

Conversations with Somali-American Leaders



HERITAGE STEM ACADEMY
MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Table of Contents

Copyright.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction.....	vi
Chapter 1: Siad Ali.....	7
<i>School Board Member, Minneapolis Public Schools</i> <i>Director of Outreach, Senator Amy Klobuchar</i>	
Chapter 2: Ifrah Mansour.....	8
<i>Artist, poet, playwright</i>	
Chapter 3: Hassan Jama.....	10
<i>Executive Director, Islamic Association of North America</i>	

Chapter 4: Dr. Cawo Abdi and Dr. Saida Abdi.....	12
<i>Professors, University of Minnesota</i>	
Chapter 5: Hodan Ahmed.....	14
<i>Chase Bank Manager</i>	
Chapter 6: Abdirizak Diis.....	16
<i>Somali Studies Teacher, Heritage STEM Academy</i>	
Chapter 7: Michael Luseni.....	18
<i>Principal, Heritage STEM Academy</i> <i>Minneapolis Public Schools</i>	
Chapter 8: Marian Hassan.....	20
<i>Author, editor</i>	

Copyright

Copyright © 2020 by the Minneapolis Public Schools

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Unless otherwise noted, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval systems, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations or critical reviews.

Permission is granted for individual readers, parents, teachers, and group leaders to copy pages for personal, home, classroom, or group work.

Minneapolis Public Schools
Special School District No. 1
1250 W. Broadway Ave.
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55411-2533
Phone: 612.668.0000
mpls.k12.mn.us

Dedication

by Mustaf Awol, Fadumo Ahmed, Ayan Abdi, Baydan Abdirahman, Sahra Ahmed, Fathi Ismail, and Kawsar Mahamud

This book is dedicated to the memory of two inspiring Somali-Canadian women: journalist Hodan Nalayeh and humanitarian aid worker Almaas Elman, who were committed to making and sharing positive news about Somalia. Both died tragically in 2019.

Hodan Nalayeh was a Somali-Canadian journalist whose mission was “to spread light and love to the Somali world” through her work. She was one of the people trying to change the views of her homeland of Somalia, to show other people how it took a turn for the good, and to share her love for the country, its food, and culture.

She hosted “Integration T.V.” from her Youtube channel which had more than 60,000 followers. She was also media executive, marketing consultant, social activist, and entrepreneur. She had emigrated to Canada in 1984, but moved back to Somalia in 2018.

A powerful speaker, she inspired many Somali women to speak up for their country and find hope in making Somalia a great country again.



Hodan Nalayeh
Journalist

Kismayo, where she and her husband were killed, is one of the places the terrorists have been attacking. The couple leaves behind two sons.

It was truly one of the saddest moments in the Somali community that she left this world. She wanted Somalia to have a clean slate and she really showed us what bravery and loyalty means. We are proud to call her a role model.

Dedication

*by Isra Mahamud, Baydan Abdirahman, Fadumo Abdi,
Baydan Abdirahman, and Sahra Ahmed*

Almaas Elman was a Somali-Canadian human rights activist who emigrated to Canada with her sisters and mother in the early 1990s. She wanted to bring peace to her country. She served as First Secretary in the Somali Embassy in Kenya and was also a liaison with diplomats in the European Union.

In a way, she was carrying out her father's legacy. He left Somalia and became an orphan, making a living polishing shoes. When Italy colonized Somalia, he got to go to Italy through a social service program which allowed him to go to high school and university, then to Germany where he got a master's degree to become an electrical engineer. This led him back to Somalia to help out the kids who were orphans living on the street.

He opened a 24-hour garage with young people who were in the same situation as him when he was young, before the civil war. When the war broke out, his focus was to help children avoid going to war as child soldiers through a campaign called "Drop the gun; pick up the pen!" One day he was shot, although no one knows who shot him. Since then, Almaas' mother founded and has run the Elman Peace Center.



Almaas Elman

Humanitarian Aid Worker

Almaas was in Somalia for a meeting of the campaign and was in a car trying to get to her destination when a stray bullet hit her. Everyone who knew Almaas thought that she was a wonderful, warm, committed, and yet modest advocate.

She was married to a Somali-Swedish tech businessman Zakaria Hersi, and was pregnant when she died.

Hodan and Almaas had a lot of things in common; they were both independent, they both got killed for no reason by terrorists, and they both left families and legacies behind.

We hope to carry on their legacies of peace-building with the stories of inspiring immigrants in this book.

Acknowledgments

With thanks to Heritage STEM Academy Principal Michael Luseni and teacher Abdirizak Diis for their vision and dedication. Thanks also to Minneapolis Public Schools Board member Siad Ali, Multilingual Department Director Muhidin Warfa, and Social Studies Program Facilitator Lisa Purcell, as well as the many community members and students who brought this Somali Studies course to life.

To learn more, contact:

Muhidin Warfa, Executive Director, Multilingual Department,
Minneapolis Public Schools, Muhidin.Warfa@mpls.k12.mn.us
612.668.5331

Introduction

This book is a product of the first public high school Somali Studies class held at Heritage STEM Academy in the Minneapolis Public Schools during school year 2019-2020.

With the support of administration, faculty, and community, students explored Somalia's geography, history, culture, political conflicts, and their own identities through a series of interdisciplinary units.

Intended outcomes included understanding the causes and effects of conflict; the influence of colonization on Somali history and culture; push and pull factors in immigration; and identity as evolving. In the course, students built skills in research, map-making, writing children's books and interviewing primary sources.

The school has completed its first year with the course, and has much to celebrate in the students' actions:

- The creation of digital story maps chronicling Somalia's history;
- A mid-year poetry gathering -- the culmination of the culture unit which focused on the importance of poets to the preservation of Somali history as well as the proliferation of contemporary Somali-American spoken word artists;

- Publication of a series of bilingual children's books, written by 8th-graders and donated to the Minneapolis Public Schools elementary schools to help with early literacy; and,
- Publication of this Somali-American Leaders book of profiles, written by 9th-12-grade students who interviewed these generous community members each week as inspiration for their own explorations of identity.

Much lies ahead in exploring possibilities with Somali Studies as each new class of students makes it their own.

~ Maddy Wegner
Writing Coach/Co-teacher

Siad Ali

Outreach Director for Senator Amy Klobuchar
Director, Minneapolis School Board

by Hanad Aden, Sabrina Abu, Adnan Ismael, Abdi Kahin, Iqra Mohamed, Isra Mohamed, Kawsar Mahamud, and Muktar Mohamud

Siad Ali is a man whose story can be related to by many Somali people. Before the Somali civil war broke out, Ali had a life quite similar to other Somali children at the time. He woke up early in the morning, got dressed, ate breakfast, walked about 6 kilometers to school (4-5 miles) and had a good time there. After school, he worked at his mom's grocery store when she napped, then went out and played with friends. He thought Somalia was the best place in the world.

When asked how his life was before the civil war in Somalia, he responded: "We may not have had a lot of stuff you guys have today, but we were ambitious kids who wanted to learn and who were hungry for our education."

After the civil war broke out, Ali and his family had to flee out of the country to a Kenyan refugee camp. Ali considers himself "one of the lucky ones" because he was able to flee and, with the help of his family, got sent to India for more schooling. He lived



there for eight years, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees before coming to the United States 20 years ago.

Now, he is a proud parent of five, and is passionate about children receiving the education they rightfully deserve. He has helped kids all over Minneapolis. He is also helping kids in Somalia. He pays for their tuition because "Education is the only way to be successful in life." He says that education helped him become who he is today. Faith is also very important to Ali, and he says "Obey your parents."

One of Ali's hopes and dreams is that Somali becomes a good place and has peace. His personal plan is to continue learning; he is currently a student going back for a doctorate degree.

He says, "Sky's the limit!" as he works with Senator Amy Klobuchar.

Ifrah Mansour

Playwright, poet, actor

by Ayan Abdi, Khandra Mohamud, Sumayo Omar, Zuhuur Mohamed, Iqra Mahamud, Kowsar Mahamud, Fathi Ismail, Mustaf Awol, Yaqub Ibrahim, Sahra Ahmed, Hanad Aden, Sabrina Abu, Mohamed Abdillahi, and Isra Mahamud



Ifrah Mansour is a Muslim queen whose art has helped girls to never give up on their dreams. Author of the poem “I am a Refugee,” she is a Somali Muslim artist who planned to be a teacher before she found out that she loves art.

She and her older brothers were born in Saudi Arabia because the marriage between their mother and father wasn’t really approved by their families. They ended up coming back to Somalia at an “unfortunate” time, when the war was about to start in 1991, and when she was less than 10. Since she was young, she wasn’t entirely aware of what was going on. She recalls just playing with other Somali girls and having the time

of her life. She told us that she would play with her friends outside with bottles as if it were soccer.

Because of the war, she and her stepmother, step-siblings, and older brothers fled to a refugee camp in Kenya, where all she remembers is the games they would have to make up in order to stay entertained. She said that it wasn’t as bad as we might think, but she remembers that “One minute you are safe, and the next minute you are stuck in your home and couldn’t come out.”

Before Ifrah came to America, she lived with her grandma who she said “showered her with love.” Her grandmother used

to tell her beautiful stories, even though she was illiterate. As Ifrah said, “Even in the midst of the darkest time of our history of our country, I received love and care.”

Ifrah and her family went back to Somalia a couple of times, but there was no peace so her family came back to America in 1998. She, her stepmother, and siblings (a family of eight) were part of the third wave of Somali refugees coming to the United States, and landed in Dallas, Texas before moving to Minnesota. In Dallas, she lived in a suburban neighborhood where they didn't see a single brown person in their first month, which was a cultural shock to her. She remembers when she and her siblings went grocery shopping and didn't know whether they should put the grocery cart in their car. “That's how hard coming to America was!” she said.

After high school, she thought she wanted to become a doctor (“like all Somalis”) but decided against it since that wasn't her true passion in life. She was on the path to become an elementary teacher and had started a teaching degree, but was still confused about what to do.

When she was at school, instead of doing homework she was writing poems. She realized that she had wanted to do art her whole life. She tried to paint, but was bad at it. So she got a job at a nearby theater and saw African-American artists performing. Eventually she got cast to be in a play about a tired nurse who hated being a nurse.

Then she wrote a short story about her life and presented it. This was the start of the multimedia artist Ifrah Mansour.

Ifrah is a very talented and inspiring woman because she moved on with her life after a lot of bad things happened to her. She loves the Somali super hero Hawo Tako, who she says was carrying her children while fighting in the 1948 riots in Mogadishu.

Although Ifrah doesn't have children, she said, “If I had kids I would let them choose what they want to be for their future. Her advice is to “Be you,” and “Live your dreams, no matter what.”

Her hope is that “Regardless of race, religion, and circumstance that we learn to see all humans as individuals who should have equal rights to find a safe home and pursue happiness.”

She would like to revisit Africa and have her mother see her perform at the Somali Qaranka Tiyaartarka, the national museum in Mogadishu. As she said, “Basically, I want to portray on stage how I want to be seen in the world.”

Ifrah is a very strong woman with a positive vibe.

Hassan Jama

Executive Director
Islamic Association of North America

by Zuhuur Mohamed, Isra Mahamud, Sumayo Omar, Hanad Aden, Iqra Mahamud, Muktar Mohamud, Ismail Jama, Sahra Ahmed, Abdi Ismail, Barni Farah, Mustafa Awol, Sabrina Abu, Adnan Ismael

In Somali Studies, every Monday we get to interview a Somali influencer. In February of 2020, Hassan Jama came to Heritage Academy and was interviewed by the students in the Somali Studies class.

Hassan was born in Mogadishu and grew up in different parts of Somalia. His life in Somalia before the civil war was “beautiful,” he said. It was one of “peace and beauty,” a “life without stress.” He said that he didn’t have to worry about anything before the civil war. Everything was either covered by the government or by his parents. Everyone was friendly, and they often visited each other at their houses.

But when he was a teenager, the civil war broke out. He went on to say that one of the political conflicts was tribalism,



which is when you hate or dislike someone because of his or her tribe and want to take over their land or resources. He fled from Somalia to Kenya, “by car and sometimes by foot.” It was a long journey. He went to Kenya’s refugee camp named “Watanga” where his family lived in a small house.

It was a difficult time for Jama. Everything was different: the weather, the language, and the people. He remembers that there was “a line for everything”: for food or bathroom or other necessities. But he still enjoyed his life. He played soccer and went to lots of mosques.

He said that two thoughts were on his mind: One was when was he going to get out of the refugee camp? The other was when was he going to get better from the malaria he got from the mosquitos?

He came to the States in '99. When he came to Minnesota, he and his group rented a little place so that they could make it a mosque. That's how they started I.A.N.A., where he is the Executive Director and has been since 2015. It is a nonprofit organization that hosts 33 mosques, and helps build masjids and Islamic institutions all around the country. He does a lot of work with youth and helps women and children.

Hassan is a passionate person who wants to help his people. As a Somali man, his faith is very important to him, as are the people of Somalia. He says that these are sources of strength for him.

Another source of strength for him is education. "I take my learning very seriously," he said.

In the future, he wants to be a writer and he wants to help fight Islamophobia. He sees that Islamophobia is one of the problems for the Muslim community.

He has great hope for his children and wants them to help benefit other people. He hopes that his children will take over his legacy.

Hassan would also live to revisit Somalia, to help rebuild it. "As a Somali community, as a Somali people, as a Somali government, we need to follow the law so that we can have a peaceful country and so that we don't have to go through the pain and sorrow that the people before us went through," he said.

He has no doubt that Somalia will go back to the stable and powerful government it once had. He sees that "Now the Somali government is improving and getting better year after year."

But, "We need to love each other. We need to learn to give and take," he said.

He is a great role model for us kids.

Dr. Cawo Abdi and Dr. Saida Abdi

University of Minnesota professors

by Adnan Ismael, Fadumo Ahmed, Faisal Abdullahi, Ismail Jama, Sabrina Abu, Yusuf Ali, Iqra Mahamud, Kawsar Mahamud, Isra Mahamud, Fathi Hassan, Fathi Ismail, Mohamed Abdillahi, and Mustaf Awol

Cawo Abdi and Saida Abdi are sisters who were born in Galkayo, Somalia, and moved first to Mogadishu, then to Ottawa, Canada, before the Somali Civil War started. They both have their Ph.D.s and many more diplomas including degrees in economics, film, communications, and sociology.

They became professors of sociology and social work at the University of Minnesota because they are interested in how families work and how men and women relate to each other.



Cawo said that when she moved to Canada, she had learned how to read and write, but wasn't as good at speaking English. She had to take English as a Second Language classes and redo two grades since the schooling she did in Somalia didn't count. When asked what the biggest challenge was that she faced in Canada, she responded, "As someone who was academically driven in Somalia, I lost two to three years of the dreams I had."

She has done a lot of research, including writing a book on Somali immigration to the U.S. and to South Africa.

She shared a piece of advice: “Ma taabin kartaa circa haddaad dhulka jiipto,” which translates to “You can’t touch the sky while sleeping on the floor.” She also said, “Unless you make the effort, it’s not going to happen.”

When Cawo was asked how she feels when she hears the word “sociology” she said that “It’s more than a job; it’s something that you’re committed to and you value.” She said that she “wakes up every morning happy to go to work.”

Her sister, Saida, has been with her in her adventure. They both love their jobs and are focused on Somali kids and moms who are suffering in America.

Saida is also a psychotherapist and a researcher with expertise in refugee and immigrant trauma and resilience. She has worked a lot in middle schools and says that she “really believes in kids.” She tries to help kids in their community, to make sure they and their peers are doing well, that they are successful, and can contribute to their community and the wider society. She is like a counselor.

She did her undergrad in film at first. Then she decided, for her master’s, to do communications. When she started hearing about all the refugees coming to the States, she decided to help them. Now she helps teachers and young children in schools.

The sisters would like to write a book together about their mother, who made them who they are today. (Their mom was close to 90 when she passed away in 2018 in Canada.)

Both also would like to go back to Somalia to help with the conflict, providing therapy and counseling and doing research.

Hodan Ahmed

Chase Bank Manager

*by Hanad Aden, Kawsar Mahamud, Khandra Mohamud,
Muktar Mohamud, Sumayo Omar, and Fathi Ismail*

In the Spring of 2020, we got to meet Hodan Ahmed, a banker for Chase Bank. She was born in North Somalia, in a city called Erivago. Her family moved to India when Hodan was four years old. She grew up there and got her master's degree focusing on finance and human resources.

She said that her family's strong educational background has kept her going. Her family encouraged her to do well academically and also contribute to the community. "Everyone in my family is an inspiration to me," she said.



In India, she helped lots of refugees through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees by supporting them emotionally, interpreting for them, and helping them fill out forms. "It is rewarding when you are able to help another human being so that they don't experience the same struggles in a new country as my mom experienced raising us in a foreign country," she said. This is something she is passionate about, as a "people person." She also said that she gets "lots of her values and attentiveness towards people" from her mom.

Her family moved to the U.S. in 2011. Although this was their first

time in the U.S., the family adjusted pretty well because they had family members here to help them through the culture shock. Within a month, she started volunteering with Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Roanoke, Virginia, helping refugees with the resettlement process. She had the advantage of speaking four languages, so could help families from Haiti, Nepal, Somalia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Kenya, and Bhutan.

In 2012, she moved to Minneapolis, where she first worked for Wells Fargo. She is now a Branch Manager for Chase Bank. She says, “I love how Chase Bank puts people before anything. I also enjoy the fact that I am helping the community with financial education as their financial well-being is my top priority.” She is able to help immigrants live their dreams by advising them on setting up small businesses, paying for education, buying houses, and securing their and their families’ futures with savings options.

She would like to write a book as an inspiration to refugees around the world by sharing stories of her journey, a journey she is proud of.

Abdirizak Diis

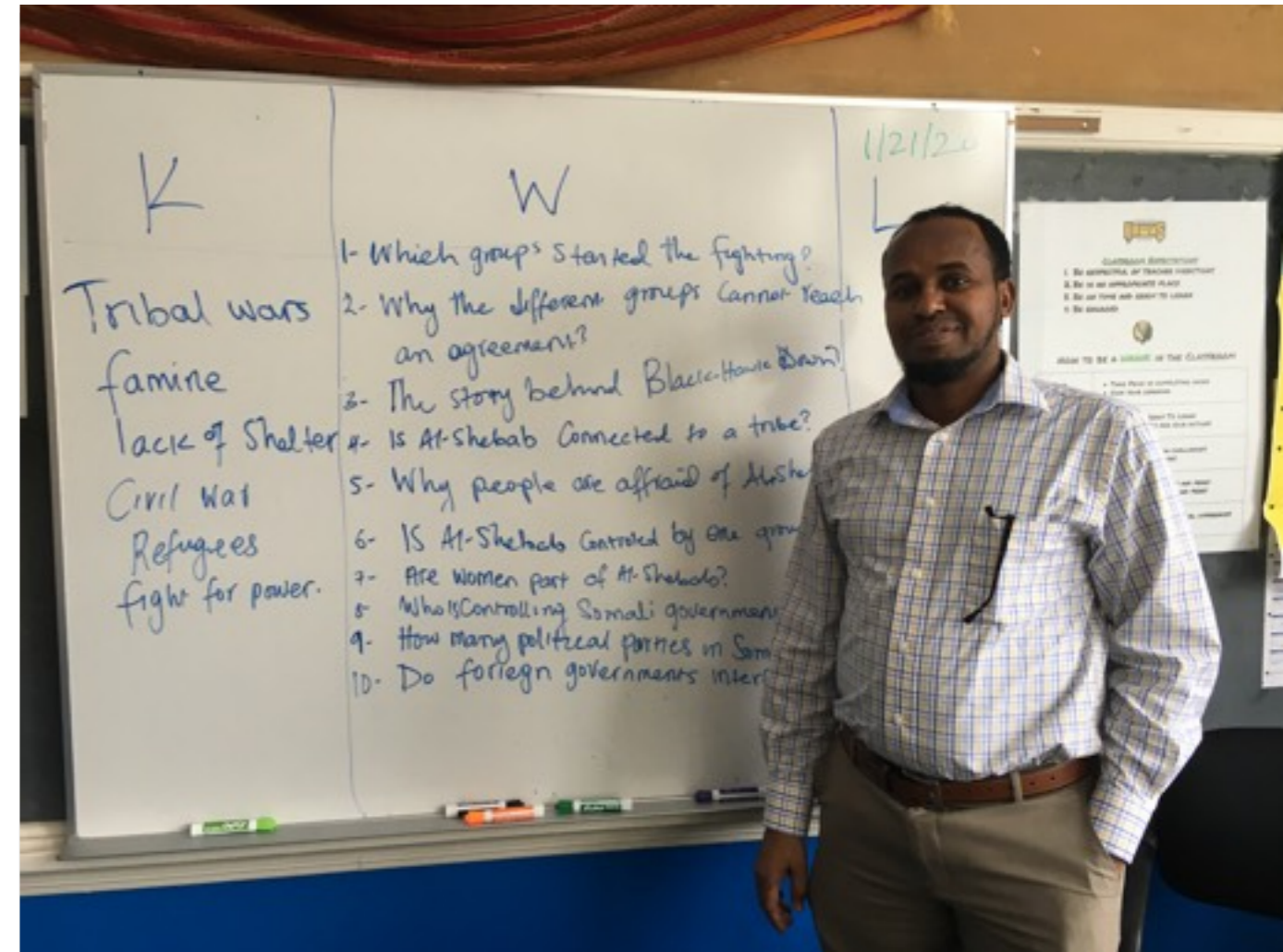
Somali Studies Teacher
Heritage STEM Academy
Minneapolis Public Schools

by Baydan Abdirahman and Abdirahman Abdirashid

Mr. Diis is a Somali teacher at Heritage Academy. That is where he is now, but he had a long road to get there.

Born in Kismayo, Somalia, he grew up in Qoryoley, was a refugee in four countries, and lived in the largest refugee camp in the world (Dadaab in Kenya). He also has managed a grocery store in South Africa, driven a forklift in Moline, Illinois -- where he got a master's degree -- and learned to speak four languages.

The Diis family lost their father young, but all have been successful. All Diis' siblings live in Kenya. One of his sisters is a nurse, and two of his brothers are teachers. One brother



joined the army after he graduated from high school. His older brother is a teacher currently doing his master's degree in Nairobi.

Mr. Diis has been in the U.S. for six years, has taught at different schools and at the moment teaches at Heritage. From his first days in school at age six, he knew that he wanted to be a teacher. In those years, he says that the Somali government supplied everything: from books to uniforms -- and had a plan to increase literacy rates. The country's motto was: "Teach or learn" and many people became teachers like him. According to a United Nations report, Somalia managed to increase tremendously the literacy rate of the population.

Diis went to primary school in Somalia, middle and high school in Kenya, and college in Sudan. He then moved to South Africa for work but said that those were hard years to be a Somali there. The South Africans would judge you as an immigrant, and often attacked Somalis, Nigerians, and Zimbabweans. As a refugee, you had no papers, so couldn't own firearms or open a bank account. Criminals would rob you because they knew you kept your money in your house and had no gun to defend yourself. While there, Mr. Diis managed to go to school and obtain another bachelor degree from the University of South Africa.

Coming to the U.S. also wasn't easy. Diis had to go through many interviews, and the screenings were harder than for other countries. In April of 2014, the United Nations agency called him to say, "Leave tomorrow for a health screening and a flight in three days, or you'll be held back for one year." He managed to leave with his wife and one daughter, and resettled in Moline, Illinois. That's where he got a job as an assistant educator and forklift driver. His dream was still to become a full-time teacher, so he went to university and was a full-time student and parent, while also working full-time

Mr. Diis wants to help the Somali community by tackling one of the biggest problems: tribalism. Diis says that it is hard to see someone as who they are, not just their family tribe. He says that how the Somali government is run today is based on the tribal system called "4.5." This means that there are four complete tribes and a half tribe. In this system the four major

tribes will get equal opportunities of the government positions and the half tribe -- which comprises all minority groups -- will receive half of what one major tribe gets. "This is unjust system that needs to be eliminated," he says. One main problem in Somalia is that you can't marry across tribal lines, and it has been that way for hundreds of years. Now, Diis says, "Change is happening, but it needs to happen at the government level."

He is trying to do everything in his power to fix Somalia and to make it the country that it is supposed to be -- "to see with one eye, to be just," as he says.

Michael Luseni

Principal, Heritage STEM Academy
Minneapolis Public Schools

*by Mohamed Abdillahi, Muktar Mohamud, Barni Farah,
Khandra Mohamud and Ayan Abdi*

Principal Michael Luseni worked hard to get to where he is right now. He is the principal at Heritage STEM Academy and came to the U.S. from Liberia in the early 1990s — unlike the other Somali immigrants profiled in this book.

He came as a refugee after a civil war broke out in his country. The civil war was between a group of people and the government, and — as a result — there was no food, water, school, or electricity. He lived in a refugee camp for nine months before coming to the U.S. on a Visa.



When he came to the U.S., he had to learn a new language, new cultures, and how to live a new life. He made a promise to himself that he would work on getting his education. As he said, “I was not going to stop going to school, and I was going to make something of myself.” He also was determined to help people with fewer opportunities because he came from the struggle himself.

The first university he went to is the University of St. Thomas; then he went to the University of Minnesota, where he got his teaching degree. After that, he moved to Washington, D.C. with his wife, where he worked in the school system for four years. Then he came back to Minneapolis and worked at the Adult Detention Center, which is for young adults who have committed crimes. After that, he became the assistant principal at Jefferson for two years, then went to South High.

Now, as the principal at Heritage STEM Academy, he says that his leadership relies heavily on his ability to build good relationships with people. “Leadership is about asking people to do something that they may not want to do,” said Mr. Luseni.

“I spend my time really looking at how I can put kids in a position where they can succeed.” He wants students to know that the grades they have now may not be okay in the future. “If you don’t have the right grade point average, you may take yourself out of a school you wanted to go to,” he said. So, getting the best grades possible now will help a lot in the future.

Mr. Luseni is a man with determination who has paved a way through all his struggles to become the man he is today.

He is a great principal that everyone can go to and “chill” with. He makes students feel confident and never belittles them. He gives them a boost of confidence and makes them feel at home whenever they are in school.

Marian Hassan

Author, editor

Author and editor Marian Hassan inspired us early on with her recently published collection, *Crossroads: An Anthology of Resilience and Hope by Young Somali Writers*. It was to be the focus of our final unit on identity as it captures the voices of many young Somali-Minnesotans. Then the pandemic hit, and learning went online. But we were delighted that she came to share her stories of journal-writing and bilingual children's book publishing with the eighth grade students, who were in the midst of their own children's book-writing project at that time.



She embodies the spirit of all the generous-spirited community members whose so kindly shared their stories with us, early Monday mornings.

We are forever indebted to them and look forward to the news that they and the Heritage students make as they continue their work.