

## **Background: Elders' Storytelling Sessions**

### **Overview:**

Elders for this project are individuals who have experienced or lived through the civil war in Somalia. Students interview the guest(s) and then share what they have learned in writing or multimedia. This is a powerful way to honor the resilience of the guests and keep their history alive.

The majority of Somali immigrants came to Minnesota as refugees escaping the civil war that began in 1991. They fled from various regions of Somalia and carry stories filled with horror, grief, trauma, resilience, and hope. Before arriving in Minnesota, many individuals spent years in refugee camps in Kenya, such as Dadaab, which was the largest refugee camp in the world at the time. They often came to the U.S. through family sponsorship or were granted resettlement opportunities. The process involved extensive interviews, security clearances, and health screenings, which could take years.

Once in the U.S., many faced challenges such as language barriers, cultural shock, discrimination, and the difficulties of adapting to a new country.

### **Project Goals:**

- **Guest Speakers:** Invite guest speakers from the Somali community who arrived as refugees. (Students may have wonderful ideas in identifying these guests!) Start by considering Somali students' parents or reaching out to community organizations like mosques, nonprofit organizations, and the Somali Museum of Minnesota. Aim to invite 3-5 speakers over the course of the unit, and ask them similar questions to gather diverse perspectives.
- **Student Contributions:** Students learn to take notes from a “primary source”, summarize stories shared, and contribute to a booklet that is produced as a class (or series of classes/schools) at the end of the quarter or semester.

### **Interview Process:**

- Depending on the class composition, either two or three students can interview each elder, or all students may have a question they want to ask, taking turns and taking notes. (A [T-chart graphic organizer](#) is included.) It's ideal to have one student designated to take photos for inclusion in the booklet.

### **Interview Guidelines:**

- Ideally, have a student thank and introduce the guest.

- Coach the students to ask questions with respect and kindness.
- If your interviewee does not want to answer a question, move on.
- Take notes on the [T-chart graphic organizer](#), capturing as many direct quotes as possible, or record the conversation with permission.
- Use the responses to inspire your final project of the booklet, or other form of creative expression.

**Suggested Questions:** (to share with guest ahead of interview, if students haven't generated their own questions.)

### **Before the War**

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us where you were born.
2. Can you describe your childhood before the war?
3. What was your home, school, or village like?
4. What were your favorite traditions or holidays growing up?

### **Life During the War**

5. What do you remember about the time when the Somali Civil War began?
6. How did your everyday life change?
7. Was there a moment that helped you stay strong and gave you hope?

### **Loss and Memory**

8. Are there people or memories from that time that are important to you?
9. What would you like others to know or remember about that time in history?

### **Living in a Refugee Camp**

10. Which refugee camp did you stay in, and what was a typical day like there?
  - Follow-up questions about shelter, food, sanitation, and healthcare.

### **Coming to America**

11. How did you come to the United States or Minnesota?
12. Can you describe the resettlement and screening process, how long it took, and any challenges you faced?
13. If applicable, can you share your experience immigrating to the U.S. through Latin America and your journey to the southern border? (Ask about the risks involved and treatment upon arrival in the U.S.)

### **Healing and Culture**

14. How has your life changed over the years since arriving here?
15. What helps you stay connected to your Somali roots today?
16. How do you find strength or peace after what you've been through?
17. What message or story would you like young people and teachers to carry forward?

**TIPS re: Interviewing Guests**

Dos	Don'ts
– Develop pre-reflection questions (for students and teacher). For example: Why is this an important guest to interview?	– Require students to participate if the subject matter or focus of the interview is in any way “triggering” for them.
– Be aware that some students may be particularly sensitive to issues and timeframes due to their own family stories.	– Dwell on the sadness of a traumatic experience relayed. Instead, focus on the resilience exercised and lessons carried forward.
– Prepare students by helping them be aware of the factual history that is relevant to the guest.	– Get scared off by the complexity of political situations relayed. Take time in following classes to add depth to the context.
– Help the students understand that the writing process will help them in all their classes – that it is important to know how to both write and edit, and that any piece of compelling writing requires more than one draft.	– Allow students to become desensitized to the suffering of others.
– Help them realize that they are helping create their own history, whether by writing about it or acting in other ways.	