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A home away from home

Somali Development Center helps refugees forge a new life in Boston



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Mariam Kaahin Ahmed came home one day in 1991 and found her husband dead. He wasn't a soldier, but Ahmed suspects he was killed in one of the many random acts of violence that plagued Mogadishu as the once-prosperous capital of Somalia, and the rest of the country, descended into civil war.

Rival groups shelled each other without regard to civilians, recalled Ahmed, who now lives in Jamaica Plain. She fled Mogadishu with her four children, aged 3 to 15 at the time, and for the next few years they wandered from town to town, trying to go where the war wasn't. The trek took them to Ethiopia in 1998 and Egypt in 1999, where each time they stayed with other Somali refugees they knew. In Cairo, Ahmed applied to immigrate to the United States, citing her refugee status, was interviewed, and accepted. Her children decided to stay, she said; today two are in Kenya and two in Somalia.

Arriving to Boston March 30, 2000, Ahmed already knew some Somalis she could stay with until finding more permanent housing. Within a few weeks, she was taking weekly citizenship classes at the Somali Development Center in Jamaica Plain that taught English, US history, government, and civics, and would eventually prepare her for her citizenship test.

Ahmed doesn't dwell on the past and dismisses her troubles to "destiny" while crediting her survival to "faith in God." When asked about her husband, Ahmed lets out a short, tired laugh and points to a headline in the Metro newspaper: "Teen shot three times on crowded Orange Line."

PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Sahra Elmi (above) attends a class taught by Naima Hashi (top right) at the center in Jamaica Plain.



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Abdi Yakub (left) and Fakhir Mohamed confer after a writing exercise at a weekly US citizenship class offered at the Somali Development Center in Jamaica Plain. The center helps refugees acclimate to their new environment.

“Everybody die. Everybody die,” she said. The display of resignation and resilience has helped many refugees of the anarchic country adjust to Boston and a handful of other North American cities that are far different from the environments they left behind. It is often a long process, one that involves challenges common to immigrants, such as language barriers, but also challenges unique to Somalis, such as learning to live in a governed society after knowing only either war or the refugee camps of Ethiopia and Kenya.

“People think once somebody’s already here they can easily assimilate,” said Abdirahman Yusuf, who founded the Somali Development Center in 1996. He estimates 8,000 to 10,000 Somalis have arrived in New England since 1992. Many of the more recent refugees are Somali Bantu, from the rural southern part of the country. “For people who have not been to school and who have lived in small villages from the country, everything is new,” from refrigerators and medicine to clothing and “just being part of a society where the majority of the people are of a different race and religion.”



Ceding power to women

Among the issues some Somali families wrestle with is whether to allow female members to work, Yusuf said. Despite financial hardship, men are sometimes reluctant to cede women the power that comes with employment or help with child

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NAIMA HASHI, (left)
teacher at the Somali
Development Center

care and other household responsibilities. “Once a woman acquires skills and money, that becomes power, the roles have shifted, and many men feel uncomfortable with that,” said Yusuf. “But given the right support and encouragement, many of them want to work; and they’re very good workers.”

Many refugees, including women who have undergone female genital mutilation, take a long time to open up about their health issues, said Jennifer Abbott, who taught citizenship and women’s health classes at the Somali center. “I waited a year before talking about anything sensitive or having to do with reproductive health,” Abbott said.

Abbott, who, moved by the plight of the refugees enrolled in the New England School of Law last fall, also worried that many Somalis are placed in violent neighborhoods where hearing gunshots outside their windows is not unusual.

"These people are trying to flee violence, and they suffer major post-traumatic stress and they have major flashbacks," said Abbott, 27. "You want to be grateful for everything they've been given. But at the same time, it's just not acceptable to put someone in a situation like that."

New challenges

Since Somalia's civil war erupted in 1991, the country has mostly been without a central government. That makes teaching American government that much more challenging.

The task falls upon Naima Hashi, 23, who has taught the SDC's citizenship course since September. Hashi, who everyone has called Nimo for as long as she can remember, is also a refugee, and knows the challenges well.

Her family fled the war in 1991 for Addis Ababa, where Hashi, the seventh of nine children, graduated from high school. She was 18 when she came to America, but still had to complete one year of high school to be eligible to apply to college. She enrolled in Boston English, and recalls her first year as "difficult."

"I was homesick. It was a different environment," she said. "I didn't know anybody. I just wanted to get it done."

Hashi finished high school in 2002, went to Newbury College for a two-year degree, and then transferred to the University of Massachusetts at Boston, where she majors in early childhood psychology. She graduates this spring and hopes to work at the SDC full time.

"I was given the opportunity to do this, and I love to do this," Hashi said. "I want to help people do something with their opportunity. Sometimes I think what it would have been like if I didn't get the opportunity to be a student. If I can offer my help to those who need help, I would be happy."

Hashi acknowledged that coming from a family that emphasized education helped her establish herself quickly in the United States, and credits her father, who took two years of night classes at Cambridge College to earn a medical translation degree and today translates at local hospitals for Somali and Ethiopian patients, for setting an example.

Cultural adjustment

Not everyone responds so enthusiastically. Many Somalis hope for peace and a return to Somalia without really trying here. While most of the 10 to 20 students — almost all females — who attend the citizenship classes seem to pay attention to the lessons, a few others seem disinterested, even resentful.

"Some people are just not up to new challenges, don't want to try new things, wishing things were just easy and handed to them," said Yusuf. "But the reality is many

will never go back. There lives are much better now, no matter what they say."

For refugees struggling with culture shock and language barriers, the Somali Development Center offers social workers and teachers who speak their language and know their culture, but help them acclimate to their new environment.

"We're not trying to Americanize them, but just give them a view of how things here work," Hashi said.

Ahmed, the refugee widow, said the center helped her pass her citizenship test and earn her citizenship on Nov. 8, 2006, a day she happily recalls. She reads and understands English better than she speaks it, knows the different branches of government, how checks and balances work, and even ticks off the names of Supreme Court Justices like a C-SPAN junkie. "If you can't change the past, you have to work on the future," she said through a translator.

"I believe sometimes people don't know about small, ethnic-based organizations like ours. They do 90 percent of the work for these populations but get 10 percent of the funds," said Yusuf. The center, he complains, could use more workers but doesn't have the money to hire them. With children of his own and overwhelmed with demands at the center, Yusuf sometimes thinks about leaving. But then he remembers how people like Ahmed got her citizenship and stays put.

"I want to have an impact," he said. "I want to help people become Somali Americans."