



## JOURNEYS OF THE DIASPORA

March 3, 2015

LAURA DACHENBACH

Somalis fled their native land during an upheaval, and two decades later they've established a community here, thousands of miles away

**Editor's Note:** We've often said at (614) that our pages are more like an art gallery than just editorial white space, that we serve as curators as much as editors and writers.

That's especially true for this month's cover story, a project more than a year in the making, in an attempt to shine more light on Columbus's well-documented, yet possibly misunderstood Somali population.

Our writer, Laura Dachenbach, has translated her knowledge of and familiarity with members of the diaspora—as an ESL tutor and friend of the community—into what we feel is an incredibly informative and enlightening piece.

Not only have we presented her experience and her vision as a journalist, but we are also honored to offer a dual narrative from one of the community's own.

The images you will see on the following pages have been graciously offered for publication by Tariq Tarey, a Somali-born Columbus resident, who has worked as a “visual ethnographer,” specializing in refugee affairs for the last decade. A variety of images from his extensive catalogue are featured, ranging from the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya to the South Side of Columbus. This article is the gallery, and visually, Tariq is the artist; these are not photos of our story's subjects, and we felt that handling the imagery for this article in such a way gave us an opportunity to offer additional compelling context to Laura's reportage.

In addition to the photos printed in this issue, images from Tariq's celebrated 2006 exhibit *Forlorn in Ohio*, which documented the plight of Somali refugees, are now part of a permanent collection of the Columbus Museum of Art. In recognition of the power of his work to call attention to the plight of refugees, he has also been honored with the South Side Settlement House's prestigious Arts Freedom Award and the Individual Artist Award by both the Ohio and Greater Columbus Art Councils. He also works in film, directing the documentaries *Emergency Living: Somalia in the Aftermath of Famine*, and *Women, War and Resettlement: Nasro's Journey*, the latter of which was aired on WOSU Public Television in 2012.

We encourage you to follow more of Tariq's work at [tariqtarey.com](http://tariqtarey.com) or @tariqtarey.



I remember when it was still unusual, the women with heads covered by hijabs, clutching their children's hands, moving about the streets of Columbus in a bit of a daze. Men, looking for work, trying to fill out forms they didn't understand. Many predicted these Somalis would move elsewhere after a short while. How could a busy, football-crazed, and sometimes very cold

Midwestern city become a new home for refugees from the coast of East Africa?

But they didn't leave. Today, Columbus is home to the third-largest population of Somali immigrants in North America, following Toronto and Minneapolis. They have created Columbus's largest ethnic enclave. The story of the Somali diaspora in Columbus is not of a people who found a new home; it's the story of people who made a new home. While I have often raised a skeptical eyebrow at the stereotype of the hardworking immigrant, I have always been amazed by the ability of the Somali community to create something from nothing, sometimes in a very short period of time.

I have not been to Somalia, nor do I speak its language. I have simply listened to the stories of Somalis with the hope of better understanding them as people, and from that point, tried to better understand Somali culture. I have taught English to Somalis. I have volunteered alongside them at benefits and conferences. I have shared conversations and meals with them. Even after two decades, I still field questions from Columbus residents about their neighbors from the Horn of Africa. But those questions are not mine to answer. What follows is the beginning of a conversation with some of the people who have lived that story firsthand, and an invitation for readers to continue that dialogue with others.

### Peace and War

"Some people think Somalia should have cold weather," Ahmed Osman Gurhan jokes as he digs his spoon into his oatmeal. "Weather changes the way you think, the way you do things. In Africa it is hot and people are always fighting. In the cold weather you have to live together. You have to share a blanket."

Wearing a black pullover and a pastel dress shirt and tie, Gurhan meets me at a Tim Horton's, the diaspora's version of Starbucks, where the spices and sugar of the French Vanilla Cappuccino taste like Somali tea. He was once a member of Somalia's military as a young officer, and he knows about fighting.

Gurhan initially joined the army for the same reasons that many Americans do. The military provided him with an education at a time when advanced learning opportunities were harder to access. As an officer, Gurhan was once a member of security at the presidential residence in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital and largest city. He saw former president and military dictator Siad Barre on a daily basis and remembers him as an ordinary man. "He was kind of a calm person, a listener," Gurhan says. "I liked him."

After nine years of civilian government following British and Italian colonial rule, Barre seized control of Somalia in 1969 and established a socialist state. He focused on

promoting Somali nationalism through the official use of the Somali language, the creation of a written form of Somali, a ban on colonial languages, and bans on other behaviors deemed tribal. These regulations were attempts to reduce the influence of Somalia's tribes, which had been corrupted by colonial powers.

Jibril Mohamed grew up in Mogadishu in this same era. I walk into his office at The Ohio State University, where he's a lecturer of Somali language and culture. He has finished teaching classes for the day and is now advising a student. Smiling and soft-spoken, he invites me to sit down. He was one of seven children, a typical Somali family, and he recalls a childhood routine of Islamic school, primary school, and breakfasts of tea and injera (a flatbread). His father was an administrator at a military hospital. He watched his older siblings further their education and eagerly followed their example. His modest hope was to purchase his own home in Mogadishu someday. "We had peace," he says.

That peace was shattered when gunfire and explosions rocked the city, the first vibrations of what would become a full-scale civil war. In 1991, a number of tribally-based paramilitary groups, perceiving an increasing totalitarianism in Barre's government, deposed the president in a coup. Bandits and tribal warlords began terrorizing the population with random and deadly violence. Instinctively, desperately, people began to run for the borders, roughly 50 miles from the capital. Jibril left for Kenya on foot with a sister, taking almost nothing with him.



Gurhan wished to remain loyal to the president, but when the national army was disbanded in the rebellion, there were few options and no protection for those without a strong tribal affiliation. "I personally did not know tribalism," he says. "I didn't grow up in that kind of lifestyle, so I was lost."

When two of his brothers drowned, Gurhan was left with few ties in an unraveling country. Tribes that had fought collectively to oust the president now turned against each other. "I decided to leave the country because I didn't want to participate in the civil war," he says. Fearing capture, he escaped under an assumed name to join his daughter and his pregnant wife in a refugee camp in Kenya.

### Life of a Refugee

After fleeing Mogadishu, Jibril stayed in the Kenyan border town of Liboi for a year before arriving at what is now the largest refugee camp in the world, operated by the United Nations in Dadaab, Kenya. "When I came in the camps, they didn't have any formal systems in place," he says. There was one hospital and spaces reserved for yet-to-be-finished schools. A single pump provided water for 800 people, who waited in line for hours to fill plastic containers for the morning's cooking and cleaning.

As more refugees entered the camps, a small amount of structure developed. A marketplace was built where people could trade or sell part of their food rations for needed items, such as firewood. In 1999, the United States government built a vocational

high school. Jibril became a teacher. He remained in Kenya for 10 years, though he never thought of his life in Dadaab as permanent.

“I had a background with an ethic that says you have to go to college. I looked for every opportunity I could,” he says. He applied for student visas and aid and was finally interviewed for a scholarship to study at the University of Nairobi, the first refugee the committee had ever considered. He received the scholarship and eventually graduated from college with honors. But Jibril is even prouder of the fact that the scholarship now funds 120 Somali students. “I was able to open a way for others,” he says, smiling.

Gurhan’s stay in Kenya was brief by comparison. He found his wife and daughter in a refugee camp in Nairobi, and although he considers his experiences there to be the most difficult of his life, he’s thankful his time lasted less than a year. He was relocated to Portland, Maine, in 1992. Others would wait much longer.

If a refugee cannot qualify for an appropriate visa, the chances of relocation are slim. Less than 1 percent of all refugees in the world, usually those considered to be at greatest risk, are resettled in a country different from the one they fled or the one in which they have stationed themselves. The U.S. Department of State works with nine domestic resettlement agencies that place refugees in approximately 190 cities.

Sometimes the match isn’t ideal. They have tried placing Somalis in warmer climates, but that often comes with the racial tension inherent to certain southern cities. Other times, larger cities with ample bilingual services proved too expensive. Immigrants and refugees may then become “secondary migrants,” moving several times while trying to find the best place for their needs. It’s a well-tread path for many newcomers, and it’s very common within the Columbus Somali community.

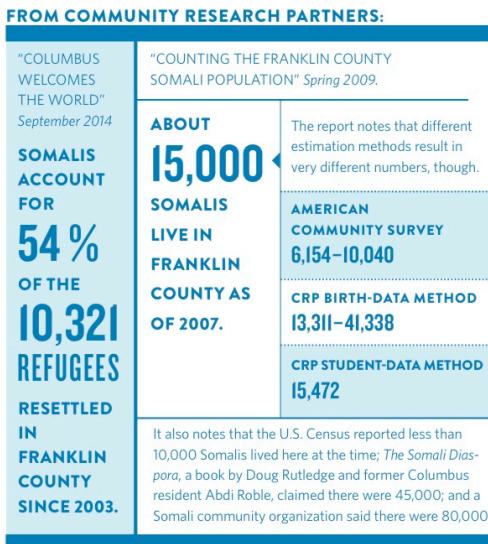
### Coming to Columbus

When Halima Warsame arrived in New York City in 1994, she was immediately struck by two things: sneakers and smiles. It seemed all Americans had the tendency to smile

frequently without reason and to wear athletic shoes as all-purpose footwear, both uncommon practices in other parts of the world.

She’s now living on the northeast side of Columbus, where she and her husband raise their four children. Halima (a pseudonym used for purposes of modesty and privacy) offers me Somali tea and bread with Nutella. Before we begin to talk, she wraps a skirt around her waist, lays a rug on the floor facing Mecca, and completes her evening prayers.

Like Jibril and Gurhan, Halima left politically unstable Somalia after it fell into the hands of tribal clan leaders. “I was scared for myself,” she explains, her voice resurrecting urgency from 20



years ago. “They don’t care who you are. If they see you they might kill you, they might kidnap you.”

She came here with a rudimentary command of English and strict instructions from her brother to get a job at McDonald’s, but she found New York too crowded and confusing. Halima then joined friends in Atlanta, where she met her husband. For a short time they lived in Ann Arbor, which also proved to be expensive, as well as isolated. When they began investigating less expensive places to live, an American friend suggested Ohio, and they finally moved to Columbus in 2007.

Khadra Mohamed came to the United States on a diversity visa and moved to Columbus from the D.C. metro area because of the cost of living. She looks statuesque in a long denim skirt and a simple blue hijab edged in gold.

“The word got out—Columbus, Ohio, was a good place to raise children,” she says. This quality was especially attractive for women who had left behind men fighting in the civil war or who had already been killed. In Central Ohio, many Somali women who had never worked before were able to find jobs for the first time.

In 2005, Jibril joined family members who had been resettled here. Of Columbus’s attractiveness, he said, “Somalis like space.” The city has easily accessible resources, as well as a sense of openness with less congestion. It’s also situated at the midpoint of the diaspora, a drivable distance to Minneapolis, Washington D.C., New York, Chicago, and Toronto. According to *A Guide to Somali Culture*, a report from Ohio Homeland Security, Columbus has been especially appealing because the city has provided employment training programs and affordable housing for large migrant families.

The question of the population’s size remains difficult. The most conservative estimates place the number living in Franklin County around 10,000, while estimates from within the Somali community run upwards of 80,000. The primary reason for the variation, according to Aaron Schill and Devin Keithley of Community Research Partners—a local nonprofit research organization—is that agencies only track data on resettled refugees for three to six months. Other governmental programs like Medicaid don’t record this type of information. Also, every Somali living here is not necessarily a political refugee as designated by the U.N., and when secondary migration affects population size, there’s no accurate way to determine it.

### Home Away from Home

Jibril tells me that the day he received his Social Security card, he got a call from L Brands’ distribution center asking if he could begin work the next day. By pulling multiple shifts and overtime, in a few months he was able to afford a car—his first.

In addition to founding and directing Somali Community Access Network (SomaliCAN), a nonprofit policy research and development organization, Jibril has also worked as an employment counselor for Community Refugee and Immigration Services, one of three local resettlement organizations. All refugees receive work authorization upon arrival to the United States. CRIS Employment Services prepares them for American employment,

helps businesses work with foreign employees, and pairs workers with potential employers.

The answer to job security for many Somalis has been to create their own employment.

“My family taught us never go on to government assistance. You have to work,” says Halima, who was unaware of certain forms of public assistance in the United States before she came. When she had children, the expensive cost of daycare eventually forced her to become a stay-at-home mom. After years of living in America, though, her English skills improved and she became a resource for people needing basic translation. These contacts ultimately grew into a core group of clients that prompted the family to open a daycare center.

Halima is proud of the stability she and her husband have achieved for themselves and their children. “Now we live a good life. We’re not rich. We can live a normal life the American way. We can send our kids to good schools. We try hard for our kids to live better.”

“Somalis are entrepreneurial people,” says Khadra, who is the executive director for the Center for Somali Women’s Advancement, and also works with SomaliCAN. “They used their coping mechanisms. They did not need to go into assimilation to do this.” Because of its geographic position on the Gulf of Aden and across the ocean from India, Somalia has been part of trade routes for centuries, and its people have used that opportunity to hone their business skills.

Islam forbids charging interest, so Somalis shy away from many traditional lending practices and banks. Khadra explains that Somalis use “sholongo,” a system in which groups of people contribute to a communal pot of money and take turns using it. For example, a dozen people might contribute \$800 every month to the group and have \$9,600 interest-free periodically available to them. Sholongo enables people to start businesses more quickly and also encourages them to remain in groups, supporting each other in their endeavors as part owners in many enterprises.

Sholongo and the close-knit, supportive business community have created what some refer to as a “parallel economy” for the Somali population in Columbus. This structure allows them to do things their own way, but it can also create an increased sense of separation between them and Columbus at large. The parallel economy is not a bubble, however. Somalis still buy American goods and services: cars and gasoline, apartments, furniture, and electronics. Halima’s daycare center employs three Americans and three Somalis. Construction on the site employed still other workers. According to Gurhan—who moved to Seattle and Minneapolis before arriving here—business startups and the improvement of neighborhoods have proved the commitment of Somalis to their new city. “We have shown Columbus who we are,” he says, and then he smiles. “We’re okay people.”

“Columbus is a good place to live,” Halima says. “We love it. We live it. And we enjoy it.”

## Identity and Integration

Abdikhayr Soofe greets me with an enthusiastic handshake as I meet him in his office. Soofe serves as outreach coordinator for the City of Columbus's New American Initiative, working to promote civil rights, inclusion, and integration in the Columbus African community.

In our discussion, Soofe reaffirms cost of living and the positive job outlook as attractive factors to immigrants. But he also pointed to Columbus being named one of the most intelligent cities in the world by the Intelligent Communities Forum; a more educated population tends to be more accepting. Soofe sees the large New American communities in Columbus as something that reinforces that tolerance.

"If you want to start a business here, or be a governor, a mayor, you have no choice but to be inclusive."

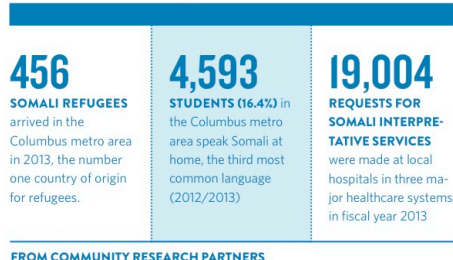
Many Somalis look to Mayor Michael Coleman as setting a positive example in befriending the Somali community. But some also point out that Somali participation in local government has been limited to outreach, and add that Columbus could take a more active role in fully integrating Somalis into the city leadership.

Although Somalis have achieved much in Columbus, they are still in the process of integration. Community Research Partners reported that most Somalis here earn between \$16,000 and \$40,000 annually, putting many of them in the ranks of the working poor. Minimum wage increases, college tuition increases, and healthcare costs are issues that will have a powerful effect on the community.

Americans should recognize many shared values with Somalis—entrepreneurialism, neighborhood pride, and the importance of education among them. But too often the differences are what become apparent. Americans notice that Somalis dress traditionally and modestly and that they are Sunni Muslims and abstain from alcohol. They can appear cloistered, particularly in their enclaves in the Northland and Westland areas. To Somalis, Americans can seem overly sexualized, pleasure-seeking, and materialistic. The space between the two inevitably leads to misunderstanding.

"You can imagine me in graduate school," Khadra says. "No one looked like me. I was very minority, very *other*." She once got lost in an OSU building and was mistaken for a cleaning lady by the American janitor on duty. Ironically, Khadra is part of the generation of women raised in Somalia during the 1970s and '80s when the government's plan for national unification included a literacy campaign that pushed for everyone, including girls, to become educated.

"THE GLOBAL REPORT, 2014-2015"



While we speak about the images of Somali women, Khadra questions me: "Have you been to a [Somali] wedding?" I shake my head no, and she uses her cell phone to show me a photo of herself getting ready for a ceremony. She is smiling in the picture, makeup adorning her face. Her turquoise, short-sleeved dress sparkles, and her head is

uncovered, a twist on the public perception of a veiled Muslim woman. But it's an image that often remains private.

Americans frequently ask how long it will take Somalis to assimilate into American society, but this is an American desire, not a Somali one.

"We want incorporation, not assimilation," Jibril says, meaning that Somalis want to be a productive part of life in Columbus, with full access to the benefits of society, but they don't want to abandon the identity and values that have been part of their success.

### The Next Generation

While teaching theater at Mifflin High School, which has a significant Somali population, Todd Decker observed that the space between the African-American students and Somali-American students was filled with tension. He decided to use theater as a vehicle for social understanding. Storytelling is a common link between almost all peoples, and oral tradition is important to both African and African-American cultures, so Decker wrote two short plays: *Dhgedheer*, based on a Somali legend, and *How Jack Beat the Devil*, based on an African-American folktale, to explore and celebrate cultural similarities and differences. The students eventually toured and performed the shows around Columbus.

Decker, recently retired, admitted that the students were resistant at the outset, particularly the Somalis, who were unaccustomed to a society in which their religious beliefs would become one of several, where the color of their skin would become a political issue, and where public presentation would be expected.

"None of us like our culture to be compared to someone else's. We all have this sense of needing to protect our cultural identity," Decker said. "Suddenly, as we start to break those barriers down, we become very vulnerable as people."

That vulnerability was shared by all students during the process of rehearsing the shows, as they discussed religion, gender roles, and appearances while gaining a better understanding what it means to live in a pluralistic society.

"All the teachers and the students had kind of an 'a-ha' moment," Decker said. "You take those cultural moments and present them onstage, it gives something that everyone can relate to."

Decker's Somali students also read *The Somali Diaspora*, a renowned documentary-style book by Doug Rutledge and Abdi Roble, a Somali and former Columbus resident. After that project, students authored *The Somali Journey...as Seen through the Eyes of Children*—a collection of personal essays, readers' theater monologues, and the script of *Dhgedheer*. As I read through the students' work, I was struck by their strong religious convictions and disdain for fanaticism, their nostalgia for a homeland that they have known only as war-torn, and their desire to eventually help rebuild a peaceful Somalia.

### Crisis in the Homeland

Global Mall on Morse Road is a busy hub of Somali retail and social life. Dresses, both dark and serious and bright and sparkling, adorn the walls. Phone cards, jewelry, and



laptop repair are offered in the small shops. A food court and halal grocery store are busy with passionate conversation, full of concern for family members back home.

**FROM OXFAM  
AMERICA  
AND ADESO:**

"KEEPING THE  
LIFELINE OPEN," 2013

**\$242 MILLION**  
HUMANITARIAN AND  
DEVELOPMENT AID TO  
SOMALIA FROM THE  
U.S. GOVERNMENT IN  
FISCAL YEAR 2012

**\$215 MILLION**  
SOMALI REMITTANCES  
FROM THE U.S.  
EACH YEAR

OFFICIALS IN CERTAIN  
REGIONS OF SOMALIA  
CLAIM THAT REMIT-  
TANCES ACCOUNT FOR

**25-40%**  
OF LOCAL GDP

**60%**  
OF THE AVERAGE  
REMITTANCE RE-  
CIPIENT'S INCOME  
OF \$3,000 PER YEAR  
COMES FROM  
REMITTANCES

While Columbus Somalis work hard to support themselves, they have not forgotten the plight of their homeland. Most of them send money to support family members who have not been able to leave and are living with little to no income and few job prospects. Recently, these money transfers to Somalia, called remittances, have come under intense scrutiny as the United States government has tried to limit funding to terrorists, in particular the Somali terrorist group known as al-Shabaab. Merchants Bank of California—which accounted for 60 to 80 percent of the total remittances sent to Somalia from the U.S.—was the final institution that allowed them, until it shut down its service in early-February.

Now there is grave concern among Somalis who are anxious for their families abroad and feel their efforts have been misunderstood.

"The money is going to [prevent] youngsters from being recruited into extremist groups," says Abdulle Mohamed, who operates a barbershop in the mall. He adds that the money sent to families in Somalia goes to pay for food, housing, and school tuition and supplies. If Somalis can't help their families with these essentials, they fear that militant groups will provide that assistance instead.

"I have brothers. Last month I couldn't send them money," he says. He wishes that government officials who created these regulations could feel his anguish.

The United States sends foreign aid to Somalia, but a significant portion is lost to overhead and administrative costs. By comparison, remittances go directly to those in need, and Somalis in the U.S. send \$215 million each year, according to a joint report from humanitarian organizations Oxfam America and Adeso. Worldwide, members of the diaspora provide \$1.3 billion for their family and friends back in Somalia, and about 40 percent of the population relies on this money for basic needs.

Somalis feel that as taxpayers, documented residents, and citizens of this country, they're being unfairly punished for the actions of a few, and consequently, the fragile country they have supported for 24 years is having its lifeline cut. Abdulle beckons his friend Mohamed to talk with me.

"If the community is willing to work with the government, what else can we do?" Mohamed says. The only reason he was able to finish school in Africa was because of the

money his sister sent to him from the United States for nine years. “It’s my turn now,” he continues.

Somalis are extremely supportive of one another in business and personal affairs, often sacrificing time, effort, or means to help those around them, knowing that someday it will be another’s turn to help them. Their nomadic ancestors would no doubt be surprised by how far the adaptability, togetherness, and resourcefulness of their culture would take their descendants, who have now established communities across the globe.

Yet they miss their homeland. They do not wish to become culturally defined by Americans. But these feelings should not be seen as a retreat from or dislike of American culture. Rather, most Somalis seem happy that Columbus is a place where they have been able to establish themselves in a city safe from violence and famine, where children can have a childhood, and life can be savored rather than just survived.

Before I leave Global Mall, I watch a mother zip up the heavy coat of her daughter as they prepare to greet the snow and cold, and I think about how the memories of this little girl’s childhood will contain not only the happiness of celebrating the holiday of Eid al Fitr—a three-day festival marking the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—but also the excitement of the otherwise foreign concept of snow days. We share some of these same experiences now, our memories linked.

Though the Somali existence here may seem curious to outsiders, to them it is not; it’s about the recognition that there is no future without flexibility. They are in a new land but they are still themselves, and their home is their community, wherever that may be.

*Additional reporting by Chris Gaitten*