

**Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest**  
**Episode 2.6: “Conversations with America: Abdirizak Abdi”**

Guest: Abdirizak Abdi

Location(s): Des Moines, IA and Apple Valley, MN

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

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Brian Campbell (BC): I’m Brian Campbell and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. We continue our season featuring stories of immigration with today’s guest, Abdirizak Abdi. When he was just six years old, Abdi’s family fled civil war in their native Somalia, then lived as refugees in neighboring Kenya. Throughout his childhood, school was a bright spot, and education was highly valued in his family. At nineteen, Abdi moved to Minnesota and for the first time in his life enjoyed a steady paycheck, working at the airport. He felt like he’d finally made it in the land of opportunity he’d dreamed about for years. But here, in this new country, was school an opportunity too? Those who knew him encouraged him to consider college, but Abdi wasn’t sure there would be a place for someone like him.

Abdirizak Abdi (AA): So I remember walking around at St. Cloud University and just like walking into that hallway in that administration building at St. Cloud State and thinking whether I wanted to go to university or not. In the hallway, I remember looking at those pictures on the walls, and I couldn’t see myself in those walls. And I hesitated whether I wanted to go to school or not.

Interestingly, I got a certificate from St. Cloud this week that I was recognized as one of their notable alumni and that my picture will be displayed in that same hall.

Just even thinking about getting that recognition and having my picture displayed for other people that might look at me to see, that just shows you how much the midwest has changed.

BC: Abdi thrived at college. He studied management with visions of being an entrepreneur or working in the corporate world. But he also started working part time in the St. Cloud, Minnesota public schools. Historically, the district had been almost entirely white, but now over a third of the students were from East African backgrounds. His job was supporting Somali-American students and families, and he loved it. Here in St. Cloud, in this place he wasn’t sure he could fit in, his plans began to change. Abdi’s American Dream began to transform.

He began to envision himself as an educator, and he began to see education, public schools in places like the Upper Midwest, as key to a changing vision of America. Could these be places where someone who looked like him could be a leader? Where students of color could see themselves? Could the Midwest be a place that welcomes differences and embraces change, where people from radically different backgrounds could model how to live together in communities large and small? It wouldn't be easy, but Abdi knew a thing or two about overcoming adversity, about resilience and determination in the face of conflict.

Today, we hear Abdi's story, his vision for the Midwest, his conversation with America.

I asked Abdi about his earliest memories, about where his story begins, and he explained that remembering is a difficult thing, for him and for other Somali refugees.

AA: The good thing is I don't remember anything at that point when I was 6 years old. But, I was told the story of how we got to the refugee camps and I'm glad those memories did not stay and traumatize me as a child and I think that's a gift from God that did not happen. There are people that have those memories and would have tears when they talk about it.

BC: But he also knows unearthing these memories can help others understand in some small way the realities of the refugee experience. And so he shared with me a little of what he can remember.

AA: So, one of the things, and I have those conversations with my colleagues and friends now where we talk about what is it like to be a refugee, to be forced out of your home and forced out of the place you called home. And I think for a lot of people they think that you just left on your own accord and that you wanted a better life but that is not what it is in a civil war. Normally there's violence there's so much that is happening not just in terms of losing your home but people being killed and many lives have been lost. There's just so much of in terms of violence that really got to that point where people could not stay at their homes and were first to leave to really fight for their lives and for safety and get to a place where they can at least feel safe and have food at the table.

I've had relatives that have been killed, people that have been family close friends that also have experienced that violence. So it's like you wake up in the day and everything has ended that you had. And if you stay alive and survive that day to make it to a place where you can stay alive, you're fine. And so at that moment when that happens it's like you don't even think of sometimes the people that are living in your own household because your survival mode is just

“how do I get out of here now?” and families have gone in different ways and have never been able to get reunited.

My dad ended up in Ethiopia which is another neighboring country to Somalia because some people were not staying together. So I haven't spent much time with my dad. Kind of grew up under the realm of my brothers. And not having that father, father figure not a part of my life, I think it would have been amazing and great. There's just a lot of that and that memory and I think it's just, during the civil war, it's just one of those memories people will not talk about.

BC: Abdi moved to Kenya, and settled in a refugee camp alongside thousands of other Somali families. He remembers the camp in vivid detail, crowded and dusty, but in contrast to the chaos of civil war, a place that felt safe, even spacious.

AA: I remember a lot about just growing up in Kenya in general. The living circumstances in refugee camps were better than running free for your life and safety, we had limited resources in terms of food and shelter. It's just a bunch of tents set up by most of the times the international organizations. The UN and etc. etc. And at least you have a space to live in. It's not like you have your own room. Like where you live in a house and have your own room to live in. And in a lot of circumstances, you just have that one space and everyone would have a little corner that they sleep. And a family. And just think of a family of 7, a family of 10. And what that really looks like. In Terms of roads there are no roads there's no infrastructure it might be just one road that leads to coming and going as far as resources and being connected to the cities nearby.

But other than that it's just a place that is set up for a temporary shelter for people to live until they are able to get to somewhere they can restart their life because they lost everything they had. And that's what a lot of people don't understand. Well why do you stay at the refugee camps? Well it's not really a place you can call home.

It's dusty, you walk around in the air will be blowing out of your... just the dust coming out into your eyes no control over it.

But there's also good things living under those circumstances that unstructured time in life even though you don't know where your future is or where you are going in a moment. But there is also just like I want to live in that moment right now because it's that free space. Open space.

BC: Abdi has fond memories of the unstructured nature of life in the refugee camps, the freedom to run and play and be a child. His family soon found a way to relocate again, this time to the capital city of Nairobi, where there were opportunities for work and for education, for a

future. Abdi's mother enrolled him in school, and he quickly adapted, learning English, making new friends, and discovering a passion for education that continues to drive him today.

AA: If you want to reach the moon she said always get an education. So my mom was a woman that really believed in education even though she never got the chance to go and get an education for herself. She always viewed it as something that could open the doors of opportunity for you. And she always talked about it. I think one thing that really kind of always, she made a comparison was that my older brother didn't have the opportunity to do that so he was just like supporting the family and being the breadwinner for the family. I think she wanted the younger ones to not go through that route to not give up the need to get an education. It was great. I enjoyed my time going to school. Still love school and I'm a learner and I can sit any day and just listen to anything that anyone is trying to tell me and I keep an open mindedness.

BC: And am I correct that your father was an educator as well?

AA: Yeah my father was a teacher actually. He taught memorization of the Qur'an and these long studies and those sort of things. It's not that he went to school for it, just a very traditional background that you learn something and you teach people but it's not like you go to teacher training and learn that and become a teacher that's just the requirement here. So for a long time that's what he did for all his life was just teaching people and he was a good and memorable man. He would always say everyone is your friend until they are not. And so treat everyone with respect and so he was a very humble human being. Just the few moments that I've seen him because you know I have not spent a lot of time with him but he was just a man of service. And I think also that took from him and as a leader try to just be first human because that's I think the one thing we forget especially now that people are going under very difficult circumstances and so yeah.

BC: And was Islam a big part of what helped your family make it through all of these challenges?

AA: Yes. Absolutely yeah. Both my mom and my dad were very good Muslims and they have always loves and have always taught us the first thing of being a Muslim is just good character and how you treat other people even those that are different than you. Those that you disagree with and they just lived into that realness just making sure that you're really not looking at people in a different way even when the opportunity allows you to. Not having pride at all and just being humble no matter what circumstances that you live in you don't know those circumstances will be real and it just reminds me of even thinking back I mean the circumstances for some people and some relatives that have lived in the refugee camps . I just kept that in the back of my head. You know when I see someone on the street who may have lost their job and was a homeless person, I cannot stand it. I always stop my car and think about

that being me. So they really installed that in us and that was just living in that just being good Muslims not just what has been broadcasted by social media in terms of what a Muslim person is.

BC: Do you have particular teaching from the Qur'an that is important to you?

A: Yeah there's a verse that really talks about all of us being humans and that whoever has taken the life of a human has taken the life of all. And whoever saves one life of a human saves all lives. And the reason it talks about another verse, it talks about that we are all made different in terms of culture and terms of religion and in terms of who we are and who we associate with. Just in the matter of recognizing our differences. But it's not so that we are different so that we fight with each other so we look at each other in a bad way. So those are the two versus that I always think about because again in the world where we live in the world today where there is so much division and uncertainty it's just hard for you not to see the good in other people that are different than you.

BC: Well and as you say that sense of being connected and our lives being linked and caring for each other so deeply, that's so different than what is often the stereotype of what a Muslim is in the US.

BC: Abdi's family did their best making a life in Nairobi, for over a decade, but they dreamed of new possibilities, of a move to the United States. His older brother Jafar worked, saved money, and eventually left Kenya carrying their collective hopes and dreams. He crossed borders and even oceans, until he eventually made it to the southern border of the U.S., and like so many immigrants, crossed a line full of promise, and full of politics too.

AA: So when everything else is gone that you have when you're a refugee and you're trying to, you don't know where you'll end up you don't know what you'll become. You don't know what country you'll end up living in and call home. And just in that matter of survival, I want to make sure that I would provide a comfortable life and get them to a safe place that has opportunities for education, have opportunities where I come from. We are more of a collective culture. We think of the good of the family other than just me. And so that's really what my brother was doing. So he stayed in Nairobi. He came all the way to South Africa and lived there for a while. It wasn't safe anymore. Still supported our family and he ended up coming here to the United States as an asylum. And travelled all the way through Latin American countries and got here and he sponsored us and said you know my family is there and I want to bring them here. So we went through the process and through that organizations that sponsored us to come to the United States. We came here as refugees and he came here actually as asylum.

BC: So I mean going back to when you first moved here you said that for years you kind of had this hope that your brother would make it to the US and that your family would be able to move. What would you imagine that the US would be like? I mean what was your vision of that life that was possible here in the US?

AA: So, I think the idea of America, for a lot of people around the world, not just refugees living in a camp. Is you know that America is the gre here was something that was really great and valuable. And I remember you know people talking about it and I think the way it was viewed, at least at that time, was if I go there then it's just the end of survival. That you're going to have a good life, Gonna get a good job. Everything that American means is that everyone has and had their own definition of what it looks like. And so it's like you go there and I mean everything is set up for you, you're covered. If you become an American like that's it. That was kind of the view and that's the view that I had when I was coming here.

Interestingly, we arrived in San Diego, California and I remember the first month because you wait for just the paperwork and documentation when you come to this country as a refugee, at least for a month just like getting all your paperwork done. And I remember getting there and most of the people, brother and some other people that lived in that same building. They would all go to work in the morning and it was just us, the newcomers and we would just stay home and watch shows. And I remember watching one of the first shows I've watched. It was Jerry Springer, so that was my first click and so I watched it and I was almost addicted because we didn't have anything else to do. We were waiting for our paperwork. And so just seeing that as my interaction with America and what it looked like, that kinda stuck with me through the years and that's how I viewed white people for a long time. Until I became an educator and I started examining my own epistemology and biases and had to go back and say oh that's where I got that from it's interesting that all of those things that we see every day give us a narrative of other people and who they are. Even though we don't make an effort to know them. So when I'm joking with my white friends I always tell them, hey I have always looked at you guys with Jerry Springer broadcasted so don't start with me. And I also say I know where you're so just that acknowledgement of the things that we see and mostly now with social media it's been so powerful it's something really we have to stop, pause and examine ourselves and understand the other people around us it was just kind of interesting when I got here. Now to answer your question, I thought coming to America that was it. But then I didn't know that I had to work for everything to get to where I am. And I'm glad I did.

BC: So tell me how you wound up on St. Cloud from, you came into San Diego but what did you do there?

AA: I've had some friends in Minnesota and so I ended up coming here to Minnesota, first in Minneapolis and I started working actually at the airport, at the terminal. And I remember my first winter in Minnesota in 2006. I still considered one of the coldest winters I have ever seen. And I became a water truck driver. A small truck that serves the aircrafts. So I would have a schedule and specific gates and a terminal that I'll be working at and so all of those aircrafts that'd come to those gates id put the water that would be used you know goes back on a trip. So that was my first job in America.

And I remember in terms of how cold it was when I put the pipe and pumped the water into the aircraft and when I was done and would take that pipe out of the aircraft, that little water that would fall down on the ground sometimes they would freeze before they reached the ground. That was my first experience of winter. And I was just saying to myself I don't think I want to live in this place I think I just want to go back. I'm glad I did not go back and so really interestingly after working there for close to a year I realized that my mother would always say to me if you become someone, reach the moon, get an education. So just thinking about what my mother said and what I wanted to do when I was a teenager I was hungry for money. I was just hungry for the paycheck that was really good. You go to work and sometimes you work over time and you see that money and you think I really don't want to give up this. But I'm glad I did give up and I finally connected with someone who lived in St. Cloud and just talked about going to school, a friend of mine. And that's how I ended up in St. Cloud. So I came to visit him in St. Cloud and then I never went back.

People always would say, you know you came from San Diego, California. That's the best place to live! Why did you come to Minnesota. And then from Minneapolis I moved back to St. Cloud and my friends would call me the backward guy, like people move from a small city to a big city, you're just going backward. Right.

BC: You're supposed to wind up in San Diego and not St. Cloud.

AA: Yep, I wouldn't change it. I love it really. I just wish that the winter was a shorter period than what it is right now. But I love the two seasons and it's really amazing.

BC: Living in Minnesota meant adapting to more than the weather. St. Cloud is the third largest metro area in the state, just an hour from Minneapolis by far, but a lot further politically and socially. Like cities across the Midwest, this part of Central Minnesota has seen a growing number of refugees in recent years. And a growing backlash to the influx of immigrants, especially to East African, Muslim immigrants. In 2019, a New York Times story featured St. Cloud as a symbol of the changing demographics of the Midwest, a city whose nonwhite

population rose from 2% to 18% in the last 30 years. And the city exemplifies the politics of this transformation. Some longtime residents welcome newcomers, but the area has also birthed a whole network of anti-immigrant citizen groups, politicians, talk radio hosts, and digital media sites. Abdi learned right away why some people call it “White Cloud.”

AA: The narrative is it's the kind of place where that racism is real. That really if you're a person of color that it makes it hard to live and survive. That's how it is but it's not. There are just parts of that and that's just the majority of people that live in St. Cloud are great people and have had the opportunity to get to know them but there are a few that are still stuck with the old ideology of it's just us. Oftentimes I hear people making comments and telling people to go back to your country.

So one time I remember and this was actually someone that I had as not a close friend but a friend asked me this was during the time when that movie the Captain came about. The Pirates in Somalia, I don't know if you ever watched. And that movie and she came to me and said so Abdi I asked you those pirates the ones that were actually kind of doing all the stuff in the Indian Ocean and they were making a lot of money on those cruise ships that would cross through that area. So she came down and she said so I have a question for you. And I said what is it? And she said, so do you think those guys would be able to come here to the US? Are they going to hurt us? I'm like no. There is no way. This is two different continents and they're not as powerful as you think they are because again movies, Hollywood, it's all those narratives that we learn or the norms in terms of social norms that we hear and see shape what we are. Yeah there's this still that fear of oh I'm afraid of you because who you look like or who you are.

BC: In the mainstream narratives, many white Midwesterners imagined Somalia as a place teeming with terrorists, and they imagined refugees like Abdi as dangerously un-American, intent on imposing their religion and culture in places like St. Cloud. It was obvious to Abdi, though, that most of these people didn't know what Somalia was really like and didn't know the Somali people now living in the communities. And it also became obvious to him that St. Cloud was a more complex place too, more than a caricature of racist nativism. It was here, for the first time in his life he developed deep friendships with a diverse group of people, with white and black Midwesterners, and immigrants from all corners of the world. He challenged his own assumptions about the Midwest, and he challenged their assumptions about him. And in the process, Abdi also grew to love Minnesota, and it's abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities, even in winter.

AA: when it comes to activities, I'm very outgoing. I try whatever that comes around. So I actually did ice skating up in Duluth a few times and so I was telling a friend of mine who is from the Midwest, born in the Midwest, and I said, you, I actually so we were talking about it and I

said I actually do ice skating, I've done it before if you guys want to do it, we can do it! And she looked at me and she said, are you serious? And I said, what do you mean serious? And she was like, I never thought that black people do that. She surprised the fact that I actually did ice skating. So yeah, I tried, yeah I learned a lot in the Midwest that I did ice skating, ice fishing once, I went with my friend. I do like the water, I started doing some you know hiking and rock climbing, mostly indoor. So I do enjoy a lot both the winter and the summer. I did snowmobile and that was really awesome too. So yeah, I, yeah I push my friends to learn about me and they push me to learn about all the different things that you know, some are weird in the Midwest. And you wouldn't know what it means, but, yeah.

BC: I wonder if you can think of any things that you think of as kind of characteristic of the Midwest. Things that you notice and laugh about with your friends, whether it's other Somalis or white friends.

AA: Yeah. It's interesting that you said that. I always joke around with my white colleagues and friends about that in terms of the Midwest that it took me a while to really understand them. The kind of that niceness in the Midwest.

BC: Yeah.

AA: And I kind of, it was kind of hard to adapt that because you know I want to speak my truth, I want to say it as it is. And so, it's just a matter of like but there's also the other side of my culture that relates to that being nice in terms of like coming from a collective culture, you are always nice to people, you are always thinking the big picture and you always think about the kind of the that we are in this together and all of that and so oftentimes I will like if we ever go to a restaurant, like, like, the kind of the culture in here is that oh you take care of yourself, I take care of myself, we're a very individualistic. I come from a collective culture so, you know if we eat food and have a coffee, I want to pay for it, because that is how we grew up right? And I remember you know how offensive that was to some people when you know I first came here because it was out of my conscious mind, I'll just do it. And they were like, you're not. I am okay, I have, I can take care of myself. I'm like, chill down, it's not like that you know, just, it makes me feel better so it's not like I'm not doing it out of disrespect, I'm doing it out of respect.

So my time in St. Cloud was really amazing. I had the opportunity to meet a lot of people to get to know people. The interesting thing is that I have made friends of all kinds of walks of life so different. Some were born here in St. Cloud, some born like coming from different parts of the world. The interesting thing is that some of those people that I had met in St. Cloud have now become more than friends but have become brothers and sisters. And so there's just that part

of St. Cloud that I always view and that people don't see. That a Muslim young man that came to this country as a refugee would really cherish and live a good life in a place in a place that they call it, they call St. Cloud "White Cloud." Just to show you that there's always two sides to the story, not just one. There are parts of St. Cloud, those few people that really make those comments, those ugly things that should not be. But there is just this other part of St. Cloud that is just great and awesome.

We're not realizing how communities are really changing but they really are changing. And I think it's something that would be great because if there's more diversity there is more for us to learn from each other.

BC: In 2017, Abdi began working as an assistant principal at St. Cloud's Apollo High School. Inspired by the Apollo space program, the school was founded in 1970 as a forward-thinking institution, where students could imagine new futures for themselves and the world. Just outside the entrance to the school sits one of the training capsules Apollo astronauts used as they prepared for missions to the moon. Abdi shared with me about a powerful experience he had, standing in front of that capsule, in the summer of 2019, on the 50th anniversary of the Apollo moon landing, an imaginative conversation with America, the America of 1969.

AA: I walked outside of Apollo and I was just thinking about that specific day in terms of America the day we landed the first man on the moon as the first country in the world. And how much united we were just that specific day. And my imaginative mind travelled back all of those years, 50 years. And so I was thinking about how divided we are as a society in America and how united we were that day that we landed the man on the moon. And I had a conversation with that America, 50 years ago. And interestingly in my imaginative mind I was talking to America and it was responding to me in my imaginative mind, as someone that cares, someone that really loves, and really cherishes starting a life and making a life here in the United States as a citizen.

BC: Abdi shared this conversation with America, a poetic vision he's captured in writing. For the sake of time, we can't include it all, but visit our website to read it in full.

AA: I'm walking right in front of Apollo and I ask America, so who are you?

And America responded, it's an irony that you asked because most of the people forgotten who I was to be. And then it continued, America,

I was to be the gatehouse welcoming everyone for whom they would become.

I was to be the dreamer for the young and old, man and woman, from every corner of the globe.

I am the same America who landed the first man on the moon 50 years ago today, but who are you?

And I responded, my journey is similar to men, women, and children who have travelled many miles seeking you.

I am a young man who came to this country as a refugee seeking a better life.

I am an immigrant whose father never had the opportunity to go to college and earn a degree.

I am a hopeful member of society who is encouraged by faith from a courageous and humble mother. A mother who never went to school yet reminded me that education was the route to success.

I am a simple human seeking to share and cherish but what happened to you America?

And America continued,

My dream was to be the light, shining bright in the imagination of boys in girls playing in the dust of camps.

My dream never changed since Apollo 11 but it's human greed wanting to alter that dream.

My dream will not live without the origin idea of the American dream, providing the best to all.

My dream will not survive the -minded idea that it is for certain people as it will narrow the dream.

My dream is the same dream from that day despite that many will not accept the reality.

And then, I continued. And I said,

America, I often get discouraged every moment watching the television and news.

America, you whisper in my heart and say speak your truth.

You say don't be discouraged by your uncertainties, divisions, and mistrust amongst you.

You ask me to go ahead and share this story and the bond that we commonly share but I'm asking you how.

And so America said, Go tell the world that I am that diamond hidden in the dust and you are that bright light shrouded in the darkness.

And I interjected while America was still talking, and I said I am scared and keep holding myself down, waiting for things to happen naturally.

I keep hoping someone else would act, but you remind me that we all have a responsibility.

I keep reminding myself that what brings joy to the hearts of all Americans brings success to mine.

I keep telling myself about the endless hope for our country and wish for a bright future.

I keep reminding myself that the success of all Americans brings hope and prosperity into my heart.

I keep hoping that change will come and bring hope, prosperity, harmony, unity and endless joy.

And then America responded. It's your fear of not seeking beyond and you have to speak your truth and share your perspective so the world can hear. And it continued,

You are the American dream no matter who, that would remain the same.

You are the optimism, your optimism, harmony and prosperity will bring you joy.

I thanked America and I concluded,

America the great promised that you would remain to be that eagle that never stops.

America, I hope you bring joy to all, and not just to some, no matter where they come from, the color of their skin, their background, who they associate with, and what they do.

And America responded and concluded, I will make that promise if you humans would make the promise that you would get along, along from each other. One love, America.

And that was the end... and then I never shared it! I wrote it and I have many of those things that I've written that I just write them and and but I don't share it. And because again, publicity is something that I, is not part of my, DNA. I just want to be that simple person that kind of helps the people that are around him, but again just that responsibility of us that we have voice and that we must share. I remember one time, it was actually one of those times that we celebrate for a holiday and I wrote a letter to President Trump, but I never sent it to him.

BC: You wrote a letter to President Trump?

AA: I did. I wrote a letter to him and it was really interesting. But I never shared it, it was one of those things. I write a lot of things and but I never get it out there. Yeah, it was, it was kind of

interesting. So it was actually a day that was kind of, so Eid, Eid is one of the two holidays that we celebrate as Muslims. And so, it was one of those days and you know, I went and kind of celebrated and then I came back and I was in a good mood. And I sat on my balcony, and I'm not into politics. So I never wanted to be involved my name, the author, me saying about anything because it's just an easy way, easy for your name to get out there. So, yeah I wrote it and I remember just talking about you know the power because if you are a leader, your words, your words, it's like, your a sword with two sides. One with the good and one with the bad and so you can really make a difference by your words as a leader. And so I was just like an encouragement, it was just a hopeful message, I don't know if I still have it, but. Yeah, it was just kind of interesting, and that was when he was first elected. It was kind of new, so. But it was interesting. Again, it was just me, my perspective as a young man who came to this country, talking to the leader of the world.

BC: Well it sounds like you know from what you shared from August 20th, you had this vision that you, you do feel a certain sense of call to speak your truth.

AA: Yes.

BC: That maybe that doesn't come easy for you, but that you do have a lot to say and you see in the world around you that there's truths that you need to speak right now.

AA: Yeah! Yeah, no and it is, but it's just like people can take your words out of context too. So I'm also careful of what I say because I just want to live in my normal life. And I want to worry about my students and my staff and the people that I interact with every single day who need me the most. And my biggest obligation is them and so I don't want to be overtaken but then like you said again, I have that intuitive mind of just thinking about that because I remember now, now it's coming back to me. I think it was 2018 or somewhere, and I remember it was just a great day of important celebration, joy, and love for us. And you know as people celebrated normally wear traditional clothes and share their clothes. Share traditional dishes that day. I was just like, I felt like you know, I'm going to give my wisdom and hope for our country. And who would it be the best to send it to? Well, the president because he technically was the president. And so, yeah, it was just like, because what's really happening is that oftentimes we tend to pay attention to the noises and the loudness of you know, the two sides. All the way out, right? And that you know just that balance in times of, we are Americans, we are humans. We are the same people and it's okay to have those disagreements, but the place that we are right now is not okay. It's not okay in terms of how we feel about each other. And that we should really try to find that balance that might be to be unattractive because that darkness would really blind us to see the light ahead of us as a nation. And it was just, it was just like

those moments that I was just reminded that you know you have to be thinking about what wind has really brought us here as a nation, as Americans. And it's just that whisper of my heart that just said, do get discouraged. You have to be able to say what you need to say, and I just sat down and wrote and wrote but then I, like I said, I never shared it.

BC: It's really striking to me that you, you've had that urge to speak truth in the midst of this celebration where you were

AA: Yeah.

BC: Wearing traditional clothes

AA: Yeah.

BC: And eating Samoli food and you know, being able to really celebrate those roots and to be able to celebrate that as an American

AA: Yeah.

BC: And as a group of Americans that, that is America, it's not just about assimilating and you know, kind of holding back that truth but it is about being proud of, of all the different cultures that are America.

AA: Yes. And so, yeah. And I want to make sure that I am celebrating, but everyone else, even those that disagree with me the most can also celebrate. But there's just this fear and uncertainty and just struggles and divisions among us. And I wonder, I always have a vision of that we can change that and prevail to bring hope, prosperity, harmony, and endless joy to our communities no matter where you live or what Zip code because I believe that crisis just, you know, lasts a period of time and then not forever and we have to be able to envision and see the light ahead of us, but right now, none of us is doing okay in terms of where we are and what's happening to some of our communities just because of what they are associating who they are. And just the words that we use, what we say to each other, you know, the struggles, the killings, there is just so much fear that exists and that's not what I see when I see America. That we can change that, but only if the people that oftentimes do not speak that includes me, can speak their truth and so that it kind of what overtakes me when I'm doing these things and writing these things.

BC: Well yeah, but I can imagine that that feels very risky you know

AA: Yeah

BC: To speak up and to speak when you know that same president was just in Minnesota just a few weeks ago saying you know

AA: Yes. The things that he was saying, yeah.

BC: You know, saying that the whole state is destined to be a refugee camp if we continue to, you know, welcome people, people like you.

AA: Yeah. Yeah so how do you see that huh? How do you respond when your own president comes here and says that. But then again, that's not who you are. That's not what you believe. That's not why you're here. It's just, it's just because just an ordinary person was saying that, it's different. A president's word is like a sword. And it cuts whatever it cuts. And so I think it's just the matter of learning from each other. I think having that opportunity doesn't matter whether you're a president or have a different title, but I think there's just a fear amongst us and that really creates and the more that we're not willing to learn who we are from each other and praise our differences, and just I think the more this would continue.

BC: So, I'm curious, I mean, as someone who moved here as a teenager, I mean what was it like, you know, understanding kind of the racial history and differences in the United States?

AA: The idea that my success would be determined by the color of my skin did not run in my head until I get to America. In another way, I did not know I was black until I got to this country. Even though I am, but I have never thought through it until I came to America and there's just so much emphasis poured into that which is really sad.

I think the way that the system is set up is just to create more divisions and not to really unite who we are as people and it's not just African Americans, its also you know, my white colleagues and my white friends who have taken me in their wings and have helped me in terms of learning all of this and becoming a really, a conscious leader, who really examines the things that he hears and not just forming one general idea about any sort of people no matter what they are or where they come from.

BC: In the summer of 2020, after years of ongoing education, and after years of learning to navigate the dynamics of race and difference in St. Cloud, Abdi realized his dream. On July 1, Somali Independence Day, Abdi became the new principal of Humboldt High School in St. Paul,

Minnesota, one of the first principals of Somali descent not just in the Midwest, but in the US. It was a challenging time to say the least. The Twin Cities were awash in protests and Black Lives Matter activism in the wake of George Floyd's murder. And schools were facing a fall full of uncertainty as leaders scrambled to develop plans for virtual learning that would be accessible to all.

AA: You know, it's, it's a reality around not just my school, but I think that other, I mean if you are an educator out there kudos to you for all of the hard work that you're doing because it's not easy or. This pandemic has really created challenges and definitely would increase gaps in terms of where students would be. We are on hold in a lot of things in our lives. Not just school, but I think it's after, we might not realize it now because, right, you know it's a, I mean Minnesota state is not, we don't know about the tests yet, last year they were canceled in terms of data and measuring data and what that would look like for each school and I don't know whether they're going to have them because covid is still as real and I think that numbers are going up right now, but it would interesting to see what it looks like, what I can say is that the challenges of the pandemic are real and I don't know how much support really is out there in terms of, institutions that have powers. But it's just a time where we're definitely going to see more gaps and more challenges for those that are disenfranchised the most.

And that's the one thing that I, when I think about is, if we are not thinking about each other right now. If we are not supporting each other now, if we are divided now, when would we ever be going to see each other as Americans? If we cannot do something about the disparities and the issues that exist because of the system that might have been built not for everyone, when are we ever going to see what that really looks like? And when are we ever going to have empathy and sympathy for each other if we are, if covid did not teach because it's real. And it's happening to all of us across all Zip codes and across the nation. And we have, you know, what a crazy time of our lives that we are living, you know, in these ups and downs and going through us as we progress and try to find solutions. But it's definitely going to, there are going to be more ups and downs because of covid. And we're going to have more challenges because of covid. And covid is real. And I think covid should teach us a lesson that we should see each other as brothers and sisters. Should visit our neighbors and make sure that we know how the people that we work with and around us are doing, no matter what party they associate with or where they have come from.

What I would say is I think to conclude is I think we are at a time in our lives where no one knows what's next. There's just so many of us that have to navigate many unknowns and challenges in this pandemic. And think it's good to say to ourselves that this time will not last,

and that good times are still ahead. Because I know many of us are really scared of the next chapter of experiences, but we should not be because I think we can come together no matter who we are or what we believe or where we come from, if we unite, understand each other, be willing to know the perspective of the other, examine our epistemology and our biases. I think we can become brothers and sisters and we can leave the world like we did. So thank you!

BC: Thanks to Abdirizak Abdi for sharing his story. And thank you for listening to Mid-Americana. If you like the show, we hope you'll share it with friends and leave us a review wherever you listen to podcasts. You can find transcripts and show notes for this, and all our episodes, on our website, [midamericana.com](http://midamericana.com), which also features original illustrations for each episode by artist Mathew Kelly.

We'll be taking a brief holiday break, but look for new episodes in January, continuing our season of stories of immigration in the Midwest. Next time, Josh speaks with Dominique Serrand. Dominique is co-founder of the Theatre de la Jeune Lune (te-ah-tr-eh de la zhoon loon) – Theater of the Young Moon - a drama company that opened in Paris and moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1985. Serrand struggled to make a living as an artist in the United States, but his work has earned many awards over the past thirty-five years, including knighthood by the French Government and a Tony Award for Best Regional Theatre in 2005. The Theatre de la Jeune Lune collapsed financially in 2008, and Serrand and his partners formed a smaller group, The Moving Company, which continues to produce innovative and sometimes controversial theatre in the Twin Cities. Serrand speaks at some length about a recent production, *Refugia*, which initially responded to the 2015 crisis in Syria, but grew to include scenes about refugees in many other places and times. The show opened to acclaim, but also drew fire for cultural appropriation. Serrand speaks about his fears of tribalism in our society, how his vision of the theatre seeks to bridge those divisions, and why he has hope for the future of the arts in America.

Abdi's story was produced by me and Josh Dolezal, and edited by Brad Linder. The theme music for Mid-Americana was written and produced by Adam Bruce. Mid-Americana is supported by Central College, Humanities Iowa, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thoughts aired on our show do not necessarily represent the views of Central College, Humanities Iowa, or the National Endowment for the Humanities.