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Narrator

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Interviewer

January 7, 2015
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mohamoud Ismail Mohamed **-MM**
Ibrahim Hirsi **-IH**

IH: This is Ibrahim Hirsi recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. I am interviewing Mohamoud Mohamed in Minneapolis. The date is January 7, 2015. And Mohamoud, first of all, thank you very much for the opportunity to interview with us.

MM: You are welcome. As you mentioned, my name is Mohamoud Mohamed, or Mohamoud Ismail Mohamed—that's my full name. I was born and raised in Kismayo [Kismaayo]. I was born in Kismayo, Lower Juba [Jubba], Somalia. I was raised in Kismayo. I was educated in Kismayo, and I completed part of my K-12 [kindergarten through twelfth grade] education inside Kismayo, Lower Juba, Somalia.

IH: Mohamoud, if you could tell us a little bit more about your childhood life in Somalia. What was the life like when you were growing up? What did your peers do in terms of playing, in terms of education, in terms of having fun? What was life like?

MM: Thank you for asking me that important question. When I was born, Somalia was independent six years prior of my birth date. As I mentioned prior on this tape, I went to elementary school, which was free schooling in the port city of Kismayo. Kismayo is located in the deep south of Somalia. It's the capital city of Lower Juba. It is one of the richest regions in East Africa. Kismayo has marine resources. It has plantations and farms in the region that are located beside the Juba River. It is a port city where we were exporting livestock, banana, other fruits and vegetables to the Middle Eastern countries and importing goods from other parts of the world. And also, we had sugar cane factory and cane plantations in Lower Juba. Lower Juba was very rich in terms of livestock, resources, and byproducts. We had a meat processing factory, one of the biggest in East and Central Africa, and it had production capacity to export meat to Eastern European countries, including Russia, and Middle Eastern countries. Employment—the region was very thriving. Starting from 1960 and after 1960, when I was born, the economy was doing very good. The region was supporting most of the other Somali regions. It was leading in terms of production and export to the rest of the country. The government was getting revenues from those exports. It had a tourism industry, too. It was where you can find the port city, international airport, wildlife that attracts tourists coming to the Lower Juba area, and in the early 1960s we had an active tourism industry in Lower Juba. And where I was raised was very established, actually.

When I was very young, I had an opportunity to get role models of soccer players. My hobby was playing soccer and it was my number one hobby, until I became a professional soccer player. I joined professional clubs in the area. And our region was very popular and was making many of the Somali best players in my region. When it comes to the national team of Somalia, the position we had was very popular, and many people from my region were playing for the national level leagues. It attracted me and I earned a living as a professional soccer player for many years. Those days it was not just a hobby for us, but it was a way of making a living that could support families.

I spent my primary education in Kismayo. Then I was enrolled to the Teacher's Training Institute which was a high school and college. I continued my high school education in Marka [Merca], Lower Shabelle [Shabeelle], of Somalia, in 1974. Then I came back to Kismayo in 1976 to teach primary schools of Lower Juba. Then I joined to a British territorial college to study accounting. When I graduated from that college, I joined the Juba Sugar Project, which was the largest sugar cane project in Somalia and second largest in the whole continent of Africa. I started as management accounting deputy supervisor. In 1990 the Juba Sugar Project was easily covering the sugar demand of Somalia, and we were very close to export that. The government was planning, the project was planning. And that project was managed by Booker Agriculture International, which is a very well-known British company that manages sugar cane projects in Brazil, in Somalia, in many other African countries and many South American countries and many Asian countries. I joined as a junior accountant, then I became a management cost and management accounting supervisor, which is cost accounting supervisor. I was in charge of all the costing of that sugar cane project from 1980 to 1983. Then I went to join the American Embassy in Mogadishu, and I became deputy chief accountant of US Agency for International Development [USAID] from 1983 to 1990. Then in 1990 the civil war started worsening, and the rebels captured northwest side of Mogadishu, Jowhar [Jowhaar], then they came to Mogadishu.

IH: And before we get to the civil war part of it, let's go back a little bit. You said after you concluded your elementary school, you went to Marka for high school. So in Kismayo there was no high school at that time?

MM: No, no. There were high schools in Kismayo. But in 1974 the government wanted to accelerate the teacher's training program. They were recruiting students from intermediate school, and they were giving them an accelerated high school education, which were very intensive courses. It was like this. The government was recruiting students, and they were putting them in special programs or "colleges," and they were teaching the students like ten hours of classes every day to cover their curriculum of the high school and the teacher's training program very quickly. They were teaching psychology, teaching high school educations, everything together. Students were living in the colleges, and it was a very intensive course that they did within two years. The demand of the teachers was very high. Instead of putting the students in the regular high schools, they preferred to take students from intermediate school or middle school or junior high through the college—which that college was starting from high school standard to college standard. Then the students were prepared to go to teach the schools in the country. And after we graduated from that college, we were able to continue our higher education in the university, the National University of Lafoole. The plan was like that, and they

were planning to not waste any time. When we graduated from the college, we were going back to teach one year and coming back to continue our higher education.

IH: And at that time what were your dreams and goals? What did you want to do?

MM: We were all focusing on covering the demand that we had in our country, whether it becomes health—there were nurses that were recruited from junior high and were training to become assistant nurses in a college until they complete their nursing education and become fully certified nurses through that education. And also they were coming back and having time to serve, too, the plenty of need that was in the country. This program was a crash program which was planned by the government to accelerate everything and intensify the teaching in order to produce a substantial number of people to cover the need that the country had, whether it is agriculture, health, administration, government offices. They were taking, intercepting, students, and they created programs that were very intensive at that time, because of the need. And they produced within five years—I remember the government had enough teachers that could teach high schools, elementary schools, middle schools, and colleges.

The country, from 1969 to 1978 I think, was kind of a Communist country. We were Eastern Bloc countries at that time, and the reason my country became a Communist country was there was too much demand and need in the country that needs to share the wealth, to open and give access of the government services like education, health, and businesses—everything—and have enough what they call public service people that are available. The government couldn't import people to run the system there, but they were obliged to produce by themselves their own, what they have. And we were the group who were ready for that, growing, and it was our time to receive the opportunity, growing with our new Somali government, especially the military government or military system in the country, which started in 1969 to 1978. The government was accelerating everything, building the army—they built the second strongest army in Africa. They were building factories, other industries, roads, even transportation, communication. Everything was growing very fast in Somalia at that time. As you remember, we went to civil war in 1977, and everything was starting falling apart.

Before we go there, I would like to emphasize from 1960 to 1978 or 1980, education was hundred percent free in all Somalia. From 1971 and beyond 1971, there were differences between 1971, and the gap, the growth of Somalia from 1960 and after 1971 was very different. One good example. In 1970, that school year, the government could accommodate three thousand students to go through grade one that year. There were not enough schools, there were not enough teachers, and there were not enough other resources. The government decided to build. From 1970 to June 1971, they built schools that could accommodate a hundred thousand students, from the south end of Somalia to the north end to west end of Somalia. In 1974-75, they decided to do the literacy campaign, and they used the Somali students who were in from grade six to grade twelve to go and teach the Somali nomads how to read and write, and it was amazing. It was very successful, and that campaign was the campaign that made Somalis to understand the value of reading and writing, and it helped many, many, many nomads to bring their children to the schools.

I'm not just saying this, but honestly, after I left Africa, I came to know that those who were leading the country from 1960 to 1990 were real Somalis, were real Africans, were real people. They were very honest for what they were doing. They were real leaders. They created things that when I looked back now, some of them I cannot find in very developed countries—where the people were working together, how they were helping themselves, how they were creating, helping their government and the system without asking any pay. How they were building roads, how they were building schools, how they were building hospitals, and they were calling *iskaa wax u qabso* [self-help]. And the outcome was amazing. For example, I said within twelve months' period they built enough schools that could accommodate one hundred thousand brand new students. Can you imagine if they wait to get either international donors to help them or to wait to have funds to build those? They called the people, they talked to the people, so everybody went out every afternoon to help toward that project, and they eliminated the need in a short period. So we had free education, free healthcare, and we were sharing the resources in a very... The government had transparency.

For example, they were working toward eliminating the unemployment problems of the country. And what they did—I couldn't forget—was if you educate your son or daughter until they reach grade eight, at the end of the junior high, the government was guaranteeing them a job paying full salary, paying job. And if you can raise your child until they complete the high school, with the best grades, they were even getting a scholarship outside our country to like Eastern Bloc countries, Western Bloc countries. Plus they were paying per diems, overnight expenses, of those students, not only their schooling. The government, whatever they were getting as a donation or grants from other countries, they were investing to the people, and the people were growing—until after the Somalia-Ethiopia war, 1977. Then the government did the worst move they made, which was they allowed Somalis to travel to the Middle East. In those days, those were petrol dollar booming days. You go to the Middle East. If you are from the Muslim countries surrounding Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Abu Dhabi, those countries, you will get access to get employment. For example, they will give you a visa to work, visa to stay there, and it was booming. There was a high demand for labor, high demand for skilled workers. Somalis were skilled workers, those who left were skilled workers. They knew how to operate machineries, all types of heavy-duty machineries. They were educated when they went there. They got contracts that were paying tons of money. For example, somebody who is going there, staying two years, coming back, bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars. And that was a huge wealth. When they came back, they invested that money to build Mogadishu. Mogadishu became the attraction of all Somalis. So all the people—either educated, skilled, wealthy—wealth went to Mogadishu.

Mogadishu became an over-crowded place, and those expatriates that came back from the Middle East started importing things. The black market issues started. We call it *ribo* [usury], which is prohibited in our religion. It started inflation. Then there was other war, too. There was East-West competition, which was worsening. So there were periods that there was embargo put into Somalia by the Western countries. And there was a period that the Eastern Bloc was fighting against the interest of Somalia. They were supporting the rebels in Ethiopia, Somali rebels, those who were fighting against the Somali government—like the SNM [Somali National Movement], other groups. There were many groups went to Ethiopia, and they were working on how to overthrow the military government of Somalia. Those conditions were worsening in my country.

After that, the Eastern Bloc collapsed, the Western world countries discontinued their support to many smaller countries like Somalia, and in the early 1990s the Somali government collapsed.

IH: That is very important background information for our audience. Now let's come back to your life story. So after high school, you went to college. So what was your major, and why did you decide to pursue that field?

MM: Actually, when I was going to the college, my college was located in Nairobi. I was a correspondence schools student.

IH: But you were in Somalia?

MM: I was in Somalia, I was in Kismayo. It was very difficult to me to find hard currency to pay my school fees, but luckily, relatives of mine supported me to do that. I was a distance student. I was getting all my lessons from the British territorial college which was located in Nairobi, Kenya. I was admitted as a mechanical engineering student. I became very allergic using some tools, especially copper tools. I became sick several times, and I changed my course to accounting. I had a chance because my siblings, my older brothers, were working with Somali Water Development Agency, and I had access to go and practice my accounting administration, admin courses, with my brother, who had a degree and who had a very long experience. My brother and his colleagues were very helpful.

Shortly after I graduated from that college, I got a job offer from the Juba Sugar Project, and then they gave me the chance to advance my education and practical experience. The project was very huge. I was in a management accounting office where you just do the cost controlling of the project, always keeping your eye on how that factory will make profit, which means how to avoid leak. Certainly a project of that size in those days when people were not using computers—it was very difficult to bring all types of that data required by the section to generate the type of report they want to generate to satisfy their superiors. It was very demanding. It was very not easy, if I recall, doing everything manually. And that time, part was full of fun. I liked it. And I spent three years there, and the experience I gained from there opened many doors for me. I went to Mogadishu, and I got a very good paying job from the US Embassy as deputy chief accountant for the Agency of International Development, which I gained tons of experience when it comes to grants from other countries, how to manage projects, things like that. I went inside. I was working with the financial analyst. I was working with the financial controller, I was working with the budget and accounting officer, and I got tons of experience in management, accounting in there. Then the government collapsed, or the condition of that civil war started from northwest Somalia affected the capital city, and I went back to Kismayo.

IH: After the civil war?

MM: After the civil war, when the fighting started in Mogadishu. The government troops and everybody started leaving Mogadishu, fleeing towards south, north, west. But I was one of those who went to south, to Kismayo, where I came from. I just went back to my city. Then the warring parties came to Kismayo, and they started fighting in the gates of Kismayo. And they were starting defeating each other, and we started realizing that this civil war is not to just oust

the group in the power. The civil war became ethnic, sub-clan war. Not ethnic, actually—we are one ethnic. Sub-clan war. And then I was affected, it affected my family and myself, and I left, fled to Kenya in 1991.

I spent five years in refugee camps. I was a professional soccer player, as I said before. I had many friends. I was a person of people, liked people always. When I realized the condition of those refugee camps—most of us, we accepted the reality, and we decided to start from scratch, and I was one of those who were helping the other, weaker refugees. Some people, they walk toward the refugee camps. I was one of those lucky ones who made it through the sea to Mombasa, and we went to Utanga [Utange].

IH: They were walking.

MM: They were walking. And most of them we knew in Somalia. For example, if they have two, three hundred people arriving, maybe we know ten, fifteen of them. So we were starting helping them, sharing the experience we gained when we came with them—how to settle there, how to build those shanty sticks. And from there I spent four years starting the life from scratch, building a shade from a piece of cloth and sticks, surviving in there until we built a bamboo house that we covered with the palm tree leaves. We called it *makuuti* [tree found in Somalia]. And it was not looking bad, actually. But the area when they cleared it was first time to settle there. There was no sanitation, there was no running water. The people were becoming very sick. There was not enough food there. There were frustrations. People were becoming sick, morally, even, because they lost everything. They lost hope, they can't foresee any hope that's coming. And many people, they died in there. We were the lucky ones that survived.

IH: And you fled with your family?

MM: I fled with my family. I had my own children with me. My siblings had their own children, some of them. Some of them were bachelors, and they flee. We were displaced, but we regrouped. We came different ways to that camp, but we met again, luckily. Except those who we lost—our neighbors, our family members and relatives that we lost in Kismayo during the civil war when the different groups were fighting in Kismayo. After five years I decided to go to Nairobi, Kenya. I spent another three years and a half in there, Nairobi, Kenya. Then I came, 1999, and my port of entry was San Diego, California. I spent several months there. I received a call from people that I knew in Somalia, some relatives, friends, working in Marshall, Minnesota. They invited me to visit.

IH: Oh, from San Diego.

MM: From San Diego to Marshall. And when I came to San Diego I received a call from my friend in Marshall, Minnesota, and he invited me to visit him in Marshall. I came to Marshall and in a short period I met Mr. Carlos who was the Marshall area cultural diversity office executive director, and we had some dialog outside his office. We became acquainted, and he asked me to come back and meet him. He told me that he was creating programs to help refugees. Their mission was to bridge the cultural gap in southwest Minnesota, which was Hispanic, East African refugees, immigrants working in southwest or living in southwest. So there was a pocket

of refugees there that was speaking Somali, Swahili, and other languages. And he decided to hire me as program coordinator through the University of Minnesota Extension Office. At that time was my first program that I coordinated in the United States, and I got the sense of nonprofits and experience like that.

IH: And when you first got here from Africa, how was the transition like for you? What was the most difficult thing that you faced at that time?

MM: Actually, when I came to the United States, especially San Diego—San Diego is a very large, large, large city. I was not exposed to a city like that, that needs transportation immediately to go to work, a permit to drive, a license to drive, learn the streets, everything. People, people, culture—which, when you come to California, people are not very friendly like people of Minnesota. They are different. The people of California are very defensive people, because of the size of the area, and it's too diverse, and everybody is avoiding unfamiliar persons to have any relationship with strangers that they don't know. When I found out that it is too difficult to integrate right away, I decided to move out. And then when I received the call from southwest Minnesota, I just decided to move to Minnesota.

IH: And how long later was it? For how long did you spend in San Diego?

MM: Less than six months.

IH: Okay.

MM: I stayed there a couple of months, and I was not employed yet when I left there. It was the end of 1999. I was—you know when you arrive those days, you will wait your Social Security several weeks, then you will wait IDs, other things, for a period of time. You waste your time waiting for the other documentations. To go and find employment right away was not possible. The employment market was not that good when I arrived. But when I came to Minnesota, the employment market was very good. The employment market was very good—perfect. And it was very easy, very small town of less than twenty thousand people. There were already pockets of Somali refugees, East African refugees, in Marshall. They were working and they were established. And there was a need, need of people with language skill to interpret in medical facilities, factories, landlords, which were hiring interpreters and translators. So it was good for me to be there.

And then after one year, the turkey processing plant in Marshall was closed. The company decided to close that plant. That was the Heartland Turkey store in Marshall. And I decided to go, to come to see the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] office in Saint Cloud. The nearest was in Saint Cloud, the nearest IRS office. I visited Saint Cloud and we found a bigger city with better opportunities. So we went back to Marshall. You know how Somalis, they talk to each other, they carry the information verbally through everywhere? We figured out that many people were preparing to move to Saint Cloud. After two weeks I decided to move to Saint Cloud. I came December eleventh, something like that, to Saint Cloud, year 2000. It is now fifteen years ago. And suddenly when I arrive, they gave layoffs at that plant in Marshall. The people who were working there lost their jobs, and they started moving to Saint Cloud. They were coming to my

home. I was helping them to complete applications, housing applications, employment applications, and things like that.

IH: And what did you do in Saint Cloud?

MM: At that time I was working with Fingerhut, Fingerhut accounting office. We were collecting credit card debts from the people by calling them. It was not a pleasant job, and usually they were calling senior people. And they were distributing the calls through the computer, and they would give somebody to call one person, and the same person they called, and then that call they give it to you, and they give it to someone else. So you call someone and that person is telling you that Fingerhut was calling them several times in that same day. And they will tell you the condition of their health, the situation of their finances, many things. They will make you to feel very sad while you are doing that. I didn't like hassling people, especially seniors. In my culture we don't use either rude language to elders. I left that job because of that.

Nevertheless, after September 11, 2001, when that tragedy happened, there was a huge misunderstanding in central Minnesota, especially in the Frigidaire plant that produced refrigerators in that area. It's called now Electrolux. It was called Frigidaire at that time. There were pockets of Somali refugees working in there with the language barriers. That morning there were two young men sitting in the cafeteria there, on their break, when that tragedy was aired by the television. And that moment there were several other Caucasian Electrolux employees around them. The two Somalis, they couldn't tell, understand, even one word that the television will say, but they saw that something was—airplanes were destroying a tall building. Those other employees accused that the Somalis were cheering. But it was not true. I knew the guys who were the Somali refugees who were sitting in that cafeteria, and they were the ones that I was helping to complete the applications and things like that.

IH: They were cheering because they didn't tell them what was going on?

MM: No, they were accused that they were very happy, cheering, jumping up and down, because al-Qaida was destroying those buildings. Other Somalis, even like me, those who were speaking the language, we have no experience or knowledge of the existence of al-Qaida. That night the word went out from that cafeteria, spread in the plant. The second shift people, when their shift ended, the police in the area and the police from other cities surrounding Saint Cloud worked together helping to escort out refugees from the other group. They called me. They called me to come there. I met the plant general manager, I met the supervisors, I met the line leads, I met some employees' union, and when they told me the story I said, "Just hold your horses. Let me meet those two Somalis in the cafeteria." In the morning they invited me, they introduced me to the two Somalis. And I knew the two Somalis. They couldn't... I remember one of them wanted to buy toothpaste, so he went to the store. Usually Walgreens and some stores, they put their toothpaste, toothbrushes near baby food, baby items—the wiping papers for the diapers, diapers, ointments, things like that. So he went in and took diaper-wiping ointment that makes the child's butt that if they piss inside their diaper, it's not going to cause a rash in their body. He bought it and he tried to use as toothpaste, but he couldn't wash it from his mouth. That person, they were saying he was the one who was cheering and jumping up and down. I explained it to them. I told them, I said, "These two guys, there's no way that they could

understand what was happening on that news.” And it is impossible to accuse them, even if you take them, call experts to interview, seek their background from their interviewing period when they were coming to the plant—because the HR office, human service office, knows who they are interviewing if he’s got a language skill or not. They figured it out. They realized that there was something wrong, and we started building a relationship.

At the same time, we started going to every school, we started going to every employer, we started going, me and my friends, a few of my friends. Then I found out that this need is greater than the temporary thing we had, and we decided to found an organization. So me and one American, African American lady from Chicago, I seek her help to be my secretary, and then we became cofounders of Saint Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization [SASSO] in October 2001. The mission of that organization is refugees helping refugees. Refugees have many needs. They have housing needs, they have after school program needs, employment, advocacy, health, crime prevention programs, and many other programs. We created objectives, missions, and everything, and we are organizing the organization. We got the tax exempt and everything. We built the board. We created through the help of the Saint Cloud mayor of that time. We were rallying on September seventeenth to educate the greater community that all Muslims were not radical. We did the first rally. Even the Muslim governments were not supporting that. There were no groups in this world that did anything at that time that can change the course and this concept of the misunderstanding that people are getting from the media about Islam. We were the first. We rallied, we got media coming, media coverage, huge media coverage that day, and it reduced the tension of our area.

Saint Cloud area, there is Saint Cloud city, Waite Park city, Saint Joseph city, Sartell. It consists of Stearns County, Wright County, Sherburne County, Benton County in Saint Cloud. Those counties, we have community members that are seeking services up to Elk River. We started doing, educating people, paneling, creating where people can come together, ask questions, listen, and learn about this group with info. We opened our first center, which was twenty-five thousand square feet, with a mosque, after school program, halal [food prepared as prescribed by Islamic law] supermarket, other services like barbershop, telephone cards—those days the people were using telephone cards—things like that. The community service office inside that same building. And we had vandalism in that time. They came, they torched the back side of our building. They put what they call graffitis on the front. We started fighting back.

IH: And what was their message?

MM: Their message was, “You have to leave. You came—leave. We don’t want you here.” They call us names. Niggers, goat lovers, many things. They insult Muslims—whatever they want. We had that, but we never confront, create differences between us and the greater community. Always we were forbearing of what we were experiencing. We knew that whenever you go to a new place you will have some kind of challenges from people with very low IQs just targeting you because you are either minority or different from them. We knew that, and we started engaging with the community. We started engaging with the other service providers, agencies in the area, like United Way, faith groups, universities, K-12 education system, cities, police, human rights offices, and legislators. We started working with them in a very aggressive way. We established more than 135 panels we have participated, until a better understanding

between our people—the newcomers—and the greater community improved, jumped up. We opened many doors. We helped refugees to spread in Saint Cloud city, not live in one pocket. We're avoiding creating a ghetto or isolating the refugees in one side. We were spreading them out. We were providing housing services, such as locating housing for the refugees, helping them to find cosigners, et cetera.

Saint Cloud is a very fast-growing city in terms of refugees' arrivals. It was the secondary refugees that were arriving in Saint Cloud area. Nowadays, we have primary refugees. They are coming directly from refugee camps to central Minnesota. We have very good relationships and informal partnerships with Lutheran Social Services. We had a partnership with or consortium with legal aid office in central Minnesota. We had a very good solid working relation and partnership with adult education, because our aim was to serve refugees and help them to go to a school which provides English as second language, help them to recertify themselves, and then we help them to integrate as fast as possible. Help them to get housing in better neighborhoods that has values and qualities that they can raise their children.

For instance, in the year 2000, end of 2000, when I was arriving in Saint Cloud, there was one student going to the high school in Saint Cloud. In Saint Cloud School District 742, one student. He was going to Apollo High. He was very special, different than anybody else there because of the way he speaks the language, his looks, and everything. Today we have more than three thousand five hundred students in K-12 education. We have four hundred students in the college or the university.

We are growing very fast. We have thirteen thousand-plus people from East Africa, mainly from Somalia, in the Saint Cloud area. Now we established some of the refugees who arrived prior than 2000, they own businesses. We have more than one hundred outlets that are small businesses located in Saint Cloud and Waite Park. We have more than 250 individuals who started to have their own trucking business. Originally they came as a refugee to Saint Cloud. They start working in Saint Cloud, saving their money until they established their small business of transportation. I know a couple of them. They have more than fifteen trucks on the road in the United States today. We have more than forty-five homeowners in the Saint Cloud area, and they were people that we started training them and gave them the financial literacy in 2008, when the economy was very bad, through the help or the partnership we had with the African Development Center. We had up to forty people bought their own homes in central Minnesota.

I said many times in the past—and it is recorded by the media of central Minnesota and many other medias like MPR [Minnesota Public Radio], *Saint Cloud Times*, and many other media groups—in 2000 we were saying we need to get a chance to work, save some money, raise children that can complete their higher education in central Minnesota, and that will be an asset for the area. And today we have more than fifteen percent of the school district are originally from East Africa, which started from one student. In the university we have four hundred, and last six years we had at least more than a hundred students graduating from Saint Cloud State and Saint Cloud Community College.

SASSO served more than sixteen thousand refugees—direct services. We located housing, helped them to obtain furniture, they start to have furniture. We helped them to enroll their

students or children through the school district. We helped them to find after school programs that we partnered with Saint Cloud State, Saint Ben's College, Saint John's University. We partnered with them, and in 2001 we created mentors and tutors volunteering to help the newcomers coming to different sites. We started from Southside Boys and Girls Club of Saint Cloud. It grew. We were providing in SASSO Center in 2004, '05, '06, '07, '08, '09, '10, until the program became very widespread in the school district, and the school district found out that the after school program we were doing and decided together with these universities improved the grades of these refugee students.

Refugee students' need was—for example, most of the refugee families were lead by a single parent. That single parents, most of them work. They couldn't read, write, and help their children. We provided services that were targeting their neighborhoods, and we provided services that they could have those services available in areas that they can walk, walking distance area. And one of them was the SASSO Center, which we had more than forty-two university students in grad school, especially those who were very good in language, teaching, math which were the areas we were hammering, when we created like four hours' after school program, which is half-day school. When children arrive in the United States, the school districts are placing them according to their age, and some of these refugee students, they never had any schooling in the past. We understood the frustration of the children, we understood the frustration of the parents. We advised, we identified the need, we took the need, we sought help from the university professors that we were working with and luckily they were very committed. We created a very nice program, and that program is making hundreds of refugee students, when they graduated they graduated with a very fine high school certificate that helps them to continue or attain their higher education needs they have, wherever they go.

We created crime preventing programs for them. If you visit Saint Cloud, we started in the year 2000 with one soccer team, traveling team. When the community started growing, the program became more demanding and popular with the refugees, and we created indoor and outdoor sport programs that were attracting youth to become a good role model for each other. The ones who were good in the schools were good in the soccer and other sports that we were promoting. And they attracted their younger ones, and they became role models. And almost I can say in Saint Cloud, past last fourteen years, we never had any major youth problems. There were no cases. We already signed an agreement with the police in early 2000. We hammered that, we pushed it with the help of African Americans and other minorities in the area. We made an agreement with the police. Police created community policing efforts that they create a relationship with the communities. There is a comfort now in relationship that youth have open door in their police stations of our area. They go there, they can sit down with the police officers, they can talk about the problems that they are facing. Police can come, approach, and they are welcoming by the refugee youth.

Those kind of activities that luckily we created in the beginning meant the central Minnesota refugee community are where other refugees in other parts of the United States love to come, and we have our secondary refugees that are moving and making our community to grow very fast. You can imagine from few Somalis in Saint Cloud, we have two thousand and about thirteen thousand-plus in today, with hundred students graduating from universities, coming back, working inside in central Minnesota, integrating with the other communities in a very healthy

way, equal way. Not downgrading their culture or something like that. We started with no mosques. We have three mosques now. One mosque can accommodate up to two thousand people.

IH: That's a big mosque. Obviously there's a lot of success stories in the Somali community in Saint Cloud. Where do you see this community in the next five, ten, twenty years?

MM: If there will be no change of the patterns that we can see now, if they grow with the speed they are growing now, it is very positive. The future is very bright. The hope is very high. Families are changing. Education is the key of everything. The number of the people gaining up to college education is growing very fast, very fast. After they graduate, most of them, they are going to—if they got their first degree—they go to grad school. They continue their higher education. In the beginning we had very few with a university degree, but now we have MAs, masters, PhD in the area, product of Saint Cloud. And they are the role models. We have students that I was working with in the year 2001, '02, '03, going to the high school in Saint Cloud—one of them is the executive founder and the executive director of a K-12 charter school in Saint Cloud. They have two hundred students now, and they started this school year. September of last year was their first year, and their school is doing very good, growing. Up to now there are no problems. It's one big step.

I remember that student—there were new regulations from the school district saying that those students from that neighborhood to their high school was less than two miles. The school was less than two miles away from their home. They cut the buses, school buses. It was winter, I remember, and they were walking more than a mile and a half. And I remember when it snows and the sidewalks were full of snow piles, some drivers were very stupid and smashing that dirt from the road to the students. Shivering students were walking from home to school, about a mile and almost a half. And I remember me and Dr. Perkins, who was the school district diversity coordinator in School District 742 in the year 2002, we had a meeting in our center and we had that problem. And we visited, one morning, stayed in a gas station watching the walking students and people, drivers, throwing water and yelling to them. We came back. He decided to apply a grant. And that grant was to bring together the greater community, students, and the newcomers to have breakfast together in order to reduce the tension. And inside that program he created transportation for those students. One of the students he was helping and I was working with is the principal of the new school, and one is the founder and executive director of that school. Both, they got master's degrees, and ten years ago they were walking. That is what is making us to go forward every morning and see a future in there.

The growth, the growth of the education. The growth of employment, which is we have doctors now, we have nurses, we have bank managers, bank store managers. We have people working with construction companies, engineers, architect—many. They need time, but they are the people we need to be the role models for our people. It's our fruit, it's our fruit. The number of dropouts are very limited, and we intercept, usually. If we keep continue the growth we have in the education fields, health fields, other professions, number of students completing their educations, helping kids when they are young, when they are fresh from Africa, refugee camps, if we can build their basics, or their basis, it will be very helpful and will give us a bigger reward in the future. And we are working on that, and it's a good sign. It's a good sign.

IH: Well, do you have anything to add?

MM: No, I've said... I need to talk about my education in the US. I did nonprofit in Saint Thomas [University].

IH: Saint Thomas University here in Saint Paul?

MM: I took some courses, some recertification or requirements that I need for my prior education in Saint Cloud State. I am still a student.

IH: What are you pursuing?

MM: I had accounting, and I did economics afterward. I would like to continue learning, going back once in a while to education again and review my education, renew my other skills, electronic skills. You know, some education itself needs updating, always. Taking courses, whether they are one semester, two, three, four, for certain areas, new things, like legal organization, things like that. I keep doing that, and I don't know where I will end up. I raised my children.

IH: How many kids do you have?

MM: I raised five boys. Their mother passed away before they come to the United States. I reunited with them in the United States. I raised them. Now some of them, they have their own families. They are working. Some of them are still going to school and working, continuing their higher education. Some of them, they drop it.

IH: Just like any other families.

MM: Like any other families, similar stories. I am very glad to see our people striving in central Minnesota, peacefully and respect, understanding the other cultures, integrating, bringing their values with them, showing that they are capable, competing with the other communities. I like competition, I like challenge. That's why I like advocacy. And I love what I see now. It is very good, smooth-going process that is helping many newcomers. We have very good relationship and contract with the Office of Refugee Resettlement in Minnesota and the nationwide one. Our services are very well known in Minnesota and outside Minnesota. We have very good relationship, our agency, with other voluntary agencies in the United States. We have sometimes some calls from outside the United States. We never traveled or marketed our agency outside the United States, but if you Google our agency, me, myself, there are tons of coverage of different types—history, many other—of the type of work we are doing.

We received many awards. One of them was President Carter, partnership award that says Saint Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization, Saint John's, Saint Ben receive it. We were the best of that year. We have that award in our office. I personally received an Awesome Man Among Women Award for the help we are providing for families lead by single parents, mainly women.

The achievement what we are achieving, I received an award from that magazine. We achieved other awards in our area. We were covered with many magazines and papers.

Some people, they call us the best agitators in the area, but we are not agitators. We advocate for the people. We always don't like unfair remarks, unfair things to the people who cannot represent themselves. We had a dispute with the school district in 2008 when some children were targeted by people with hate intention. They were carrying bacon and chasing girls, Muslim girls with the veil, hijab [headscarf worn by some Muslim women], inside the school. The school district was not reacting very well against that until we rallied and until when the superintendent realized what he did, his mistake. It was not coming from him, actually. But it was coming from some his staff who were covering these things. When he realized that they made a huge mistake, he resigned. He resigned. He told me that it was his fault. Because I was standing other side of this rally, he came, he shook my hand. He told me that it was not me who made him to resign. In fact, the day we had a dialog before we went to that rally, I remember I was telling him to call a kind of, to create a committee to investigate these things. The people who were working with him were lying to him. And then afterward he figured out that the mess was there—I was right. They were telling him a lie, and he took no action at the time we could avoid that. He resigned, he told me, he came... We are friends. He went to China, he came back, and he told me the whole story—how they were mistreating these students, and he made some of his staff to resign, too. And he told the new superintendent about what they did wrong, and they changed some of the staff in the school district, too. And they brought a better system that can safeguard the moral wellness of our children in the school district.

We met the police, we met the K-12 program, the way they are treating the minority children different than what they had there in the past. We forced them to be very transparent. We participated in the school meetings. We made our people to participate in a big number. The first six years were very difficult, but after six years we had our products. Students graduated from college, universities, coming to the area, and we coached them to volunteer for the community while they are working somewhere else, to join boards, to participate in activities in the community. And now we have participations in the city, participations in many places. Even this year we have two candidates running for the offices. One was running for the school district, one was running for the city council. And next year we hope someone will attempt higher. [chuckles]

IH: That's great news in there. Well, thanks, Mohamoud, for your time. I really appreciate your sharing your story with us.

MM: You're welcome.