything thing was beginning and going up at the same level, you know.

When I took another test and I did good, because I had already six months' experience. So they group the students into four different parts, like yellow, green. Orange was the highest, so I become one of the orange group. [chuckles] After that just started everything at beginning, and then I go up until now I'm [unclear].

AW: You knew a little bit of English, but you had to learn a lot more. So did you learn that at Abraham Lincoln [High School]?

AS: Yes, before Abraham Lincoln, I knew little language and then when I was in Abraham Lincoln, they added a little bit. It was just maybe [unclear]. Then when I come to Icall, I was pretty much a good student, a good student who can speak some English. There were students who couldn't, didn't know any English.

AW: But you already knew some.

AS: Yes, I knew some. Six months, I learn a lot, because, you know, I was always good at English. Yes, still am good in English. Even when I was in Kenya, I'm the first one, second, third. Especially like grammar. If I go back to my going to Koranic school, if you have some kind of ratings [unclear]. Arab, they think is the most difficult in grammar, very difficult. So I was able to get those kind of grammatical system. So I think that skills helped me in English. I think sometimes I can kind of refer.

AW: Definitely. You know how many languages? You can read Arabic.

AS: Yes, I can read Arabic, speak Somali, Swahili, still I forget a lot, but, still, I can speak Swahili, English, Somali, and Arabic language. But Arabic, I can speak some of it, not that much. But I can read all right and speak a little bit. Swahili, I can speak. I can write a little bit but I cannot write letters. I can speak. And Somali, that's okay. No problem.

AW: Reading Somali, is that...?

AS: I don't go to school for Somali language. I didn't have a chance to schools. I miss that whole system, you know. There are some people who had a chance to go to schools in the early days when Somali was a decent government. It's just not the same. They can write. They can read. So sometimes I feel like, yes, you did good. It took them, like maybe, six, seven years, you know, but it took me, like, one year. [chuckles] So that was good.

AW: Yes. Very quick learner. So you think it was going to the Koranic School that taught you...?

AS: Yes, that helped me a lot. That helped me with Somali and English. I think it helped me maybe that I'm going to study physics. [chuckles] Because if you knew some difficult thing early, you know that you can try some difficult thing. If you can do that, you can do this. At the Koranic School, I was very young. When you're young, your brain is fresh, catch everything, so I think that kind of basic school... That's why it's good for the children to go to school. That

idea, I think, is good. You know, in America students, the children, must go to school. They have to. The parents must bring them. I think that's why, you know, children very young, they catch everything. The brain is very fresh.

AW: Yes, it's like a sponge.

AS: Yes, a sponge.

AW: Everything goes in.

AS: Yes.

AW: If you knew Somali, then you were learning another language, how to read and write another language at five years old. Then you're building to learn new languages further down the road.

AS: Yes.

AW: It's better. For me, I only knew one language, so it's really hard for me to try and learn a new one. When I was little, I only knew one. Which is sad. I wish I knew four languages.

AS: You should know one thing. English was your first language. That's okay. But English doesn't have some kind of system. You just have to memorize everything. So if you know English, now other language, you'll try. Not a problem, I guarantee you.

[laughter]

AW: Well, I've tried to learn some, but I didn't do too well.

Tell me about your classes here. What are your favorite classes?

AS: Actually, language, just language, I think. I'm good at language, maybe math isn't best. [chuckles] I'm not good in math at all, but history...

AW: What do you like about history?

AS: I like to know theory, religious... I like to know all the people, the generations before, past generations, you know. I always read books about the Bible, Koran. My teacher give to me a Bible which is Swahili and English. My English teacher, Laura—I don't think you met her—she used to be [unclear]. We're talking always, and she said, "I think it's good for you to read history books." Yes, I like. She give me one book that was "The Theory of Religion," something like that. My favorite, I think I can say, is history, something about history, any history, religious, the past generations.

AW: In your history classes, have you learned much about the religious history of America?

AS: Yes, why many people come to this land. The cause was religious. It was just to survive, to escape with their religion. I think the main purpose was they fled from oppression, you know, for the cause of their religion. I learn that and said, "Wow. These people came to United States for the sake of religion? Wow. That's good." [chuckles] That shows, you know, how people love religion. I think of religion as something that you need for your life. You cannot live maybe without it. Sometimes, when you refer to the Bible or the Koran, they just talk about religion. They talk about just kind of going to another topic. [chuckles] They just talk about their religion and religion is kind of a system that leads, people follow, that kind of idea. Some people's religion is very important. If you attack them by religion, that's why a lot of conflict today is about religion, I think.

AW: Is that something you're going to want to study? Are you going to go to college?

AS: Yes, I want to go to college. I was planning to. I was thinking...

[extraneous conversation about who is coming in the room later]

AS: I was thinking to go to study history, I thought in the future, to become history... If I make my major history, I thought, like wow, I should go back to Somali or maybe...history...how can I do thing that's going to help with my future. I think maybe change that area.

AW: You want to do history?

AS: Well, it's kind of, you know, doubtful.

AW: Doubtful?

AS: Yes.

AW: I'm a history major.

AS: Oh!

[laughter]

AW: There are plenty of jobs for history majors.

AS: Okay.

AW: Especially if you want to do Somali history because there's not a lot here in our schools about African history, especially East Africa. We know a little bit about West Africa, some of the slave history and stuff, but we really don't know that much in some of these schools. You could be the one.

AS: [chuckles] Then I thought, like, how about if you go to the medical field? I was thinking radiology, something. So I'm kind of planning to go into radiology or history.

AW: What school would you want to go to?

AS: I plan to go Normandale [Community College].

AW: When do you find out?

AS: I apply and then they talk to me and they said, "You just can come and take a placement test." Still I didn't go, but I called them last weekend and they told me, "You come. You're welcome."

AW: Okay.

AS: Maybe skip somewhere if I remember anything. [chuckles]

AW: What are you looking forward to this summer?

AS: In the summer?

AW: You're graduating, so tell me about that.

AS: Yes, I'm graduating this coming Monday, a very historical day it has to be. That's a historical day. Since I finished my Koranic School, really I didn't get anything that maybe I accomplished. So maybe I feel some kind of accomplishment. I did some very important thing. Can't wait that is coming this Monday. It's going to be a very exciting day.

AW: Where is graduation?

AS: Graduation will be held at, I think, in MCTC [Minneapolis Community and Technical College]. They offer us a theater, so we are going there Monday at nine-thirty, maybe twenty-five students. So I can't wait.

AW: Is everyone going to be there?

AS: I don't know. Everybody kind of seems busy, but they will try. Of course, my sister goes to school. She's here, so she's going to be here, so she's not going to be going with me. If I don't find, it's okay, no problem.

AW: You'll be very happy.

AS: Yes.

AW: And your friends will be there.

AS: Yes. Maybe somebody will clap for me. [chuckles]

AW: What are you going to do this summer then? You have a job already?

AS: Yes. I work parking lot.

AW: Where?

AS: Downtown. Eighth and Hennepin, downtown. So maybe sometime you park in downtown parking?

AW: Block E?

AS: Parking, yes.

AW: That's the only time I usually park, in Block E and when we go to the movie.

AS: The one located First Avenue and I think Ninth, across the...

AW: Is it three dollars after...

AS: Six, yes.

AW: I go to one by First Avenue, that building, sometimes.

AS: If you come, I'll help you out, no problem.

[laughter]

AW: All right. I just have to find you in the one parking lot.

AS: Yes. I will give you free parking that night.

So I work for them. The company called Loop Parking, so I'm going to ask them more hours. If they are, I'll try to find another job. I want to work this summer. Then I will give myself some kind of off days. I'm not going to be busy. When summer ends, I don't wanna get myself busy. But I want to work some extra hours.

AW: Where are you thinking of working, where else?

AS: I will apply other parking companies. Yes. So I will try to find some of those.

AW: What are you going to do on the days off? There's a phrase called what do you do in your spare time? What do you do when you're just relaxing?

AS: I always like to hang out with friends, you know. I don't always like alone. I don't like alone. I like always to go with friends and go out soccer fields, some kind of basketball.

AW: You play basketball?

AS: Yes. Actually, I like soccer, but I try. I'm not good in that, basketball. I like soccer.

AW: Plenty of people play soccer around here.

AS: Yes, yes.

AW: Have you found a team yet to play? Didn't they over at Coyle sometimes...?

AS: That's only for last summer. We had a team. We play very far away. It's near the...in the middle of Minneapolis and St. Paul. They go to Concordia University, near the Concordia University. We got a team and then we just play with another high school. I think it was Roosevelt High School. So we have some kind of basic...I'm ok.

[chuckles]

[End of Abdi Sheikh Interview]

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