



IQ

Symbols of Salvation

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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 ATOBELL



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**



September 10, 2006

To Whom It May Concern:

I had the opportunity to get to know Geneva Cole while she served as Associate Director of the St Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization (SASSO). I have served on the SASSO Board of Directors since the inception of the organization.

Geneva did much of the groundwork needed to form SASSO. She spent many hours contacting potential board members and helping to establish the board. She completed the necessary paperwork to get SASSO the 501(c)(3) status as a non-profit organization. Geneva learned to write grants, and has written several that have been successful in bringing funding to the organization. Geneva recruited volunteers, organized events such as an Open House, helped to train many in the St Cloud area on the topic of Somali culture, handled accounting functions, prepared agendas, financial reports and other materials for Board Meetings, and worked with many service agencies in the community.

Geneva has a passion for helping others, and worked much of the time without compensation to assist new African immigrants that moved to the St Cloud community. She was involved in a whole host of resettlement issues including assistance with finding employment and housing, making arrangements for children to enroll in schools and adults in Basic Education, dealing with legal and social issues, and otherwise helping to integrate refugees into a new culture.

Several months ago, SASSO began providing interpreter services for Somalis on a contract basis. Geneva was involved in all facets of this service and handled all of the accounting functions.

One of the difficult parts of serving on the SASSO Board has been the inability to generate enough income to provide employees with reliable financial support. There were many months with no compensation, but Geneva continued with her work. The Board was supportive as Geneva searched for a job where she could put her skills to use and receive enough compensation to meet her needs.

She left the St Cloud community to accept a position with AOL in Florida. Her work there has involved working in a customer service environment where she has used her communication and sales skills. She has shared your position description with me, and I believe she has the skills required for the Sales Associate. Geneva is a very hard worker, has worked well with the public and has great multi-cultural experience.

I highly recommend Geneva as someone who will be dedicated, hard working, can negotiate with customers and can work under pressure. Geneva is very willing to learn and do whatever is needed to get the job done. If you would like to talk with me about Geneva, I can be reached during the day at 763-271-3766 and in the evenings at 320-253-7953.

Sincerely,

Wayne Anderson
SASSO Board of Directors

September 1, 2004

Donna Birk, Director
Faith in Families
PO Box 6051
St. Cloud, MN 56302-6051

Dear Donna,

This letter comes as a recommendation for Geneva Cole whom I have come to know through her involvement in ISALAH's Great River Interfaith Partnership (GRIP) Diversity Taskforce. Our research and work on community diversity issues has also helped me get to know Geneva in her role as co-founder of SASSO. She is a passionate, skillful, and fearless leader for people who are struggling to survive in our culture.

Geneva not only speaks passionately about her work with SASSO but has committed immense time, energy and resources to developing the organization and obtaining community support. Her experiences would be valuable in recruiting faith communities and inspiring leaders to engage in this important work.

In addition to Geneva's personal life skills, she attended the Gamaliel Foundation's National Leadership Training in March, 2004. This training, which I and other ISALAH organizers use as a basis for our work, is an intense weeklong, 9 AM to 9 PM, program which helps people identify what is most important in their lives and the organizing skills they need to achieve their goals. Geneva returned with an intense focus to continue her work in improving people's lives, withdrawing from issues that distracted her attention.

Geneva is fearless. She enjoys taking on difficult challenges. The potential controversy and risk of defeat in building SASSO has not stopped her from tirelessly pursuing her goals. I think it is because Geneva has a very clear sense of who she is and what her values are. Her solid center frees her to be a keen observer and helps her gain insights into other's attitudes and behaviors.

I highly recommend Geneva Cole for the Faith In Families position. Her courage and determination are contagious to those who work with her.

Sincerely,

Ruth Wiechman
Organizer, ISALAH's Great River Interfaith Partnership

October 15, 2004

Jason A. Laker
Dean of Campus Life
Saint John's University
122 Sexton Commons
Collegeville, MN 56321

Dear Manager:

I am writing this letter in support of Geneva Cole's application for the position of Retention Sales Associate with America Online. I have known Geneva for approximately 2 ½ years, beginning in the fall of 2002, when I stopped into the offices of the Saint Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization. I had recently moved to the area to assume the position of Dean of Campus Life at Saint John's University. One of the first and most striking things I noticed about Geneva (and it would be hard to miss this), was her unusual combination of exuberant warmth and thoughtful, reflective wisdom.

Geneva is one of those rare people who can carry off both wisdom and care in what I can only describe as a captivating persona. It was her willingness to welcome me, both personally and as a representative of SASSO, that led me to join SASSO's Board and ultimately become its president. Now, you have to understand that when I met Geneva, I was a new Dean, and adjunct professor at SCSU, finishing a dissertation, a husband, and father of three (with one on the way). I assure you that I was not looking for more work. Yet, Geneva invites people to make commitments in the most understated ways-she first exudes a commitment to others that cannot help but be reciprocated.

Frankly, there are a number of talented and qualified people (including Geneva) who meet the basic qualifications to be a Sales Associate. However, in an increasingly competitive sales environment where current and potential customers are often weary and mistrustful, Geneva's warmth, intelligence, and integrity would add great value to your sales team. She evokes trust from people because she conveys genuine interest in meeting their needs. She is a desktop publisher as she was instrumental in creating and promoting all the advertisement for the organization that ultimately was responsible for making SASSO a household name throughout the community of the St. Cloud Area.

I have no doubt that you have choices among a variety of candidates. However, you would be well-served by recruiting Geneva onto your team. I have worked at major research universities and small colleges with fascinating and brilliant people from around the world. Geneva is fascinating and brilliant, and you would benefit greatly from her services.

If you should like to discuss her candidacy further, I can be reached at 320-363-3171.

Sincerely,

Jason Laker
SASSO Board President
Dean of Campus Life-Saint John's University