

Somali Struggles in Minneapolis

Just as a rusted old car with a new paint job still runs poorly, the problems of racism and a lack of inter-cultural understanding continue to eat away at the interior of Minneapolis despite the appearance of peace. I had never encountered anything beyond stereotypical jokes during my upper-middle class suburban childhood. Defined as any prejudiced action or statement based on a negative view of a specific ethnic group or race, racism includes so much more than black jokes. However, as a white student and a member of the majority, I had never encountered it in its more severe forms. I suppose it makes sense that if any racism occurs in my community, it won't be aimed at me or fall directly in my line of sight. I honestly grew up thinking that there were no more real racists out there; that everyone saw our country's prejudiced past with the same contempt that I did. Only within the past several months has that image been broken in my mind and replaced with a much less appealing reality.

I started taking a class offered at my high school called ELL (English Language Learners) Tutoring. Basically, the American students in the class are partnered up with one of the students who moved here from another country. My partner was a Somali student, as were most of the foreigners in the class. During my three months as his tutor, and an additional two months as a summer school ELL tutor, I learned more about the Somali people than I ever dreamed I would. I met his family and he met mine, I became very close with not only his brothers and sisters, but with many of the other Somali students and their families as well. They are a beautiful, hard working group of people who have so much to share when one merely asks. I was surprised to learn how

incredibly similar they are as people, but blown away by the racism that they encounter so frequently.

One boy named Hassan once told me that a police officer in Minneapolis began chasing him once for no clear reason. He was so frightened that he ran although he had done nothing wrong. I couldn't understand why he didn't just stop and explain his situation to the officer. Then I heard about the time when he was attacked in the bathroom at school, and when he went to report the incident to administration, was suspended for fighting. He told me of another incident when he was spat on by another student, then beat up, but refused to punch. When he again tried to tell authorities, he shared equal blame with the guilty student. As I listened to story after story, I finally realized why he ran that day. As a young Somali boy in Minneapolis, he is presumed guilty. This in combination with his language barrier makes it almost impossible to effectively communicate with the police or school faculty. Now, he just fights back.

He explained that when he lived in Africa, he didn't need to fight. If something happened he told someone, and it was resolved. Unfortunately, after trying that tactic unsuccessfully in Minneapolis, he has given up, and become a fighter. It's so ironic how the fact that he was stereotyped as an aggressive young Somali male is exactly what led him to fit that mold, and that fighting keeps him out of the trouble that notifying authorities causes.

Another young girl who has become one of my closest friends told me a horrifying story of something that happened right in her neighborhood. Two of her younger female relatives were outside at the playground by their home when an angry woman began kicking and assaulting them while telling them exactly what she thought

about Somalis. I know that their bleeding stopped, and now the cuts are healed, but isn't the knowledge that people have pure hatred for you and your culture a permanent wound?

Even the Minnesota demographic study entitled "Speaking for themselves" (<http://www.wilder.org/download.0.html?report=1151>) found evidence supporting the difficulty that Somalis have experienced here in our community with complaints of prejudice from an equal amount of whites and blacks.

I could spend hours citing every traumatic story of violence against the Somalis that I have heard. However, various news articles, interviews, studies, and stories have already described the situation as accurately as it can be done. The Twin Cities Daily Planet printed an article entitled, "Somali Youth Decry Police Profiling, Harassment" (article at: <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2008/07/07/somali-youth-decry-police-profiling-harassment.html>) that cites a few more examples. One night, a few weeks ago, I was at my friend Siima's house when a news story came on the television about the recent murder of several Somali people. With the high level of vocabulary and rapid speech, they had a little trouble understanding what was happening. I had to explain to them that there were people killing young Somalis for no apparent reason. It was a dreadful experience that brought all of the racism I never knew existed right in front me.

While the specific catalysts for this anti-Somali sentiment are debatable to say the least, after speaking to the Somalis I know and exploring the media coverage, I have found two primary suspects. First, there have been several known Somali gangs and violent activity associated with them. While these gangs do not by any means represent the majority of the Somali people, they can result in a hatred of the entire culture. Also, it must be understood that a great portion of the prejudice against these African immigrants

comes from other African Americans. In fact, when I speak to my Somali friends of their concerns, they are much more afraid of discrimination by black Americans than white Americans. In their personal experiences, they feel that some of the poorer inner-city blacks are angry that the Somalis have been generally more financially successful than they, despite the fact that these immigrants have been in America for so little time. This jealousy and frustration is the second possible cause of this racism.

The most important lesson I can learn from all this is that as unfortunate as it may be, racism in Minneapolis, MN, my hometown, is alive and dangerous. Now that I know the consequences of sitting by and permitting the progression of this issue, I refuse to let it go. If my community just paints over the holes and leaking parts and drives along as though the car is fine, eventually we will end up stranded by the side of the road where all hope of rescue seems gone. However, I believe that education can fix this overlooked issue. If we can learn to be culturally aware, and eliminate the misunderstandings between ethnic groups, it is absolutely possible to end this cycle. Every hardworking Somali who is determined to lead a successful life in my community deserves as much protection from the law as anyone else. I hope and pray that others will see the value of this cause, and take whatever action they can, however small, to aid the elimination of racism in our society.





For the first time in the history of the rich cultural center that is Minneapolis, Somali people are a huge part of local identity. With African markets, restaurants, and even a Somali mall, their presence is clearly here to stay. As the city with the highest number of Somalis in the entire country, we have an example to set. We can show our Somali neighbors and friends that we are a country of prejudice, ignorance, and intolerance. Or we can demonstrate the ability of Americans to welcome them as the beautiful, honest and hardworking people that they are.

