

Nasra

I identify with the Somali community in Columbus. We moved to Columbus eleven years ago, in 2000, so I grew up here. It is the most familiar and it feels like home. I consider this my home. Even when I moved to Pittsburgh for graduate school, I still felt like I was a part of the community in Columbus.

I also identify with the Muslim community. When I became a student at Ohio State, I became more involved and interacted with people of my community. I was the community service chair for the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and the Somali Representative in the Diversity Coalition of the American Red Cross. Participating in these organizations introduced me to people of my own age group that I could relate to. We were all connected, even though there were differences in language and in culture—but one thing we had in common was we were Muslim.

Living in Pittsburgh for two years and away from my community had an impact on me. Great things were happening in Columbus and I would have loved the opportunity to have been more involved with them. Youth and young adults were more active and began quickly working together to help those devastated by the famine in Somalia. I was inspired to help as much as I could. In Pittsburgh, my friend Jamaad and I decided to host a fundraising event at our school and donate the funds to an orphanage in Somalia. With the help of a few student organizations, our event was a success. Pittsburgh does not have a large Somali community, so many people did not even know about the famine at the time, it was a great way of spreading awareness while helping those in need.

Since moving back to Columbus, I have been focusing on building my career and networking. I plan to work with Somali youth in education and feel like there is a lot that can be done here. I've been a little out of the loop since going to Pittsburgh, but I'm making contacts through volunteering in schools and getting to know the Somali community from the outside. My peers dispersed, moving to other cities, so now I have to create more of a network.

I'd like to go back to Somalia, and visit when things are more stable. I was born in Mogadishu, but I wouldn't recognize it today. A lot has happened to that city in the past two decades. I love collecting pictures of Somalia. I have many old pictures that are beautiful, from before the war. I also have images of what happened to those very same places post-war.

I am a social worker. I want to offer services to Somali students in public education because of my own experiences navigating the school system. In the public school system,

Somali students are generalized and a lot of assumptions are made. In high school, I remember being called to the guidance office and was offered an ESL dictionary for testing just because of my name. There have been other similar instances where I've been offered a translator at a doctor's office as soon as I walked in. People have assumptions when they see my name about my English skills and capabilities. Obviously, I don't have any trouble speaking English.

This stereotype about our ability to speak English is an exception, not a rule, although it's different for those newly arrived. You have adult immigrants having to learn a new language, when they might already know two or three. The accent stigmatizes, and shuts people down. If I could tell people one thing, have the patience to listen. I think sometimes people don't take the time to really get to know someone before making assumptions. Some people hear an accent and refuse to listen. They just tell the other person they can't understand them—because they don't have the patience.

Even among Somalis, there is a stigma surrounding accents. I have an English accent when I speak in Somali, and that's difficult sometimes because of the comments that are made. Language is important, and a big part of your culture. If you don't know your language, you lose culture. It's something that my generation and the generations to come will struggle with, maintaining their native tongue.

The women in my life disprove stereotypes. They are role models – they are educated, strong, intelligent, and they work hard. They showed me there are a lot of opportunities for women.

I started wearing a scarf in 2006, when I came to OSU. I was ready to express my identity as a Muslim and wanted people to see the aspect of my life that was so important to me. The hijab is all about being modest and having self-respect.

There's a stereotype that all Muslim women dress the same but we all dress differently. There was a time when I had to go downtown to one of the government buildings to do something with my taxes. When I went through security, they asked me to take off the zippered sweatshirt I was wearing. It was part of my uniform for work at the RPAC. It would not have been appropriate to take off my sweatshirt in such a public setting, so I tried to explain the situation and said I could not do this in the lobby. The security guard said I was not dressed like a Muslim, simply because I was not wearing *jilbab* – a big scarf – so obviously I was not Muslim. Because of this she would not give me “special treatment” and allow me to use a private room. I wear my *hijab* every day, but because I was wearing my work uniform, khakis and a sweatshirt, I was told I was not Muslim by someone who had a very narrow concept of my

religion. You cannot generalize the entire community, especially based on appearance. I am not more or less Muslim because of my dress. There are many aspects of being Muslim. Being Muslim means that you pray five times a day. Being Muslim also means being kind to others. It means being a good person.

The majority of Somalis are Muslim, so the Somali culture is strongly connected to Islam. It's the only country that is practically 100% Muslim. Now they say it's 99.9% but I don't know any Somali who isn't Muslim. So it's hard to separate our culture from religion. My family observes Ramadan and celebrates Eid. This was the first time in two years that I spent Ramadan with my immediate family. For us, it is family time. We cook together before breaking our fast. And Eid is a whole day of celebration for us, including even more family time.

I am the second oldest. I have three younger siblings. The girls outnumber the boys in our family. The only boy is also the youngest, so my sisters and I did stuff together all the time. We're close. We don't have any cousins or aunts and uncles here. We take of each other. There is a shared responsibility to take care of the younger siblings. Although since moving back from Pittsburgh, my role has changed – I am more of a caretaker. I have more responsibilities. I think it's the same for other Somalis. We tend to be a collective society. Our family is valued over the individual.

S.

I was born in New York City, but Canada was my home for most of my life. My family began moving to Ohio in 2003. My father decided that Ohio was the best place. There was a Somali community close by, cost of living was relatively cheap, traffic was good, real estate was relatively affordable, and he did look at the schools. He moved to Ohio in 2003 and so 2003 onwards my family started moving to Ohio. I myself came back to the US in 2007 to pursue my master's degree in Boston with the idea to eventually move to be with my family. So in 2009, I moved to Ohio.

When I came here in 2009, I was working with Somali families. I noticed, and was informed by community members, that many Somali children were struggling in school, particularly where literacy was concerned. Young children were coming into the schools with attention problems and there were cultural clashes happening with teachers. It was alarming. I met with many people to try to find out more and decided that the best way to make an impact was to do research in this area, which led to the idea of doing my doctorate. So in 2010 I began taking classes towards my doctorate and formally became a student in 2012 in Ohio State University's School of Teaching and Learning with a specialization in Language, Education and Society.

I would like my role in the community to be a backseat driver; somebody who is helping to improve the community but not in a visible way. I see myself as a behind the scenes, community advocate. I hope to be able to do that with my research. I am still trying to figure out what ways to do that which will have the most impact, but I see myself as somebody who is helping behind the scenes. And I prefer it that way. In Islam the best deeds, the best acts of charity are those that nobody knows about. It's from a *hadith*, sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The *hadith* basically says the best act of charity is the act of charity in which the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. The idea is that you're not doing it for other people. You're not doing it so people can say, "She's so awesome. She's done this and this." Rather, you're doing it for a higher purpose – you're doing it for God's pleasure. You're helping people solely for the sake of improving your relationship with God and helping people and not so that people will you know your name and talk about you.

As a Muslim, I see myself as an ambassador for my religion. I don't mean ambassador in the sense that I go up to every random person saying, "This is what Islam actually is". But it really is to personify Islam through my actions, through the ways that I interact with people. I think actions speak much louder than words. The Prophet, peace be upon him, when he was spreading religion in Arabia, more people came based on his actions, his good deeds, his ability to connect with people, his kindness, his gentleness with strangers, that's what they connected with more so than, "This is what Islam is." It's so profound. So that's what I try to do. Every

person that I interact may come to me with their own perceptions of Islam, but what if those perceptions can improve because of their interactions me?

I started wearing *hijab* when I was twenty. My mom never said, “You have to do this, you have to do that, you have to wear this” so I came to it on my own. I wasn’t a practicing Muslim early on. I was interested in what all adolescents are – having a social life, clothes, shopping, that kind of stuff. When 9/11 happened, I had an existential crisis. For the first time I began thinking about big questions about life, the meaning of life, about mortality and things like this. And for me, practicing Islam was something that I was going to do in the future. Wearing *hijab* was something that I was going to do when I was older. I had so much time, I was young. But I started looking into Islam. I didn’t know much about it except what I had learned from my family. I had studied the Quran when I was a kid in Canada. I went to a number of weekend schools with different teachers to learn the text of the Quran and the fundamentals of Islam as all Somalis do, but it was mostly Arabic memorization of the text and learning the basics of the religion (i.e. prayer, fasting, testifying that there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet).

I started reading about prayer, about God, and *hijab*. This was the first time I actually paid attention to the words in the English translation of the Quran, which had a transformative effect on my life. I was reading passages that really spoke to me, as someone who was just coming from adolescence and who had dealt with a lot of angst and identity issues. Passages that talk about patience. Passages that talk about the experiences of the prophets and the things that they endured during their lives. Things that really spoke to me in my own experiences and my own situations. I was able to see Islam as more than a doctrine. I was able to connect and understand the religion more spiritually. It not only improved my relationship with God, but it improved all my relationships as well. My perspectives on life, my outlook on life - everything was transformed because of this. I was striving to learn at a more spiritual level and not so much as something I have to do to be a good Muslim. It can quickly become rules and rules and rules. Islam in many ways is much more than that. It’s a way of life. The Quran is a guidebook for your life. And I think a lot of my misperceptions of Muslims fell by the wayside. By the time I started wearing *hijab*, I understood that it was for modesty. It was a commandment from God, first and foremost. And in a society where women are often portrayed as sexual objects, you want people to see you for your intellect and for how you are going to contribute to your community not your body.

Now many years later, I feel that *hijab* is like a second skin. It’s part of who I am. I feel more comfortable wearing *hijab* than I did when I wasn’t. Early on, I would think, “What would it be like without it?” But after that, I’ve never thought about what it would be like without it. I

think it has to do with the ease of my life. I've never had discrimination hurled at me because of my headscarf. I know that there are Muslim women who have and that has influenced their decision to wear it or not to wear it, but I've never had those experiences. In fact, before I wore it, people would talk about all of these things that would make extremely uncomfortable. Now that doesn't happen anymore. There's a certain amount of respect that is afforded to you because of your appearance, which is nice.

I talk to women who don't cover and they definitely understand why I wear it. They agree with me that we have become a visual society and in many unfortunate ways the image of women has been degraded, especially with popular media. For non-Muslim women, they find it refreshing that somebody would not ascribe to those beauty ideals. There is a lot of pressure for everybody to have the perfect body, to have the perfect face and features. A lot of my friends are not Muslim, and they might not be wearing headscarves, but they understand the whole issue of modesty. It is not just a matter of dress, but also of character and how you carry yourself.

I also have friends who are Muslim and don't cover. We have conversations about *hijab*. For some Muslim women they have lots of pressure: Should I do it, should I not? Am I going to be profiled from the community to cover? And I just tell them, "Your time will come. Don't rush it." I was somebody who didn't rush it. I wore the headscarf late - twenty is considered late – and for me it was doing my own research and coming to the decision on my own. So I tell them my story and remind them that there are other ways to display modesty. That's what I advise them to do.

I don't understand Arabic, but have learned Arabic and the Quran since I was young. When the English translation was introduced there was an instant connection with it because I finally understood what these words mean. Immediately the Quran became accessible to me in a way that it hadn't been with the purely Arabic text. Everybody who understands Arabic tells you that the poetry of the Quran, the beauty of the Quran, that intense connection comes across in a way in Arabic that it doesn't in other languages. Other languages don't do justice to the rhythm, the way that the words rhyme, the nature of these verses and everything. Arabic is a very poetic language. It's a very beautiful language. And a lot of that comes across in the language. Unfortunately for those of us who don't understand Arabic, we're not able to access that. There are a lot of beautiful translations, including English translations, but again, there is something about the book in its original language and its original text that just has this immense beauty that people talk about that other translations just don't. Learning Arabic is the goal for I would say most practicing Muslims. You do really want to connect with the Quran the way that those who understand Arabic are able to connect with it. When we pray, for example, we're supposed to

recite a number of chapters of the Quran and to be able to understand what those words actually mean would transform your relationship with God because you would be able to really understand those prayers.

I am not fluent in Somali. I would say that my expressive Somali is better than it was, but it is not perfect. I pretty much understand all Somali, but expressively is where I get caught. I don't speak Somali at home. When I was young, my parents tried to enforce a Somali-only zone at home. Unfortunately that failed. But the good news is that my parents always spoke to us in Somali so our comprehension is fine. It's my expressive Somali – when we responded to my parents, we responded in English. I should say that, I understand colloquial Somali. If you were to put a Somali news program on, if you were to play Somali poetry, I would probably understand very little of what was being said. Especially poetic Somali, it's a higher level of Somali, unfortunately I don't have access to and most young Somalis cannot understand Somali poetry, because they are speaking a traditional Somali we don't know. It might as well be a foreign language.

It's something that I really want to work on because language is a huge part of Somali identity. I think it has to do with the fact that Somalis have a very oral culture. The Somali language was not written until 1972 so there is a huge emphasis on poetry, on proverbs, on orality in general. So when you are Somali American, or Somali British person, or whatever it may be, all these different hyphenations, and you don't speak your mother tongue you are looked at differently unfortunately. So it's a goal of mine to learn Somali better. What I do is take every opportunity to practice my Somali, to read Somali texts, to do translations just to learn Somali better.

I have a very big family. And for me, definitions of family are completely different – my family spans multiple continents and multiple countries. I don't make a distinction between my nuclear family and what in the West would be considered my extended family. I think that until last year, although I knew the Somali definition of family is much broader than Western definitions, I acted as if my nuclear family was it. I've always had a very close relationship with my nuclear family, so that's never changed, but when I went to Kenya last year, I met other family. I met my dad's brothers and sisters and their children and I had an instant connection with them. I treated my cousins like my brothers and sisters and I had the same obligations and responsibilities to them as the older sister in my family. I have this tremendous love and this tremendous connection with them, my family. Fortunately now there are apps (WhatsApp) that allows us to stay in touch with them easily so I have conversations daily with cousins in the UK, in Canada, in Kenya, so much easier than I would have in the past.

I went to Kenya because I got an internship. A really great coincidence was that my dad had family in Nairobi. I had seen some of my aunts and uncles in the eighties when I was a child, but some of them I had never met. And the kids I had never met before. It's an experience when you're trying to make a connection with teenagers. It took a while for us to get each other. The first two months were a lot of pleasantries, a lot of "How's it going?" But at Ramadan, the month of fasting, I broke almost every fast with them. And it's funny because we connected over humor. My uncle would basically spend every opportunity, every breaking of the fast, to make fun of my cousins – his kids and nephews. And it was hilarious! It was a great, great bonding time. I got to see a different side of my uncle and I got to see the kids in a different light. And once I got to see a sense of humor, we had a different connection.

Muna

I came to Columbus in 2001. We lived with my dad's side of the family in Minneapolis before that. After he died, all his sisters branched out. One moved to Columbus and we went to live with her and we just stayed here ever since. In Minneapolis, there were more Somalis. It was a really good atmosphere. We were allowed to go outside and play whenever we wanted because we were around people we knew. Coming here, there weren't as many Somali people as there are now. It was a whole new environment. We were sheltered in because we didn't know anyone and we had to learn our way around. It was just completely different.

My aunts tell me stories about when they were growing up. My mom's family and my dad's family were really close and all their brothers and sisters were really close. If one left then one or two of them would go too. When the war was starting and they had to leave, my aunt left to Italy, and then my other aunts went over there with her. One got married and then the others got married so they branched out from there. That's how they got out of Somalia.

When my mom married my dad, they moved to Dubai, which is where I was born. One of my aunts moved in with my mom to help raise me, but then she got married and left. I was about 5 or 4 when we went to Minneapolis. They did not give me citizenship in Dubai. Most of my dad's family lived in Minneapolis, and they told him, "Move over here. The kids can go to school and we can take care of things and help you settle." And that's what they did.

Since my dad passed away, my brother took on the father role. He's the one who makes sure that we're on the right path. He's in medical school so we don't see him much but when he does have breaks, he comes home. I also have two sisters. We all live under one roof – me, my mom, my sisters, my nephew and my niece. My brother is in and out. And then we're essentially under the same roof.

I belong to the Somali community. I don't say that I'm American because I don't think I am. I mean I grew up here, but I don't have American blood in me. I have Somali blood in me. That's who my family is, that's what my culture is. It's what I grew up in. Somalia is home. My mom is from there. My whole family is from there. My siblings were born there. When somebody asks where I'm from, it's only right to say that it's my home. Everyone is the same and understands one another. It's not possible until I see it for myself. I've never been to Somalia. I would love to go sometime before I die. My mom is going to Mogadishu to visit her sisters. We have land and a house over there, so she's going to go check on it after almost twenty years.

What does it mean for me to be Somali? I don't know the answer to that. Our culture is everything. Our culture ties a lot in with our religion. We grew up knowing the basics – don't drink, don't smoke, because it harms your body. Don't have premarital sex. Even though we all sin, if you do end up doing those sinful actions, we keep it to ourselves. We don't want people knowing. We don't say, "Hey! Guess what I did last night?" Even if you bump into someone else who's Somali at the bar, you hide your drink. That's how it is. Regardless if you follow what you're supposed to or not, our religion is a huge part of who we are.

Our language is everything. It's the way we think, it's the way we act upon things. It's just different than the way that Americans would do it. It is our mentality. We have this thing call *xishood*, which basically means to be modest. Not physically, but in a mannerly way. We have this mentality that we don't want to ruin our names, our family names, our reputation with the Somali community because word gets around fast. So we're always watching our back when it comes to our reputation because we don't want to embarrass anyone's names, especially our own family.

Xishood. Say for example you're a girl and you decide, "Listen I never get to do anything with my friends. So all of my friends are going to go out to the club tonight and I'm going to go with them." And you run into your brother's best friend. You're in the Somali community and your brother better not see you doing anything he does not want to see you do. His friends will most likely tell that they see you there where you're not supposed to be. I don't want him to see because it will just start trouble. So I leave. It happens a lot more with girls than boys. When it comes to boys, I feel like as long as they're providing, if they're protecting their younger siblings or helping out their single mother, they get a pass. In most cases, guys are more of the provider, their mentality is very prideful. They will not sleep unless their family is taken care of. Girls are more focused on their school work and getting out. Men would rather work, work, work and provide for their family.

I don't dress the part. I feel that I will wear *hijab* when I'm ready, when it comes from the heart and not just because I'm supposed to do it. Although, for example, I would never walk into a Somali mall dressed the way that I am right now, just for the mere fact that people, especially the older people, would lecture you in front of everyone. Why would you dress that way? Why won't you wear a *hijab*? You're a girl. And they keep going. I'd rather just go there covered. There was a point when my mom told me I had to put it on. I told her that I'd either wear it to make you happy and when I leave the house, I'll just take it off, which I don't want to do, or I will do it on my own. She realized that it was better that she knows what I'm wearing when I walk out of the house. My older sister wears it because she's married. Once you're

married, you kind of have to. My other sister, she just now recently started wearing it. She's not super religious, but she's trying it out and staying committed to it.

There was a point in my life where I thought I was ready and I wore it for a year straight. I still wore jeans and stuff, but I tried to cover my hair. It was about 2 years ago, my freshman year at Ohio State. One of my really good friends, she started wearing it. She uplifted me a little and I thought it's time to grow up. So I put it on. I saw that friend switching back to her old ways and I kind of looked at it like that's not cool, you know? She was talking a big game about it and I respected her a lot for putting it on. For me to see that she was turning back to her old ways and even becoming worse, I thought maybe I just did it in the heat of the moment. I've realized since that I just wasn't ready and I just jumped into it. In Islam, we call that having low *iman*, which is faith. That's just what I went through at that period of time and I took it off and said, you know I'm just going to restart. I feel like dress is so important. If it wasn't so important I would just cover up because I'm supposed to. But you know dressing the part has a lot to do with your modesty. I just I'm still young. I don't want to be kind of caged into doing something that I'm not proud of, that is not coming from the heart.

Taking it off was not as hard as putting it on. Taking it off was the easy part because you just took it off when you walk out of the house. Putting it on was hard because people see you without it all the time, so what are they going to think of me having it on? Most of my friends are Somali and they are Muslim, so they were happy to see me with it on because it was a big step. They didn't say anything when I took it off. A big part of being Muslim is not judging anyone. Anything you do is between you and God. People don't say anything when you're doing something wrong, but when you're doing something right they always congratulate you and respect you and are proud of it.

I'm still not ready to wear it. Hopefully one day soon. I need to become more dedicated to my religion. It has to do with me uplifting my *iman*. I just feel that right now I'm busy with school and work, that I don't have the time to sit down at the mosque to listen to a lecture. So it just has to do with me working on it.

My friend doesn't wear it anymore. We're not friends anymore. She graduated from high school and her parents let her move to Cincinnati. She started doing things she wouldn't do when she lived here. That's the big thing. Most parents don't allow you to move out because if you leave you're going to wild out. You don't have anyone on your back, telling you to come home or to do something at a certain time. You're on your own completely. That plays a major role. It probably has something to do with why there are such big Somali communities places. We like to be around Somali people, we help each other out even if we don't know each other. We have our faith. It's just the idea of being around people that are the same as you.

I feel like I need to step up when it comes to our community, especially back home. Our generation is the future, so simply doing things like the Somali Student Association (SSA) or just helping out at the Somali *masjids* (mosques) are important. With SSA, our main goal is to get the Somali community active, whether it's through donations or simply coming out to our events. We're supporting our own people and working with other cultural organizations. We have fun events, like the poetry slam. We had a canned food drive in November and are having a benefit next semester with the Habesha Student Organization. We're having a discussion coming up next month about the clans back in Somalia. Things like that. Basically giving back. With the mosque, they have youth groups. They have conferences. Just going and cleaning up after *duqsi*, which is Arabic Saturday school. It is the simple things that are all it really takes.

Right now, I'm studying international studies. When I graduate, I want to go into either international or immigration law. My specialty in international studies is development. Somalia is an underdeveloped country and we're just now getting up on our feet. With my degree and especially with my law degree I can put in a lot more work.

Qorsho

Here in Columbus, we are at a crossroads. People still don't know what to make of us. They've gotten used to the fact that Somalis live here, but there is still a misunderstanding that inhibits any kind of progress as far as getting to know who Somalis are and what we're all about.

I was born here as an American and was raised as a Somali. I am stuck between two worlds and sometimes I don't fit well in either. To Somalis, I'm not Somali enough. To Americans, I'm not American enough. So I've created my own little identity. Being Somali American means finding a new home here in America, coming together, supporting each other, helping to identify problems within our community such as tribal issues and even gender related issues.

As a community we are growing accustomed to the fact that Somalia might never get better so we are creating our own little group here, our support system, and I feel that that is what keeps Somalis together. For example, I ride COTA a lot and countless times Somali men and women and families that have stopped and literally told me, "You're not riding that bus. We're taking you home." They may not know me or my family, and they don't care about my tribe. It's about helping each other out and giving back. We're also very tied to the religion and that helps with understanding one another and having patience when we go through trials and tribulations. As a community, whether we are here or anywhere else, we've gone through a lot of difficulty and struggle and one of the things that I feel is true marker of how we've gotten so far and why we continue to give back is our faith. That's one of the binding characteristics of being Somali.

In general, Somali women hold the community upright. They have a lot of responsibilities from rearing children, working, paying bills, to cooking and cleaning, to dealing with Section 8 and Job and Family Services. One of the things that almost sets us back is the way we dress because people assume that we don't speak English and don't know how to interact with males. A lot of negative assumptions are made when we're looked at. To me, it's completely the opposite because our dress means so much more than people perceive. It's not about covering us up and hiding our beauty. It's more about our devotion to God and our willingness to let our words, personality, and intellect speak more than our looks. That is often misconstrued as being oppressed and not doing what we want to do.

I believe that what makes us Somali is our commitment to our faith and in many ways we go against the norm. It's a marker of strength because we're able to do so much in such a strong way; that we can tell American society that we're not going to change. That we'll do some

things – we'll learn English we'll do this or that, we'll adhere by the laws of America – but we are going to choose to wear what we wear because it's important to us.

Dress blurs the line between culture and religion. I don't like mixing religion and culture but I am a product of it. The Somali culture is heavily based on Islam. There are so many traditions that we adhere to because Islam – marriage, family, finances - but Somalis now have created a code that Islam and Somali are synonymous. Culture and religion are two different concepts. They blend well together sometimes, but sometimes they do not. And personally, I would go towards the route of Islam rather than our culture, because the first thing I am is Muslim and then I am Somali. They can blend, but are not the same thing. Culture has flaws, but religion should be perfect.

My family is very small. It's also more maternal than paternal. My mother came here on a student visa in 1986, where she met and married my father. He passed away in 1994 and my mother went into to survival mode. Even though my uncle served as a father figure to my sister and I, my mother ran the show. She is the superhero in my story. She made sure that we were raised properly, had a very smooth upbringing and sent money back home. There are a lot of Somali youth that can relate to that – their mothers have taken on multifaceted roles and changed the balance in the U.S. Back at home, men were the breadwinners but here, women are taking on more leadership roles.

My dad passed away abruptly and since then, what I've seen in my family are the strength of the women. My mother has been working nonstop since 1993, usually low paying jobs because of her skills. But she would work to support not just us but also our family in Somalia and Kenya. An important characteristic of Somali community is helping out your family. And by family I mean your entire family, not just the immediate, nuclear family. You could be the poorest member of your family and still be obligated to send money back to your mother or father or your family back in Somalia. So my mother felt the burden of that as well as raising her kids singlehandedly. Her strength surprises me to this day. She's still in that survival mode of making sure that we're ok, that everyone besides herself is ok. She's very community minded. Now she doesn't work anymore. She hasn't for the past 5 years because she's been diagnosed with diabetes. She worked two jobs for a lot of points in my life and had stress and now she is resting and watching us grow up.

My sister and I are now supporting the family. I am sending money back home and raising funds for my mother to go back to Kenya shortly and my sister is paying the bills and worrying about her student loans. We're still at that point, we could be off government assistance, but we still send money back home. That's what moves us from lower middle class to the upper poverty bracket. This goes for a lot of Somali community members; we're in the same boat. There are people who disagree with that trait of Somalis that we give back so much. They assume that we're poor because we choose to be and see this as a bad trait, that if we didn't give away so much we wouldn't be such a strain on the American economy. But I don't know, if they didn't send money back, they probably wouldn't be able to sleep at night.

In the imminent future, I will be an English Teaching Assistant for the Fulbright Program in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia but my dream is to assist Somalis, particularly youth, in assimilation. I've been in various situations where I've helped Somalis understand English or American law or some abstract idea. I think a lot of that has to do with how I've been involved in the community in the past years. When I was 18, I started interpreting for Somali Bantu, whether it was going to the school and having a talk with their children's teachers or going to the doctor's with them. In college, I interned with the Somali Women & Children's Alliance, assisting Somali refugees in the central Columbus area. I feel like I've been a tool with helping them to assimilate, to understand and want to participate in American culture. In the future I want to be an educator. I want to be the voice of reason and engaged Somali youth to increase their want to go to college and decrease deviance and negligence. The Somalis that I went to high school with work and go to school; imagine working 30 hours a week and going to school for 8 hours. That's a lot of hours doing a lot of work. I want to let them know that they can do it and give them a support system, as well as educating the older generation that we need to be more inclusive. This is the only way that we can progress and become stronger.

Hoda

We're different from other Somali families – we're a small family. For most of my life, my family has been my mother and she's often worked a couple of jobs, and my sister Qorsho. Because we're just my sister and I, we're really close. Sometimes when I see other families, I am surprised when the siblings aren't close because Qorsho and I are so close, but I'm just used to that. Also, my mom stressed education when we were younger, probably because she didn't get a chance to finish her own. So rather than learning how to cook or that kind of thing, she really pushed us to take AP classes and even going out of state to college, which wasn't really common among Somalis. I went to the University of Chicago and studied anthropology and was pre-med. Now I'm working in a lab researching infectious diseases and applying for medical school. I've always been really interested in different cultures and different groups of people.

We had to move from Canada because my dad passed away. My mom didn't know any English, and had little education. My sister and I didn't start speaking English until we were seven or eight. We were at home and my mom was always speaking Somali, so that's what we knew how to speak. We went to ESL classes, even though I had been born here. The transition to Columbus was much smoother. When we first came in 2000, there weren't many Somalis at all in Hilliard and Columbus. Over the past few years, there's been a pretty large expansion of the Somali community both from overseas and from other parts of the U.S. I get along better with those who had been in America for longer – I can understand them better. Even though I am fluent in Somali, the cultural differences made it difficult for me to interact with a lot of them who have come to the US more recently. I think in Columbus in particular since there's a larger refugee population here than in other cities, it makes the community more fragmented. The work is just beginning, you have to learn English and do all these different things. The Somalis that I went to school with in Hilliard, I guess you could say were more sophisticated –they had either been here for a while, or were from Canada, or were born here. So it's a little easier assimilating to culture. A lot of things are easier when your family is settled in. There are a lot of obstacles that Somali refugees face when they settle here, but now they are starting to come together; there are more places where they can get the services they need and for people to come together.

The community is changing. I feel like I haven't been in one place long enough, except when we lived in Hilliard, to really have a community because I went away for college for four years and came back. When we were in Hilliard, the community was pretty well established for

the few families that were there. We would help each other and support each other with whatever we needed. If you had a problem, some sort of monetary issue, there was a haven that you belonged to. For example, our neighbors were a Somali family and the father had a stroke and ended up going to the hospital. They weren't able to fully pay the bills so all of the Somali families who were in Hilliard at the time pitched in and covered the costs. If there is a death in the family, you will see a coming together of Somalis. It's really common to see 20 or 30 Somalis in a patient's room in the hospital because it's so important to see that family and for them to know they aren't alone if there is a death in the family, that there are people willing to help them. We live now in a part of Columbus that isn't very safe, so I don't think of it as having that kind of community anymore. There are so many more Somalis, and I suppose you could find it, but it doesn't have the same sort of dependability as it used to have.

Back in Somalia, there are a larger number of women from here who are strong in politics. There is a famous singer from Minnesota, Sado Ali Warsame, who was a member of the congress that recently elected the new president of Somalia. There are quite a few instances of Somali women who have risen to power, from entertainment or some other area, who have gone back to join the government. It's sometimes hard to tell because Somalis are Muslims and you might think that men have a stronger position and they do – especially in the government you can see that they're the ones making decisions. But at the same time what distinguishes Somalis from Arabs is that the elder women do have a lot of power, even in Somalia.

In America, I think it is easier for a woman to come over with her children than a man to come with her. I also think it is easier for women to adapt to American culture and to fit in. The men aren't seen, from what I know, as hard working. They'll go to Starbucks and drink coffee all day, while women are the breadwinners and take care of the children. Another reason might be that it is actually easier to receive government aid as a single woman with a lot of children versus having a man there. There are a lot of incentives but at the same time it is a cultural shift.

I really think it's because a lot of the Somali women, even if they have eight or three children, are working full time jobs and interacting with other Americans and picking up different things from them. I know of one Somali woman who came over about a year ago, and since then she's been working at a shoe factory. When I first met her, she didn't speak English very well and some of her mannerisms were different. I noticed a pretty drastic difference in her when I saw her a few months ago. I guess you could say she seemed more American. Her English is better. She used to wear the *niqab*, which is like the veil but you're also covering your face with a smaller veil, and she's not wearing that anymore. She has two daughters, one in high

school and one in middle school, and when they first came, they weren't really allowed to join in afterschool activities. Now, one of them plays an afterschool sport and the other is in some sort of book club. So I don't know if that is more American, but she's allowing her children to partake in school activities. Somali women are taking their children to school, having meetings with their teachers, and those kinds of things. They are out in public more than they're used to back in Somalia, where they were at home most of the time, and it is giving them more opportunity to branch out and learn more about American culture.

For me personally, it's easy to think of Somalis as the ones you see around in America. But there is a larger population in Somalia and Kenya. In order to really understand them and speak to them, you have to speak Somali. I'm not saying that they don't speak English, but their command of Somali is so much better and if you're able to communicate with them at that level then your conversations will be that much more meaningful. So you're not there, you're in a different country and one thing that can tie you back to that home is your language. At home, my mom almost always speaks in Somali. When I'm talking with her, I'll speak Somali. But if my sister is in the room, I'll speak with her in English. If my mom asks me a question, I'll have to think for a minute and be like "Ok, I'm going back to Somali now, I'll respond in Somali." In public, if I'm out with my mom and my sister, we usually speak in Somali. With my friends, we'll usually speak in English, unless there's something that we don't want others to hear. Then we speak in Somali. There is a fear that the children of those who have come over will not be able to speak Somali anymore. That's the biggest problem we have – not being able to speak Somali.

I was age 11 when I began to wear *hijab*. I started wearing it because I wanted to imitate my mom. I saw her wearing it and I decided to wear it for a while. I wore pants and everything else was the same, just the top part was different. Then I stopped wearing it for a year, around 9/11. My mom didn't feel safe with us wearing it. She had an incident at work and she didn't want us to be discriminated against. She worked at a grocery store bakery. She never really told me the full story but from what I gathered she was intimidated by someone at work. Maybe violently, I don't know if the person was wielding a knife, but they blamed her for what had happened. That really scared her. She ended up quitting and it spurred her to make us look less Muslim. Then my grandmother came to stay with us for a while and her coming really changed my opinion on Islam. I learned more about it. I always had questions about it – why do I have to do this, or do that? I didn't always feel I got the best answers from my mom, so I asked my grandmother and she gave me answers that I was really happy with. I started praying and wearing *hijab*. Not just *hijab* but also the skirt. Since then, I haven't stopped wearing it.

I had questions about the scarf. My question was why is important for women to be modest? Why don't I see men doing the same thing? And my mom's answer was that it was something that God wanted and I understood that but I wasn't happy with that. What I saw was a difference between the two. If men could do whatever they want, why do we have to be covered? My grandmother answered that you can't think of it as they have something that you don't. Men also have to be modest with how they dress; they have to wear a beard and they have to pray. She was also really good at explaining that biologically and in many other ways we are different than men, not the same. Her explanation and teaching me the Quran helped me to understand more. My mom never finished reading the Quran and unlike many other Somali parents she didn't know much about it. My grandmother did and she was able to explain to me more specifically why.

Within the Somali community, *hijab* isn't just your scarf. It's about the rest of the clothes you're wearing – are you wearing jeans or a skirt? Are your clothes baggy enough so that you can't really tell the shape of your body? Are you modest in your speech? Do you hang out with guys all the time? It's not just necessarily what you look like. It's your mannerisms, your speech, your character. It's how you treat people. I feel like people think Somalis might seem more extreme, the way the women dress and the men dress. A lot of the older women you'll see wearing long cloaks and the men wear long beards and they're dyed. And they might think it's a little strange and they practice Islam stricter than Arabs. I feel like Somalis are more careful about how they dress. There are a lot more young Somali females that wear *hijab* than don't but if you don't wear it then it's not something you should judge or force them. I think it's a personal choice and it's something between that person and God and I don't think anybody else should have that influence.

I would identify more American than Somali. I personally think that I can be both Muslim and American. I've always identified as American and more recently, I identify more as a Muslim. I feel like the two can be used in the same sentence. I feel like it's gotten more difficult though. I don't think that the perception of Muslims has really changed. I don't think that there's been an effort both on the part of the media and in people in general to define Islam without including the extreme forms of Islam. So I don't think that it's gotten any easier, but for me personally, I've been able to work that out. **Being Muslim** is trying to adhere to the teachings of all the prophets - from Abraham to Jesus to Mohammed, peace be upon him. It is following the Quran to the best of my ability. Being a good person and trying to show people through my actions that I'm just like them. Islam is a very peaceful religion and I try to display that to others. Wearing the *hijab*, you're automatically identified as a Muslim. If you don't or if you're

a guy and you don't have a beard, then people don't really know. So I feel like there's an added responsibility on my behalf to show, to represent Islam in a good light.

I think in the Somali community, being Muslim is probably the most important thing. A lot of activities are surrounded around Islam. So activities at the mosque are really held in high regard. Tribalism and culture might be stronger in some parts of Somalia, but the Somali-American community in particular holds Islam to a very high level. It's important to be involved at a mosque. My mom is part of a *haliqa*, which is a group of women that come together every week and go over the Quran or some other part of Islamic doctrine. So having that link to Islam is very crucial to identifying yourself as a Somali. Most Somali families are quite religious and attend mosque. The men who are supposed to attend Friday prayers and are encouraged to go to early morning prayers if they live near a mosque. Women can send their children to weekly Quran classes. I went to one when I was younger for a little while, and was involved in youth activities. Learning Arabic, which is a completely different language than Somali, is important; you have to learn it if you want to really understand the Quran. And then also funerals - there is a whole ritual associated with that. My mom is a part of a group of women who are in charge of one of the mosques and they wash the body of the person who has recently passed away. They bury that person. They read the Quran with the family. I think those are the most common things.

A lot of our traditions are Muslim traditions. Other Somali traditions are associated with celebration. So poetry is a big thing in Somalia and storytelling is very important. There are stories that my mom and grandmother have told me, that I've either remembered, or I've heard so many times that I've memorized them so that I can tell my children and they can tell their children. Like *Dhegdheer*, the woman with the long ears. I've heard more stories since I've come here to Columbus because there are a lot more Somalis. They come from different parts of Somalia, so they'll tell you a folktale. That's something I didn't appreciate as much when I was younger and now I'm trying to learn more about. I was more into Somali music when I was younger. Traditional, classical, older Somali music. I've moved away from that, especially now where we're living is more religious and music isn't something that is seen as being something you should be involved in or listen to all the time.