

Oral History Transcript- Ramla Sahid

Narrator: Ramla Osman Sahid

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AD: Hi, my name is Avika Dhillon, and I am interviewing on behalf of the Race and Oral History course, opposite me is--

RS: Ramla Sahid

AD: And wonderful, it's wonderful to have you here.

RS: Thank you. It's good to be here with you.

AD: [Laughs] All right, so to begin the questions. Do you mind telling me when and where you were born?

RS: So I was born in Somalia, in 1986, in Mogadishu specifically, the capital.

AD: What was it like growing up there? Did you grow up there or were you only born in the capital?

RS: You know I was-- I was born there and my family was there up until... I was the age of three. And then the Civil War in Somalia broke out, and so... that meant that my family had to, you know, take what they could and get out of there as fast as possible. So I don't actually have a whole lot of memories of Somalia.

AD: So where did you go after Somalia? Like, what was your childhood like?

SD: So I know that from stories and, from, you know, disconnected or just jumbled memory, that my family took a while to get out of Somalia. So we would travel to get further and further away from the conflict, and from the actual war, and it would catch up and we would have to keep moving. So I remember that, and I remember some of the parts, some of the places we settled. One place, one place in particular, I remember really well was an old abandoned school. We settled there for a while, and I was with my uncles and my grandparents and uncle, you know,

aunties-- and, and-- other families who were also trying to seek shelter and safety in this abandoned schoolhouse. And then I remember hearing gunshots and, you know, having to figure out how we all can, can get back on these trucks to keep going. So that's my memory of Somalia, and as we moved further and further away from the conflict we eventually crossed the border into Kenya, and I remember before we crossed though we were at a border community and my family had to make a decision. So parts of my family, so my grandparents, my uncles and aunties, wanted to go back to the Somali region of Ethiopia where we're originally from, my family is originally from, and one of my uncles and my parents wanted to go to Kenya, to seek other opportunities. And so that's where the split happened, part of my family went back to the Somali region of Ethiopia, and to resettle in their former, you know, to find their origins, and to, you know, resettle in their old homes. And then, we, we ended up being in Kenya, in a refugee camp, and I remember that refugee camp being sort of, you know-- I don't know what refugee camps are like today, but I remember it being, having a playground, having a, you know, commissary, or like an open and public large meeting hall and a community kitchen, and I remember the tents, like the refugee tents and where my family was. And we were towards, towards the front, so maybe a few rows down, on the-- I would say, towards where the playground was, right? And so closer to that area, and I don't have memories that are dramatic there just because I think refugee camps were, or at least I think the refugee camp in Kenya was so new, that, you know,... kids like me, you know-- could see we were like everybody else outside the camp. But! We weren't also, having a tough time. Does that make sense? Cause the international community, you know was prioritizing at that time, Somalis surviving the Civil War, and providing support. Of course today, those refugee camps are open maybe twenty-six years more, and the international community is less focused on those refugee camps and more focused on newer camps, right, and newer crises, and for example the Syrian Refugee Crisis, and so internationally I think there is a huge gap in, resourcing and supporting refugees globally, and, I'm talking about refugees that are new, right? Or coming from new conflicts, but also refugees who have been forgotten, in camps in Thailand, Burma, and Somalia-- or in Kenya, where that, where those camps have been open twenty-five, twenty-six years now or longer.

AD: How much time did you spend in the camp?

RS: That is not an answer that I know, but my guesstimate, from stories, that my family shares, is we were there maybe a year or less, and again, because the conflict was so new we were one of the first families to arrive. We were, we had gone through the interview process and the vetting process, and then selected to resettle in the U.S., in Dallas, Texas, specifically. And so we, we have that, I think, I have that very privileged story, because not everybody gets to make it out so early, and then not everybody,... gets to be selected right, to resettle. There are families who arrived at the refugee camp when we did, who didn't have that privilege, so the, the idea that

refugees are waiting in refugee camp to be saved, you know, is not true for many many many people. And only one percent of global refugees ever find a home in a third country like the U.S.

AD: Before we move on to perhaps, what it was like coming here, are you still in contact with the part of your family that split off before you went to the refugee camp?

RS: Some. You know, I'm in touch with two of my brothers, who never came here with us, and whom I've never met in person. I've spoken with a few of my uncles, and an auntie here and there, but the good majority of them I have not had the privilege of meeting, or talking to, or connecting with.

AD: I see. So, when you came to America, specifically, I suppose to Dallas, in your early years, how did being a refugee effect, you know, coming to this country and your experiences in America?

RS: You know, I think that's a, that's a-- is a question that can only be answered-- can't be generalized, it can only be answered based on like how old you were, and how, you know, depending on your age of arrival, right? So, kids like me, who came here at such a young age, starting with you know, primary school here, or elementary school here. The unwrapping into sort of a new normal is easier. Right? Because I hadn't established a set of cultural norms, you know, I was still developing and forming those things. And so, when we resettled, and I was enrolled into elementary school, you know that was the first formal school I'd ever been to. So that process was easier. Also because a lot of the refugees being resettled at the time I was resettled were Somali or East African, and so the classes were largely East African, Somali, and somebody had a Somali student- teacher aide, so I think the schools did really well for children like me when we first arrived in terms of providing us a support. At that time also, there was dual English immersion classes, right. And although I'm not Spanish speaking, right [laughs] it served kids who were bilingual like me. And so I think those were the things that are, that were beneficial. Today, kids who are arriving, you know, at the time that I arrived, don't have the same kind of strong, dual immersion and like, language, you know, courses or classes, and so it might be a little bit of a-- like I can't imagine what it's like right now. But I also know, just from my nephews, just from kids in the neighborhood, just from the families we serve and the kids that they bring in, those kids [snaps fingers] are up to speed in no time, right, and they're really resilient and that's beautiful. And, but, I can only imagine if I arrived here when I was fifteen-- Right? And what that, what those challenges could have, would have been like.

AD: So then, what were some of these challenges that you encountered, that you think are, in your experience, that you would maybe like to share?

RS: I think in my experience, I remember-- I remember in my neighborhood, in City Heights actually, this was sort of the Ellis Island of San Diego, right? This is where refugees resettled. And, so I remember it being very diverse, and that diversity created a lot of I think, great cultural opportunities for kids like me to just sort of go with the flow of things, in a place like City Heights, and really develop a perspective, a world view, that I'm grateful for. You know, I'm glad I had that upbringing I did in the neighborhood that I did and feel really privileged about that. But I also know that my neighborhood was significantly underinvested in, right. The city basically ignored this community for decades [laughs]. And that this community's businesses, mom and pop shops, had to buy a billboard to call to attention that City Heights was the crime capital of San Diego, right? To force the City Hall to think about this community and to invest in this community. So I think, you know, I come from that, that space in that community where I see both the benefits and, you know, how it impacted me today, and the work that I do even, right, and, but also understanding that my community was discarded by the city, a long time, and it took our community and our businesses coming together to force action here, to force investment here, and today you see City Heights being celebrated as a cultural hub, you see San Diego tourism agency coming in trying to highlight City Heights as a destination. And, and, you know, I'm really scared for the erasure that might happen in this community in terms of cultural erasure, in terms of the history of resettlement in this community. As it gentrifies and as it becomes a sort of a hip or hot, you know, market for tourists and people who are-- much more better position, right, to buy and own land in this community than the community that has historically called this place home, which is largely made up of immigrant families, mixed-status households, who don't earn enough of an income to buy the land here.

AD: I see. So then what exactly would you say that, this community and City Heights, what does it mean to you? And, especially with all these changes that have come up in probably the last decade or so with the gentrification and things changing rapidly, so what does this community truly mean to you, now, as opposed maybe to when you first came here?

RS: I mean... So the community is pretty special right, this is probably the only place in San Diego, one of the only places in San Diego, where you can walk around and just see so much cultural integration and support, and... like a real affirmation that we all belong here, and that we all care about each other, and that this is our hood, right? And this is our home, and our *barrio*, or whatever you want to call it right, and I think there's a real sense of like, City Heights pride and home that I'm really proud of. I'm proud of it because it has caused communities to come together about the issues that they really care about and take action on those issues together, and I see joint or multi-racial, like, coalition building and organizing around the things that they need and then making sure elected leaders and officials in City Hall are aware of their needs so I think that's really special, right, and there's complete community ownership, I feel like, for what goes on here, and ownership of each other as well, as diverse people. I think what I'm scared of,

though, is losing that, right? Because more and more, you have apartments that are being flipped, so somebody would come in and buy out, evict everyone so they can make the upgrades and renovations that they need, which is usually nonsensical, right, and it's like putting in vinyl flooring and wood paneling up front at the gate and then all of a sudden they can jack up the rent right, without adding any real value [short laugh]. Both for the people who are going to be the future tenants of that apartment complex, but also really taking away so much from this community.

AD: So, as a community leader, how do you, you know, what are your goals and how do you plan to tackle the problems that you see facing the community that you care about?

RS: I think the way we tackle that is by coming together and doing what we have historically done in this community, which is organizing, which is calling to attention the plight of this community and what's happening and demanding that action be taken to try and slow down a lot of the erasure that's happening. We can't stop it, of course, we can't stop capitalism or market forces, but what we can do is figure out solutions; creative, innovative, policy solutions that allow communities like this to remain. And that could be a part of, you know, increasing tenant protections, or renter's protections, right, that other cities have done like the city of San Francisco, or Portland or New York even, have great models for that, although not successfully, right [laughs]. We have to start real early to get the benefits! And I think often those cities, by the time they get those things, pass those things, those things are already too late. So, my hope is that we get to do those things now, while we can still make an impact. In addition to that, I think it's getting the city to pass a tax revenue measure that is to build and increase supply of affordable housing in communities like this and all over the city of San Diego so families can have some stability, right... some sort of stable housing, shelter they can rely on and not be priced out of. So that's it too. And then the third piece of it is to really, at the end of the day, we need to increase wages, we need to make sure everybody in our neighborhood can earn a family-sustaining wage or a housing wage, and that is through innovative things like, like community-owned businesses, like we need investments that allow people to have a stake in equity, in the local businesses and in the community. And that can only come with real leadership, at City Hall right, but also in the community.

AD: So then, how exactly did you get involved in this line of work, and in this community leadership position?

RS: So, I blame my mom. My mom was an activist [faint laugh] she, she's an organizer, she started organizing in my middle school and in my elementary school. She was, you know, one of the most involved parents you'll ever see, she was at every community meeting, at every parent townhall, at every, whatever! She was there. And she was never afraid to call out the things that

she thought needed to get done. Now when you're growing up, and you see your parent act like that, you're like "Girl, you're embarrassing me!" or "Can we do that?" or "Why are you challenging, you know, authority, can we do that, is that allowed?" And so, there was moments where I felt like oh, what's going on, what's my mom doing, she's like arguing with this person and she barely speaks English, you're like what's happening, and you're a child and you don't know better, right? And then she's winning. And then you're just like "Oh, my mom", [laughs] you know, just, not only does she know her rights, and know how to assert it, but she often knows more than those who are fully, you know, English speaking.

AD: Can you give an example of maybe, one of these things that she won, or one of these really formative, you know, confrontations or negotiations that she had?

SD: Yeah, I mean, so, there are a lot. And the most recent one is she got involved with Mid-City CAN awhile ago, actually she got me involved in Mid-City CAN, which is an organization in the neighborhood, and she also got me involved in the United Women of East Africa support team. So the United Women of East Africa support team women wanted to pass a halal meal at schools program, and at this point I'm more of an adult, I understand my mom and how she works and how she operates, so, it wasn't a crazy ask. It's like she wants halal meals at schools, sure! Like, that's a thing! And then doing some research, understanding that, you know, there are ways to do it, and then just seeing her really push for that, even against institutional leaders who said: "That's not doable, it's not possible, that may raise flags for other cultural groups". But she, and the women at East Africa support team actually said "No, we are going to be unapologetic about our ask, about what we need, and because our kids cannot learn in school if they're starving", right? So that is like, not a thing that we're going to accept and we're going to change this by providing halal meals, and in fact, it's going to be healthy, and it's going to be good food, and all the kids are going to enjoy it! And they brought in Vietnamese moms and Latino moms who shared their desire for that as well, right, so they were building coalitions with other cultural groups in City Heights to demand this, and they actually won that, right. So that's kind of an example of like who my mom is, and the women that I grew up with. And she did those things when I was younger, right? And when you're younger and she's challenging authority you're like "Oh my God, what's happening right now?", but, growing up under that kind of leadership and growing up seeing her fight those fights, battles, and win, particularly as it related to my own education, right? Getting her, having her advocate for me to get out of certain classes and put in certain classes, really, I think, instilled that like, everything that we see in this world is man-made, and everything can be re-imagined, and just having that perspective really opens up a lot.

AD: So, so you were obviously inspired by this kind of almost at-home activism, so then at what point did you yourself start going out and making those changes that you saw, that your mom had essentially taught you could be made?

RS: I think more in high school. In middle school I kind of started to join clubs and things like that, but it wasn't until high school that I actually started a club, became, you know, decided I wanted to run for leadership of a club, decided to engage in specific activities, and then after graduating high school, did a lot of volunteerism in terms of going back to my old high school and doing some work there, around a school environment, and having youth take back ownership of their school environment and having a relationship both with their school and with administrators, and also the school board. And that's actually where I think, for me, I decided okay, that's maybe what I want to do, even though at that time I was majoring in something else! And I enjoyed that too, right, I enjoyed nutritional sciences and counseling women and children on like, good healthy habit-building and healthy meals and things like that. I also just understood that, like, you can't solve societal problems at an individual level, that eventually we will, you will need positive interventions to address inequity, which is the root cause of poverty, and all the other things that are impacting my people. My people being folks from City Heights.

AD: So then, could you also explain how you got involved with PANA, and what PANA is about?

RS: Yeah, so... I talked to you some about my organizing experience, at a younger age, and so I got a job as an organizer and I did some work around juvenile justice. And I wanted to figure out, you know, can we create a pilot in San Diego that would find restorative ways to deal with youth wrongdoing, rather than discarding our youth and putting them into, you know, jail training camps, right [chuckles], juvenile hall. And so, I was able to successfully organize community members to build a relationship with probation, the DA's office, the presiding judge of juvenile court, and probation... Did I say probation? Yeah, and the public defender's office. And we went through some learning together, we committed to each other that we were going to go through this process, and we did eventually create a pilot, right, that would take higher level misdemeanors and lower level offenses and completely make them, diverted out. And what we wanted was a pre-adjudication diversion, right? And that meant that youth would have a chance to repair the harm that they caused before being adjudicated. Right... or finding that they did that harm. And so, after winning that, I did a lot of thinking about, like, what I wanted to do long-term-- Do I want to start a new campaign with the people that we're building with? Cause at that point it was the implementation of the campaign that they had just won but also creating a community council or steering committee to keep that, you know, authentically rooted in their vision of community. As the pilot developed, and I was really, at that time, thinking a lot about what it meant to be a refugee woman, right, or former refugee woman, to come from City

Heights, to be Muslim, to be black, to have all of these identities, and, you know, go to spaces where I would bring up certain experiences that people in my neighborhood and people from my community and from my background would have, and there wasn't an authentic attempt at understanding that. You know, it was almost tokenized, almost like "Oh! Yeah, I get it, so we'll just put an 'and refugees', does that help?" and so, really... figuring out, like, how do we actually help San Diegans who look like me, who have the same experiences as I do, being... finding home here, right, being resettled here, the same experiences my family's had, and how do we get them to act on their own behalf, to be positioned to, you know, be at policy tables talking about their issues, having their own relationships with lawmakers, and really talking from, authentically, from their own experiences and moving on those issues. And so that's when we decided, or I decided, I was gonna start an organization to do that! And so PANA was sort of that dream to provide a space for newcomers, refugees, homeless refugee asylum seekers, to build leadership, to engage on policy decisions, to have discussions that impact them, and build visible electoral power in the city that they are now finding, as home.

AD: Fantastic. So, how then would you describe a day in the life of what you do at work? What is it that you would come in to do on an ideal day, what are your goals?

SD: So, we operate on a cyclical process, meaning every two years we do a bi-annual report on San Diego refugee experiences. That report gets, it's participatory in nature, so that means, the community's involved in the data collection. We send it to a researcher that does analysis and we feed it back to the community for affirmation, like, you know, these are the top things, these are what's coming up as priorities across cultural groups, does this sound right? So we just get the community to affirm the report, provide feedback, and then we also have them prioritize one or two things that are left up as their core campaign or issues they want to take action on. Those core pieces then, we use the next two years right, to build. And so, for me, that means I am working around the clock to make sure that our staff and our team and our community are making movement on that, on those items that they prioritize so that everything from developing a practical work plan around those core goals that they, or priority issues, that they, that the community had prioritized, developing structures, we have a monthly steering committee where core members come and they make decisions about the next steps of the campaign plan or strategy that they're going to take on. I do a lot of research and meeting with and developing with the community, you know, the different pieces of the campaign that need to be done, so the research, that finding, and then training the community on those things, right, making sure the community is informed so we have informed consent every step of the way, right, and we do that through again with the steering committee, that is monthly, making sure our staff is plugging away at the different aspects that-- so we have free powerbuilding strategies, so civic engagement, which is electoral organizing work, that organizing work, which is both where the cyclical house meeting research project happens but also the student committee sits, and then we

have like media messaging, legal defense, and different things like that. So those staff that are responsible for civic engagement or the electoral advising or the media, legal defense, are all plugging into the steering committee and so we're providing rapid response and support to community members as well as moving forward, making movement on our long term or short term goals and strategies that they had prioritized and then that process starts all over again.

AD: So then, why, in your opinion, is it important to do this work, like why does it matter and why is it significant?

SD: I think that you know, it's... [short pause] We can have all the laws in the books to protect people, but if people don't know how to assert their rights or don't have a place to go where they can get support to assert their rights they will always be taken advantage of, they will always be erased, they will always be in a position where they are constantly moving uphill, or going up on a downward going escalator, if that makes sense? They are always behind. They are always trying to, you know. So we want to make it so that San Diego is a bit more fair for people, and that newcomer families from refugees have what they need to thrive and to have a sense of home and belonging in the city. And you can't do that if you don't have a voice, and if you don't have a relationship with those that make decisions about things that impact you and your family's lives.

AD: So, this is kind of moving a little bit in a slightly different direction, but I noticed that you did bring up the fact that you are, of course, a woman of color and you're also, Muslim. So, especially since we live in a post- 9/11 world, where the type of discrimination that many people face is certainly different, you know, then perhaps it might have been twenty, thirty years ago. So what impact do you think that has had, perhaps, on your activism or on your work, or what your goals are, if any?

RS: Yeah, I mean I think every day I am facing the fact that there are real people out there who are questioning my very existence, right? And my right to worship, and my right to exist in this world, and to live in the way that I want to live, right. Fully in my faith, and rooted in my culture, and my identity, and all that. And so I think, part of it is, you know the best way to challenge those things is to do the very things they don't expect us to do. So that means keep getting loud about who I am and what I am, and the community that I'm from, building others to [who] are from this community who are leaders in their own right, and can do this work as well, and building a cadre of leaders who can also do this work, and to fight the the the very thing that I think has crippled us as a community which is being invisible in our own home, so we definitely, I absolutely believe that we need more women hijabis, more Muslims, more South Asian women, more Muslim me, right, who are in public leadership, in public roles, right? The more of us that are doing this work, the more of us that are public about who we are and our faith, and

rooted in our own experiences, people proudly, I think the harder it will be for Islamaphobes and racists and you know, Nazis to come out against us and target us the way that they've been targeting us.

AD: So I guess, if you could give maybe advice to your younger self, like going back maybe ten years or to when you were first starting out in this line of work, what advice would you give?

RS: [Few seconds pause] Go to law school. [Laughs] I should have-- well, that was one of my goals. I wanted to go to law school, and then some dude, some idiot, [chuckles] excuse my language, said "You can't possibly do that" and I didn't!

AD: Why do you think this person felt the need to tell you-- that you couldn't do something?

RS: Patriarchy. [Laughs]

AD: [Laughs]

RS: You know, I just-- I was so young, I think I was in fifth grade, when this happened, so yes. So I think if I was younger, or if I was talking to my younger self I would say totally be unapologetic about everything that you-- who you are and everything you wanna do, and just do it.

AD: So, is there anything that you in particular would like to, perhaps, add to, like, what your kind of goals are perhaps in the next maybe five years, what you would like to accomplish?

RS: In the next five years I hope, between Amina Sheikh- Muhammad, whose at the Refugee Health Unit, and Sahra Abdi, whose the director of the United Women of East Africa support team and others I hope that there are so many more, dozens more young women leading this work who come from our communities.

AD: So if -- What would also be your ad vice, to perhaps, people who are starting out in community work? Like what do you think they should do, to not only educate themselves on how to help others, but also what steps should they take in order to help others?

RS: I think the only thing to do is to get involved. So join an organization, a cause that you care about, and become a member of that organization, support that organization, and like take part, like in leadership roles within that organization so that you're in decision-making roles, that you are providing input into the priorities of the organization and you're moving work that you truly care about. 'Cause once you go through that cycle, doing something like that, something

meaningful like that, and winning something meaningful, I think you, you'll just get the confidence that you need to do other work that you maybe have always dreamed about but didn't really execute on, right? And so I would say just join an organization and cause you care about and learn what you can, do, do, do everything in your power to put yourself in, in relationships with people that help you develop as a better human, a professional, and be unafraid about taking this kind of risks and leading on the issues that you care about.

AD: I think I forgot to ask earlier, what is your birthday?

RS: [redacted]

AD: And finally, is there anything in particular that you would like to add to, like what part of your story do you think you want people most to know?

RS: That I... People like me [pause].... are given permission to do this work, from leaders like Sahra Abdi from the United Women of East Africa support team, and my mom, who set an example and a path for me to follow, and so, you know, the importance I think of leadership, and leadership that is reflective of you and your background, and especially leadership that is, like, provides mentorship to young women.

AD: Alright, I think the one last question I suppose-- What living person would you say you most admire?

RS: [Whispers] Oh my God. [Regular speaking voice] What living person?

AD: Yes.

RS: [Exclaims] One? [Laughs]

AD: Or you can name more than one, I won't stop you. [Laughs]

RS: Oh man, I--I think Angela Davis comes to mind, Michelle Obama comes to mind-- I know, extreme, right? [Laughs] Yeah, that's a hard question, personally.

AD: Would you mind telling me what about them, perhaps?

RS: Strong women, who are unapologetic. Oh, there's this one woman, her name's Lateefah Simon, she's in Oakland, she's the president of the Akonadi Foundation. Hearing her speak just, affirms everything, you know, that I'm-- Everyday I'm like, in this role I feel like I'm unsure

about myself, I'm unsure about the things we're doing and moving along and I hear her speak and I'm just like, okay, like she-- She flips on the switch of like, okay, I know I'm doing this work, I know who I'm doing it for and I know, you know, that I can succeed and I can win and be totally unapologetic about all of that, right? And so women like that who are whip-smart, who are unapologetic about their stances and who absolutely fight with every bone that they have and every fiber of their being for the things they believe in truly inspire me.

AD: Alright, thank you so much for participating in this interview. I really enjoyed talking with you. Is there anything you'd like to add before we sign off?

RS: No, thank you so much. Good to meet you.

AD: It was lovely to meet you too.