

BECOMING A BETTER LEADER THROUGH SELF-DISCOVERY

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INTRODUCTION

As a refugee I was on a journey of self-discovery, and I emerged as a leader in the refugee community in the Salt Lake City area. I will address different experiences and talk about how they have shaped me into a leader. I will begin by defining the term refugee. I have come to know the shocking truth that the majority of Americans do not understand what it means to be a refugee. I've learned that misconceptions are common and believe it is essential to start with this shared understanding. Next, I will talk about my personal experiences as a refugee and the different challenges that I have encountered. I have used these challenges as stepping stones to learn more about myself and discover my passions. I will then discuss how this road of self-discovery has led to my extreme passion for helping refugees in my community. Finally, I will conclude by exploring how leadership is a process through which I am continually improving.

WHAT IS A REFUGEE?

The average American has many misconceptions about refugees. An immigrant is often mistaken for a refugee, and there is an essential difference between a refugee and an immigrant. A refugee is someone who was driven from their home or country, often due to war; whereas an immigrant is someone who leaves their country usually for better opportunities such as education or to escape poverty. The main difference between a refugee and an immigrant is the ability to choose; refugees do not have the option to choose.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A REFUGEE

Let's take a closer look at the life of a refugee. My family came to the refugee camp from Somalia in 1993. They were forced out of the houses they built with their bare hands by people who perceived themselves to be better and more powerful than them. My family walked for miles on end looking for somewhere to settle to protect their families. It took them three days to walk to the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. They arrived at the camp when my older sister was three months old. Years later, I was born there. Growing up, our everyday worry was whether or not the next bullet would go through our brains or those of our loved ones. After losing so many of our loved ones through homicide, we got the best news in the world: we became eligible to come to the United States. After waiting for 15 years in the refugee camp in Kenya, my family received the opportunity of a lifetime to come to the United States. I was nine years old when we arrived.

CHALLENGES

There were a few challenges that I encountered while adjusting to life in the United States. One of the major barriers was not speaking English. Learning a new language is a challenging thing to do. As a kid back in Kenya, my dream was to be a writer, but I didn't even know how to write my name because girls did not have the same access to education as boys.

My difficulty of communicating in English followed me into the school system. Due to the language barrier, I ended up needing an interpreter. The school was only able to find one interpreter that my sister and I had to share, even though we were in different grades. Whenever the interpreter was gone we were unable to communicate our needs.

My family's first winter in the United States was one of the hardest things that I had ever experienced. One day the interpreter did not show up, and we did not know English at all, not even enough to try to communicate with anyone. We missed the bus that morning, so we had to walk to school. The snow on the ground was about two inches deep, and it was very shiny white. If we had been prepared or even knew about it, then we probably could have enjoyed it to some level, but it was very traumatic for us. We were not prepared for it at all. We did not have any winter garments; we came to the U.S. with just dresses (for girls), shirts and pants (for boys) and sandals.

We walked all the way to school in just dresses and sandals which felt like the longest walk of our lives. We were so cold; every part of our bodies were frozen. When we finally reached the school, as we stepped into the building, the heat hit us. We started to cry because it hurt so badly. The longer we stayed in the building, the worse the pain got. As our bodies were warming up, we would cry even more intensely. I remember feeling so lonely and homesick in those moments. Back at home (in Kenya), while we were not safe at all, at least we understood what was said to us, had people to play with, and were able to communicate what we wanted and needed.

ASPIRATIONS

My first experience with winter in the U.S. shaped my dreams. Not being able to communicate our needs and say that we were cold helped me realize that I would be able to help others avoid the same challenges that I experienced by being an interpreter myself.

Finding interpreters is a difficult but very essential service. I now speak three languages, English being my third. I also speak Somali and Miami. I want to make a real difference in people's lives, as the interpreter from the school has made in my life. Throughout middle school and high school, I took every opportunity I got to interpret, and I loved it.

An experience that taught me the most about being an advocate was during my junior year in high school. In high school, I had a hard time making friends. The people of color that I tried to befriend did not want to be friends with me because they described me as "too white" because I loved to read and spent a lot of time in the library. They told me it was not something that black people did, so I separated myself from them. I used to sit and eat lunch alone. In 11th grade, a new girl came to the school in the middle of the year. She was from Ethiopia. Her name was Fana. Fana and her family were new arrivals to the U.S. She, like myself, did not speak much English. She was very delightful. Interestingly, we met because the school administration was looking for someone who spoke her language, which was Swahili. Funny enough, I don't speak Swahili. The only word that I know in Swahili is how to say hi (Jambo). But, I told them that I could still help her. I knew a way to communicate with her, while they tried to find another interpreter.

I had some classes with Fana which made helping her a little bit easier. We had our struggles trying to understand each other, but for the most part, it went smoothly. We did a lot of things together. During lunch, we would go on the track when there was nobody there. We would walk around and run for a little bit and then walk again. The days we felt like eating lunch, we would get our lunches from the cafeteria, go outside, and sit under the shade of a tree. We would eat lunch, and when finished, we would sit down and stare into space every once in a while, look at each other, and just laugh, and only we knew what was funny. On the last day of school, classes got out at noon. My dad would not pick me up until 4 pm. There were some of the kids from school that were going to the mall near the school. I wanted to go with them, and Fana agreed to go with me. We left the mall around 3 pm. We didn't know which way school was and were lost for a while. We started looking for things we saw while coming to the mall and we finally made it back to the school. It was 3:30 pm.

We decided to rest under "our" tree shade. We used our backpacks as pillows and gazed at the sky. Around 3:50 pm, Fana said that she had to go home. We hugged each other, and she went. When she had gone just a short distance, she turned around and said, "I love you," in English and ran before I had a chance to reply. Fana became my best friend that year. I went into the situation trying to help her, but it turned out that she helped me more than I helped her.

One week after graduating high school, I was employed as an interpreter at Linguistica International. I worked there for three years helping bridge the language barrier gap between healthcare providers and patients who spoke Somali or Miamia. I provided services in hospital settings as well as over the phone. It is a lot harder to find interpreters in healthcare settings because there is the need to learn the medical terminology, not just in English, but also in the language in which one is providing the interpreting services. It can be quite challenging. Nevertheless, I loved the work that I was doing and found a lot of satisfaction in it. I was able to make a difference in people's lives, making it easier for them to communicate with their healthcare providers. This experience has helped me expand my English skills as well as my Somali and Miamia speaking skills.

EXPLORING OTHER PASSIONS

I earned my medical terminology certificate in high school and had developed so much love for the work I was doing. I decided to follow my passion and become a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant). I received my CNA certificate in high school, and I became a residential trainer for the Work Activity Center, helping elders with disabilities with everyday activities such as personal hygiene, taking medications, and grocery shopping. There were a lot of challenges that came with the job, as the clients that I was caring for were at least 25 years older than me. It was challenging for them to trust me. I went above and beyond to do everything in my power to make them comfortable with me and to prove to them that I was an honest person and only wanted to help them. The workers were the only people that the clients saw in their lives except for big holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. I felt so honored to be in these individuals' lives because they were so wise, funny, and unique. They taught me so much about appreciating the things I have in life and not taking things for granted. I loved every single one of them, and deciding to move on to other things in my life was one of the hardest choices I have had to make. I miss them every day and carry with me the lessons that each one of them have taught me about life so I can make myself a better person.

LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF

About two years ago, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When I discovered that I had bipolar disorder, it was the biggest challenge I have ever encountered in life. I was not able to turn to my family for support, because they did not know what bipolar disorder was or how they could be of any help to me. I also lost my friends because they treated me like I had the flu and said to me, "I am sorry. I hope that you get better." Those comments cut through my heart like a sword. I was not only learning how to adjust my whole life into this new "normal," but at the same time was grieving the loss of my friends' and my family's support.

Although bipolar disorder has come with many different challenges, it has more importantly had a positive impact on my life. It took a lot of grit for me to face this challenge and stay focused on my life goals. It has helped me challenge my perception of "normal." Having bipolar disorder has challenged me to practice gratitude. I realized that for me,

being grateful when things were going "right" came naturally, but with bipolar disorder many times, things were not going according to my liking. I had to make a conscious decision to appreciate the things and the people in my life.

BECOMING MY OWN ADVOCATE

While at the University of Utah, I took a class from a teacher that I felt comfortable talking to. I opened up to her about recently being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and how I was struggling to adjust to it. I told her how I have lost friends because of my diagnosis and did not have my family's support due to their lack of understanding. She helped me understand that it is okay to seek out additional support; in a sense, having a second family, which would provide me with the strength that I needed. She guided me to some student groups on campus that I could look into, such as Black Student Union (BSU) and Muslim Student Association (MSA).

I checked them all out, but none of them seemed to click for me. A few women and I discovered through the Women Resource Center on campus that we could create our own student group. There were six of us who felt out of place so we developed the Women of Tomorrow (WOT). It is a group dedicated to supporting minority women on campus, helping them to discover the unique powers and gifts that they bring into the world. Women of Tomorrow provides a nurturing environment that helps women establish self-worth, self-esteem, and self-love. I felt like I finally found the support for which I have been longing. This group has become my second family, and I get all the support I need to help me through tough times.

MY EMERGENCE AS A LEADER IN THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY

After being diagnosed, I started intensively researching and learning everything I could about bipolar disorder. I have learned that mental health issues are common for refugees. However, there is a stigma that is attached to mental health issues that keep refugees from getting the help they need. Learning this information saddened me. I wanted to learn more about it so that I could be able to help myself as well as others.

In 2016, I began volunteering at Catholic Community Services (CCS) twice a week as an interpreter so I could help refugees seek the mental health care they needed to live their lives to the fullest. During my time there, I realized there was a gap in the services that were being utilized by the refugees. CCS was having a hard time convincing the Somali Bantu to seek the necessary assistance because the Bantu community feared being perceived as crazy by the doctors, their families, and the community as a whole. I realized that the gap was due to trust. Somali Bantu is typically a very private group of individuals, and they feared that their business would be leaked to the community. I discussed my concerns with CCS on how to address the issues while respecting their privacy.

During this process, I became a representative of the Somali Bantu community—and not just as an interpreter to the CCS. I was able to better connect with Somali Bantu community by sharing my personal story and discussing how accepting help, such as medication and therapy, has helped me and, at times, even saved my life. While communication is important, having someone who is a part of the Somali Bantu community provides a greater service in bridging the gap between the Bantu community and healthcare by helping them understand the importance of seeking and accepting help.

My goal has been to learn about and address different mental health issues that refugees encounter. I was able to do that by building relationships and getting to know them as individuals. I understand everyone is different and that the way to help one person may not be the way to help another. I feel that getting to know refugees as individuals has better equipped me to collaborate with them. It has helped me identify resources and solutions, as well as advocate for them with their families.

CONCLUSION

My emergence as a leader has been a process of broadening my understanding of how I can have an impact on people's lives and realizing that there's not just one way to serve the community. The different roles that I've had have taught me important skills that I need to help people. I hope by sharing my story, others are able to see that there is not only one way to help refugees and that no matter what their passion is, their

experiences are important and needed. I want to make a difference on a larger scale. I plan to continue my work with refugees, learn how to best make use of available services for refugees, and help refugees get the specialized help they need.

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