



IQ

Symbols of Salvation

> page 12

SPRING 2004

AN INITIATIVE FOUNDATION MAGAZINE

St. Cloud Organization Helps Somali Refugees in “SECOND HOMELAND”

Some of Mohamoud Mohamed's fondest memories are of chalk-white beaches on the Indian Ocean. Their sandy tides cleansed and delighted his toes and swimming was an all-day pastime. Somalia's hot oceanside breeze was the most comforting beach towel one could imagine, and while the sun bronzed his skin, the sand he used to brush his teeth made them glow when he smiled. That was before the life-shattering civil war, before the horrific refugee camp, and before he met Geneva Cole and began the search for salvation in St. Cloud, America—his second homeland.

Today, Mohamoud admits his life in pre-civil war Somalia is nothing more than a fleeting dream, followed by a flurry of vivid nightmares. He shares the burden of these memories with at least 2,500 to 3,000 Somali expatriates in the St. Cloud area, a conservative estimate that is calculated by multiplying the number of known workers and students by five—generally, a minimum family size. As many as 70,000 Somalis have settled in the Twin Cities metro area, one of a few established United States points of entry for refugees.

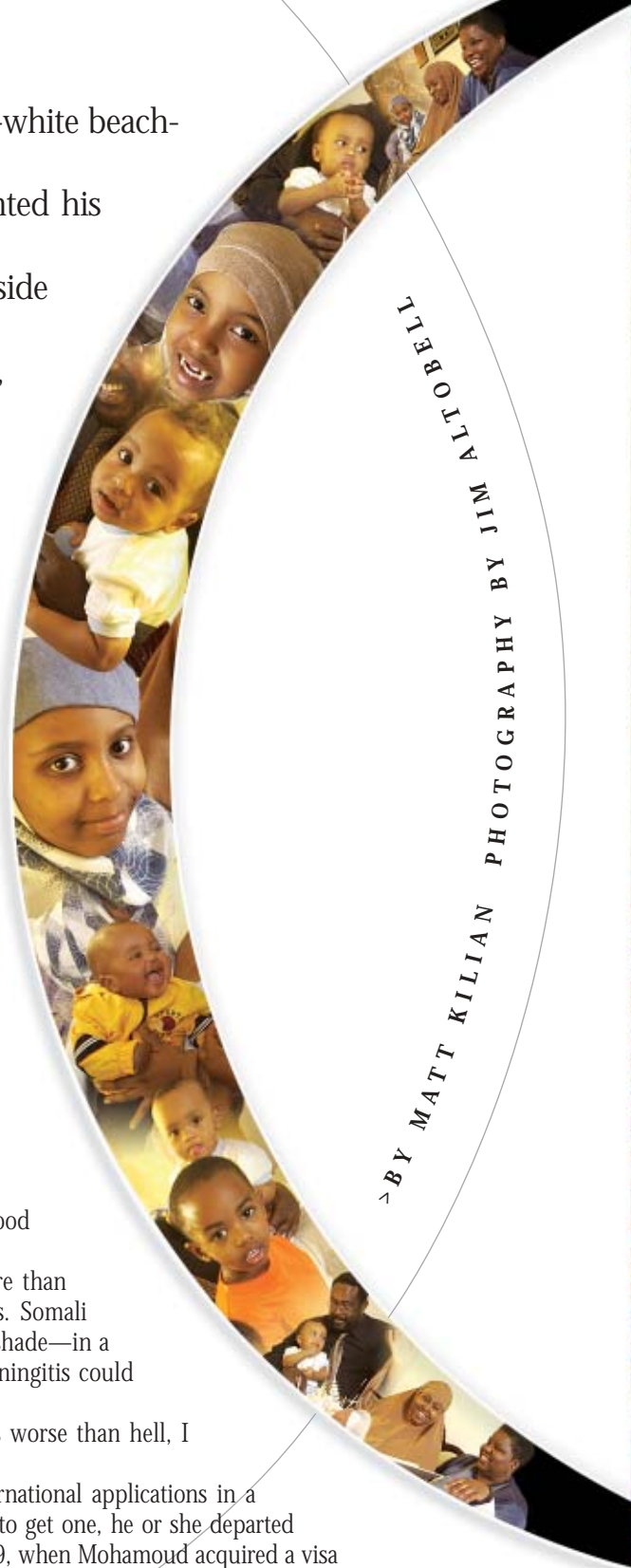
Mohamoud believes Somalia's strategic location on the Eastern outthrust of Africa—and the free-flowing supply of foreign military equipment that eventually landed in the hands of warlords—led to the 1991 collapse of the government and the exodus of more than 900,000 citizens to refugee camps in neighboring countries, such as Ethiopia and Kenya.

“We left our country with empty hands,” says Mohamoud. “I felt empty, like I had a good dream that I could not let go, and I did not know where I was going.”

He describes his five years in a Kenya refugee camp as, “very difficult,” with more than 100,000 people competing for humanitarian rations, medicine, and makeshift shelters. Somali families employed every available item—from discarded cans for cooking to plastic for shade—in a relentless effort to survive. Still, widespread death from starvation and diseases like meningitis could not be prevented.

“The children died quickly,” he remembers. “Nothing is worse than starvation. It's worse than hell, I think. I don't believe that anybody who dies of starvation will go to hell.”

The only way out was by obtaining a visa to anywhere—filling out dozens of international applications in a process that had the logic of a lottery. If one person from a family was fortunate enough to get one, he or she departed immediately and began their mission to reunite their family in a second homeland. In 1999, when Mohamoud acquired a visa to the United States—eventually St. Cloud—he left his wife and his five sons behind.



BY MATT KILIAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM ALTOBELLI



Symbols of Salvation

Geneva Cole and Mohamoud
Mohamed created the St. Cloud
Area Somali Salvation
Organization.



From right: Geneva visits with Lul Hersi, her daughter, Adna, and a neighbor's baby, Sadiq.

About that time, Geneva Cole, a Chicago native, found herself a reluctant passenger in a train headed for the same location. Geneva's son persuaded her to come to central Minnesota, as she was battling the after-effects of a stroke. To both she and Mohamoud, the community of St. Cloud represented a new beginning. They met as employees of Fingerhut Corporation a week later.

Geneva was first intrigued by picnic table conversations she shared with Mohamoud's aunt, who introduced the two. They became fast friends, bound together by Geneva's longing to "touch the land her ancestors came from" and Mohamoud's desire to reunite his family while helping other refugees gain as strong an American foothold as his own.

"[Mohamoud] would give me rides home, and he was always telling me about Somali culture and the plight of refugees," says Geneva. "He just called me up one day and said, 'Geneva, I am thinking about starting an organization to help my people. Would

you help me?' That was how it started."

Although they shared blue-collar jobs at Fingerhut, their complement of past experiences laid the foundation for grassroots success. In Chicago, Geneva worked in administration for more than thirty years. Mohamoud was an accountant in Somalia and had learned to speak fluent English. Both were seasoned survivors.

In 2001, with financial assistance from the Initiative Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, Central Minnesota Community Foundation, the City of St. Cloud, and United Way, they founded the St. Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization (SASSO), a small network of Somali volunteers providing advocacy, translation, and referral services to ease American culture shock. Its motto: "Refugees serving refugees."

As one might imagine, learning the English language presents a formidable bar-

rier for Somali immigrants. Until each person develops a working vocabulary, Mohamoud and six other SASSO volunteers are kept busy translating everything from employment and housing applications to monthly bills. A partnership with St. John's University also provides English classes, cultural programs, and competitive soccer for youth.

"People call us at home and knock on our doors late at night for help with crisis situations," says Geneva. "We started by simply providing a need, not comprehending in the least all that went with it. The reality is we need funding."

SASSO estimates that it will require at least \$100,000 each year to meet the needs of an increasing number of Somali immigrants. An annual translation agreement with HealthPartners is helping provide some funds for the organization. When a non-English-speaking Somali schedules a medical appointment or arrives at a clinic for urgent care, SASSO receives a call requesting paid translation services. After developing an

effective system to handle translation requests, SASSO has become eager to market its services to other companies. It also plans to write more grants.

Geneva and Mohamoud may be best described as glorified volunteers, drawing an insufficient stipend from grant dollars earmarked for administration and coordination. When they aren't attending meetings, making community presentations, or providing direct services out of their homes, they hold down other full-time jobs. Mohamoud now works for a commercial printer in Little Falls and Geneva punches the clock for the St. Cloud-based Housing Coalition. A vehicle is a luxury she cannot afford (she sold her car to purchase SASSO's computers), although that doesn't seem to trouble her.

"My motivation to do what I am doing comes out of my spirit of ministry and service," she says. "It's a great opportunity for me in a lot of ways. Mohamoud and I are more concerned about remembering to say thanks to everyone who reached out to help us."

Overall, St. Cloud has been a warm and welcoming place for Somali families. Government, church, and nonprofit leaders seem to remember the stories of their own immigrant ancestors and find it in their hearts to help. Many know the two SASSO founders by their first names. (Geneva confesses she can't get her hair done or visit the grocery store without someone starting a friendly

conversation.)

While they are quick to point to the overwhelming goodness and generosity of central Minnesotans, Somali newcomers have also experienced subtle racial prejudice and blatant hate crimes. On September 11, 2001, Somali and white workers at a St. Cloud manufacturing facility watched as planes destroyed the World Trade Center live on cafeteria television screens. While most looked on in stunned silence, Somali workers excitedly raised their voices and their hands.

"They thought [the Somali workers] were cheering," says Mohamoud. "Actually, they were in a kind of shock like everyone else. They just use their hands to express themselves."

After rumors spread throughout the company and community, Mohamoud led an effort to mend the huge rift, which culminated in a well-attended rally on the steps of the Stearns County

courthouse. The cultural misinterpretation—one of many that SASSO is working to overcome—caused several Somali families to keep their children, especially the ethnically dressed girls, out of school for fear of reprisal.

The most explicit incident came in 2002, when vandals spray-painted a Somali market, mosque, and cultural center with the message, "Get out of St. Cloud, ni**ers." Later, perpetrators set fire to a nearby storage shed. Dozens of outraged and sympathetic community members responded by repainting the building and helping clean up the mess.

"Unfortunately, Somalis never knew they were black before they came to America," says Geneva. "In Somalia, they were one culture, one language, and one religion. They never experienced somebody judging them by the color of their skin and some still hesitate to complain because they are so grateful to get a second chance at life."

Count Mohamoud as one of those. Five years after his arrival on American soil, he still works to reunite his family, which now has one solemn absence. His wife died in 2002. With such a shadow of tragedy, Mohamoud's resolve, optimism, and patriotism are nothing short of extraordinary. As a Somali refugee, he is one of thousands whose culture and contributions will become part of the ever-changing face of Minnesota and America.

"The good people far outnumber the bad," he says. "I support the course of America and I will sacrifice everything I have for my second homeland." **IQ**

