

# Seminar in Murfreesboro focuses on Somalis

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By Brian Mosely

MURFREESBORO -- "There will always be change."

Those were the words of Salaad Nur, a Somali immigrant who spoke Thursday evening at Middle Tennessee State University to a group of students about the refugees who have moved to this state after fleeing their war torn country.

The event, entitled "Somali Immigrants in Middle Tennessee: Challenges and Opportunities," was presented by the Somali Community Center of Nashville at Todd Hall on the MTSU campus.

"Every time you have new immigrants come into this country, you're going to see some friction," Nur said. "That's always going to happen and it's not something that limited to the United States."

Nur said if you go to any part of the world, people are going to move to pursue their best interests, noting the large amount of immigration currently taking place in Europe from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

"This movement is always going to happen ... people have a right to control their borders, but we also have to understand that there is always change in the world. There's always going to be change, not matter how much we want to stop it. That is part of human nature."

He said both sides must try to smooth over friction, adding that while Somalis are legal immigrants, they are nonetheless grouped with others that are considered illegal.

As the Outreach Coordinator for the Somali Community Center, Nur admitted that the cultures of America and his home country are very different. Language plays a huge role in his society, he said, with a rich oral history tradition.

Coming from a very nomadic lifestyle, Nur said his countrymen adapt very easily to other environments. Politically, Somalis relate to each other as tribes, but as a result, they know their family history well. He astonished the group of students by quickly listing the names of his ancestors back 500 years.

"This is how we know how we are connected to each other," he said. "We're taught while we're young." Tribes could be separated for generations, but they know each others' links by their unique names, Nur explained.

Somalis and east Africans have two main ethnic groups, the Kushitic, which are a major group in Somalia; and the Bantu, which are considered a minority in that country, residing in the south. In fact, Nur considered Somalia to be the "melting pot" of east Africa.

Nur explained how the Islamic faith plays an important role in their family life, which he said causes some problems due to the current political climate in this country.

Salaad was just 8 years old when the civil war began in his country in 1991, but it is something "I can remember like it was just yesterday." He said he could clearly remember the first three days of the

conflict, but the rest became a blur.

The dictators uses the tribal and ethnic differences to divide and conquer, he said, and also created the negative stereotypes of Somalis that exists to this day. "Because of this, people can not come back together and feel as one."

The main challenge Somalis face in America is adapting to their new environment. He asked the students to imagine being left in Africa with no understanding of the language and culture. Language is much easier to learn than culture, he explained.

While learning the language is a challenge, mastering western mannerisms is another factor. "If you come out as speaking very direct, you're going to come off sounding rude," Salaad said. "It takes a while to adjust to the new environment." He also admitted that Somalis "are cocky at times and overconfident."

Nur is currently working on a graduate paper that studies the effects of income and language on the Somali refugee community. At the Center, Nur said that they want the refugees to be able to increase their incomes and improve their lives, to make it easier for the next generation of Somalis. Two first generation refugees have already run for public office in Minnesota and Connecticut, although neither of the candidates won.

"We want to be part of the American Dream, and that's what we're struggling toward," Nur said. "I think some of us are doing pretty good."

Amal Adam is one example of success. She managed to leave Somalia some three months before that country's civil war began in 1991. She spent time in a refugee camp in Egypt before coming to America about eight years ago, arriving in Nashville on July 1, 2000.

"It was already apparent that the situation was getting worse," she said of the time period before her family left Somalia. They decided to leave for a short period in the hopes that things would get better.

They did not.

With no passport, her family was trapped in Egypt for a number of years because there was no United Nations refugee resettlement program at the time and no government in her home country. While Amal was able to continue her education in Egypt, there were no jobs in the refugee camps.

But since coming here, her life has definitely changed. She is now a U.S. citizen, works as a software engineer in Nashville and recently joined the Somali Community Center as a board member.

She said adjusting to America was much easier for her than some of her fellow countrymen because she had already started learning English before coming here. She said the refugee resettlement agency gave them support for the first three months and then, her family and she were on their own.

The first part of her adjustment was to find a job and learn to drive. Even with a bachelor's degree, she had no experience in her field due to being in the refugee camps. But after a temporary job, she was given a chance at her current position of software engineer.

The desire to belong, or to be a part of a community and shared experiences was another hurdle, and Amal felt isolated. Turning to her mosque, she was able to find others who helped her make connections

in the area and helped out with a Somali girl scout troop.

A big step was becoming an American citizen in 2006, which she said gave her "some solid ground underneath my feet."

"You really don't feel like you belonged until then," she said. After that was a period of considering her future, searching what she wanted to do with her life and "finding your place."

Amal said she was blessed more than others in coming to this country, but there were still challenges. Mannerisms were one point -- even though she could speak the language perfectly, she had to learn to weigh her tone of both assertiveness and respect.

Pop culture references were another obstacle. While most Americans converse about sports or episodes of "Friends" and "Seinfeld," such topics were unknown to her.

"I still don't have any clue on that," she laughed.

She admitted that there are "communication issues" that she still has to get used to, especially the relations between the sexes in the work environment.

But overall, Amal said that in America, the "opportunities are limitless."

"There may be longer adjustment periods for different people, but I feel this country is a place where immigrants can make a life. Things here are pretty good."

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