

Race and Oral Histories In San Diego, UC San Diego

Interviewer: Jamilah Bellinger

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Length of Interview: 00:29:08

Faiza: Okay, and then if you don't get the recording. I'll send it to you. All right.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, so first I wanted to share my screen real quick to show you the the, what's it called the oral history release form. I don't know if Faiza already sent it to you hold on [brief pause]

Abdirizak Ahmed: Okay, since you're recording I'm gonna just I'm gonna go off I'm gonna take a video off

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay it's fine. Here it is. It disappeared [pause]

Jamilah Bellinger: not sure if I sent it to you already, but it's I don't know why it's not appearing right. Okay, there it is. Can you see it?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, I can see it

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. Sorry What?

Abdirizak Ahmed: She didn't send me anything.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. Well, this will count as like you signing it. So you'll be fine after you agree. If you decide to this interview is conducted in accordance with the goals and course description of HIUS 144 Oral Race and Oral Oral History in San Diego. Under the direction of professors Luis Alvarez, Yen Espiritu, and Simeon Man, in consideration of the recording and preservation of this oral history by students at the University of San Diego, California San Diego. Do you accept to transfer the university the rights to publish duplicate or otherwise use the recordings and transcribed interview? And all this stuff? I'm sorry, there's just a lot to read. Do you agree to the terms?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. Um, if I have to, I'll send it to you. And I'll just have Faiza send it to you.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Okay.

Jamilah Bellinger: But they from what I remember, they said this is fine. Okay, so let me go into the questions. So first, I would like to thank you for giving me and UCSD, your time for this interview. If at any point you feel that the questions are too personal, or throw uncomfortable at any time, just let me know. And we'll skip that question. As we discussed a few weeks ago, this interview will be recorded, transcribed, and then put into the UCSD library digital collection for public use. I will give you transcription before it's put into the collection so that you can edit out whatever parts you just wouldn't like the public to know. And so that you can have it for personal use if you wanted to like show it to your family and what not. Also, just hope I hope you see this more as a conversation rather than like an interview. And I hope to make this a welcoming and open space for you. With all that said, let's get started. What three words would you use to describe yourself?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Caring, hard working, and probably spiritual.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. Um, what are some hobbies that you started? Or gotten back into because of COVID-19?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Reading and like playing video games

Jamilah Bellinger: Yeah, I've been trying to get back into reading as well. But school means I have to read all the time so I usually don't. So what is one question that you get asked a lot that annoys you?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Why do I have had the scar on my eye? They ask me why do I have that scar?

Jamilah Bellinger: I bet that gets annoying. I'm trying to think of a dumb question I could ask. Usually how to pronounce my name to be honest. But if you feel comfortable sharing can you tell me about your family or your migration story?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, no. I wasn't born here. I was born in Kenya. I came here at six months. My family fled the war in Somalia. And they moved to Kenya in 93. And we came straight to San Diego, we've been here ever since.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. What were some of your first memories when you moved to the States?

Abdirizak Ahmed: I mean, I was basically born here pretty much I was six months when I got here.

Jamilah Bellinger: Yeah, okay.

Abdirizak Ahmed: So like everything I remember is from San Diego. I don't really remember anything else.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, um. What was a just like a follow up question. Well, So your family's from Somalia. Right? And then you moved to then they moved to Kenya.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, they went to like a refugee refugee camp in Kenya.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh, was that like a like before you go to the state to go to a refugee camp there? Because I know like, Trump did that.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: But is that kind of like the same thing.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Now, there was a war like, there was like a civil war. So like, basically, like, people couldn't really live in the country. If you did, it was pretty dangerous, too. So a lot of people went down south to Kenya, so they could find like, a place to live in refugee camps, or that was that place for them. And then they were getting sponsored and stuff to come over there.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, so, for lack of a better term, it was like a rest stop before actually filing finding asylum somewhere.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah

Jamilah Bellinger: Or is that too?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, no, we went to my family went to Kenya to seek asylum. Okay. There's like, can't live there, you know. So we're just gonna camp until we got approved to come to America.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. Yeah. Well, what were some of your like did you always live in City Heights?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, we moved. We moved to Lemon Grove when I was in high school. So I went to high school in like Spring Valley area. But I moved back over here right now. I'm in City Heights now.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, how was it? Um, see, my next question was like, how did you feel about your neighborhood when you first arrived, but you were like six months old? So you

probably don't remember? But um, how do you? How did how did you feel like growing up in this neighborhood? From like a cultural standpoint?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Culturally, it was cool. Cause like because there's a lot of people that are just like me. And like, everywhere you go, you could find like, restaurants with Somali food you could find like mosques or, like community centers and stuff. So culturally it was pretty like inviting. But aside from that, like it was kind of dangerous. Obviously, living in City Heights is not it's not easy.

Jamilah Bellinger: I'm so sorry. My internet like timed out for some reason. So I did not hear what you said.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Okay. You missed [sneeze].

Jamilah Bellinger: bless you

Abdirizak Ahmed: Thank you. Sorry. What I said was, culturally, it was cool. Like, it was easy. Like, everywhere you go, there's like, Somali restaurants, and there's like mosques and like community centers. But it wasn't easy living there. Because like, we're kind of like in poverty. And there's like crime and everything. It was kind of hard at the same time. Okay, I can't hear you. I couldn't hear you. Can you hear me?

Jamilah Bellinger: No, sorry. I don't know what's going on with my laptop. I have to close things. But um, I don't know if you heard me. But I said, How do you feel? Do you feel like City Heights has changed in any way good or bad?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, like it's less gang violence. I feel like there's less gangs. It's kind of getting gentrified, especially towards like, when you go towards North Park area. Yeah, it's the coolest one. But yeah, it's a lot safer now.

Jamilah Bellinger: I can definitely attest to that. My brother used to. He was in gangs, basically. And he told me about a lot of the gang history from before and it's just so different to like what I experienced.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Jamilah Bellinger: Um, have you ever gone back to Somalia or Kenya to visit?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Nah, never

Jamilah Bellinger: Do you plan on that? Well like, if things led up, would you ever go back to visit?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, definitely. Like my dad. My dad and my sister are there right now. They're stuck. They can't come back until everything clears up.

Jamilah Bellinger: Do you, would you feel comfortable like explaining that more?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah. My dad and my sister went there. They're, my other sister she was getting married. So they went to go meet like her husband and they were there just for like, like a three week vacation. Which turned into like a three months vacation now. Yeah, they're just stuck until like the flights open up from their airlines. Yeah,

Jamilah Bellinger: That's tough I'm sorry. They have to go through that. Yes. Well, um, do you still have like, what am I trying to say, are you still in touch with people that live there? It seems like you obviously do.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Like we send we send money there every month.

Jamilah Bellinger

Oh Okay. Um I'll come up with a follow up question later I can't do it right now. Um, do you have a favorite story about you or your family members that you would like to share?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Nothing specific but just like, spending Ramadan together. That's probably my favorite memories.

Jamilah Bellinger: How is that, speaking of Ramadan, because that was one of my questions, how has COVID-19 affected, has affected Ramadan or any other cultural practices?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Oh, dang it kind of like I wouldn't say it ruined it because you could still be spiritual and do things at home. But it ruined like the community aspect of Ramadan. Like, we can't go to the mosques anymore. Like things are closed. So just caged up in the house. It makes like, it makes me more like unproductive when we're supposed to be more productive during Ramadan.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh okay, I get you. Are they doing like, I know, some spiritual places are doing like tele what's it called services. Are they doing that for mosques as well?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, they have like, like, the head of the leader of the mosque, he's at the mosque. He does live videos where he does like reminders and stuff and lectures. And then he does, like, they do the prayer there. So I mean, we can't really pray with them. But you just like, enjoy the recitation and stuff.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay. I was also because for what I know very little about Ramadan, but I know that some people can, like, kind of opt out in a way if they're just not healthy enough to do it this year. Are some people is that more common now because of the pandemic?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Ye- I don't really, personally, I don't really know anybody that got affected by the virus. But yeah, there's definitely like rules to where like, you don't have to fast if you're like, like a severe diabetic or something or whatever. Like any like, if you're if you're sick, you don't have to fast. It's always been like that. I wouldn't be surprised if people with the virus are not fasting.

Jamilah Bellinger: Um, so you do work for UWEAST, right?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: What ins...What inspired you to fight for immigrant and refugee rights? Sorry, that sounded weird

Abdirizak Ahmed: What inspired me is that I'm like, I'm in theirs. I was in their shoes. Like, I'm like, What do you call it? forgetting the word, but like, I'm like a result of what could happen if, you know, we get the right services and stuff. And I'd be glad to help people in the same position as me.

Jamilah Bellinger: Um, would you so back on like you're a product of if people would have community resources, would you say your upbringing at all affected why you chose this line of work?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, definitely. Like my mom and dad, my mom still doesn't speak English. But they they both didn't speak English for a long time. So it was hard for them to like get services and stuff. And seeing like programs like this. Certainly companies, nonprofits like UW East really inspired me to help out once I was like, old enough in the position to

Jamilah Bellinger: And you... just to get this out on a recording because we spoke about it in a pre interview. You spoke about how you, like kind of slowly got in to UWEAST. Can you speak on that again, please?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, in middle school when I was in middle school. My sister was like a volunteer there. And she ended up getting hired. So when I was in high school, I would always tag along with her. So when I was in high school, I was a volunteer. And on those four years, I was just volunteering and then I started like, kind of moving up ranks, getting more responsibilities and then when I graduated high school, Sarah, she she offered me a job. It was a blessing.

Jamilah Bellinger: And what was your like, your original title when you officially got the job?

Abdirizak Ahmed: As a youth coordinator.

Jamilah Bellinger: I kind of do like the same work but like not really at the same time. It was basic. I work for primetime so.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Oh okay I know a lot of people do.

Jamilah Bellinger: Yes, it's like babysitting, essentially. Um, so how did your organization react to the sudden changes and uncertainty caused by the current pandemic.

Abdirizak Ahmed: And I remember actually, the first day that they announced, everything was closing down. I was actually in the office. And we had like a group of guys were talking about stuff, like for our programs, and then we got a text from our boss saying, like, all the programs are shut down, and that we have to get all of our stuff from the office. So it was kind of weird, like, we were sitting in the office at like 8 pm. And we got that text. I mean, everything's been closed. So we've been doing things on zoom still staying in contact with people but it's not the same, obviously.

Jamilah Bellinger: Yeah. Can you talk about that a little more on how like, everything being virtual changing the dynamic of community work?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah. I feel like it's a good thing that we're I mean, obviously, like, not meeting up right now. But we've definitely lost numbers. Maybe that's because people don't have laptops and stuff, I don't know. But we've definitely lost the numbers that we used to have. It just doesn't feel the same, honestly, big. They used to, or were they, the program I ran we were we had a Basketball thing. It was like, we ran a whole Basketball League, and then afterwards, people will come to the office area and we have like a little hub area for gaming and playing cards, or whatever it is. So we can't do none of that anymore.

Jamilah Bellinger: I definitely see what my prime some primetime orgs are trying to like, do zoom for kids, but it's like we're a after school program, and they don't go to school. So it's kind of weird to have a after school program, where we're just like, because as soon essentially I did like, watch the kids. So it's I did how that is very weird. It's just a kind of wholly different. Dynamic. Yeah. Um, dang, I had a follow up question, but I forgot. Um, anyways, what are the challenges that you have faced as a community advocate? This doesn't have to be pertaining to the pandemic, but you can speak on that as well.

Abdirizak Ahmed: The challenges I really like probably getting like, just numbers, like getting a lot of people to come to events. Even though a lot of people I feel like a lot of people do. But I mean, I would love for more people to come. Another thing that sucks is like there's like a few other programs, like a few other companies that do the same things. So like not damaging unity I would say.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, are you like the first nonprofit that comes to mind? Is the African Alliance or is it I cannot remember

Abdirizak Ahmed: I know what you're talking about, I forgot their name too.

Jamilah Bellinger: It's like Alliance Assistance. There's a lot of A's in that one. Um, so is there like...

Abdirizak Ahmed: I mean, we work together on certain things, but, I mean, we do the same things. So I don't know. That's just my point of view. I feel like they should all be working together, instead of being different companies.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh ok like a conglomerate type?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah. I feel like they...

Jamilah Bellinger: I totally forgot that follow up. If I remember that follow up question. I will definitely ask because it was pretty decent. Um, what are three words you would describe that you would use to describe your neighborhood?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Noisy, poverty, like impoverished. I would say like, it's caring. People care about each other here.

Jamilah Bellinger: How do you think living in City Heights has, like, cuz you mentioned caring. And I feel like City Heights is a pretty close knit community. Um, I don't know where I'm going with this. But like [brief pause]. Sorry, I'm really trying to get this follow up question out. Oh. Do you think that makes your work easier as the community's like a little bit more close knit and caring as you say.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, definitely. Cause like when our hub or like the whole office was in, actually in City Heights right now it's in like near La Mesa when it was there, like people would walk there. And like we had way more like more attendance and then we had like, a huge, like hall area where people would have their weddings, like the community would come often. But yeah, people felt like, like they can come to us for anything it just felt like more personal than, than anything.

Jamilah Bellinger: I remember the follow up question, what has the pandemic shown you about, like, how you can still help your community and like, you mentioned that some people can't stay connected with you because of, they don't have a laptop or they don't have internet or whatever, whatever. So what has the pandemic shown you that you can improve once it's over? If you know what I mean?

Abdirizak Ahmed: It showed me that there's people that still care about the programs we offer, and showed us like people need us and the things we're doing are good. And that we just need to ramp it up. Hopefully when everything's over, get more attendance. Yeah. That's about it.

Jamilah Bellinger: So what would you want people to know most about your community?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Like are like UWEAST? Or

Jamilah Bellinger: It could be UWEAST or City Heights or just culturally?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Okay. Yeah, I would say for like City Heights. Like don't judge by the cover, like what it looks like and stuff like that. But the people are people are really caring, loving. And like people care about each other. And that's that I would say like, don't be frightened by what you see. And get to know people more.

Jamilah Bellinger: So what is your opinion on law enforcement agencies like ICE or CP CBP, and the way they execute their jobs and your neighborhood? I know, especially in City Heights. I think it was in the summer last year, they had random checkpoints.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I feel like its sad that that they're targeting people. And personally, I haven't had any problems with law enforcement, thankfully. But I know a lot of people that have like, there's a video on YouTube, like one of our mosque leaders, like getting guns aimed at him. Like for no reason. But I feel like they're better. Like, the cops around this area are more understanding rather than, like other areas like we if I was to go to like, La Mesa or something. I feel like they'll be harder on me than the cops in this area.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh, why would? Why do you feel that way?

Abdirizak Ahmed: I just feel like the cops there feel like I'm out of place and that I shouldn't be there. And like, you know, they'll pick on me more. I've never had I've never had any problems with cops here. But I have in La Mesa, definitely. Up north.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh, see, I forget where La Mesa is at. Is it East County?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, that makes sense. East County so different. Um, okay. How do you believe community advocacy will evolve during the pandemic? Like, how are people still going to be advocates from home essentially?

Abdirizak Ahmed: I feel like it's the pandemic like it opened up like a new layer to us, like we can reach out to more people than then we never thought we could. Like, it's I feel like it's easier to reach out through social media and like platforms like Zoom and stuff, but I feel like it's better honestly. But you still need like that community part of it where people come, but I feel like they expanded a lot through online work.

Jamilah Bellinger: So are you like saying that, since you can reach more people that it's better?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: Is there any other ways how this is like better than, like, I guess the normal or previously normal way to do it.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Uh, I don't really I personally personally, I don't really like this way. But I mean reaching more people, that's probably like the best part of it.

Jamilah Bellinger: And you said, You're still like doing zoom conferences with people, like, what activities are you still doing with the community?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Not me personally, because I've been busy. But they've been doing like, PowerPoints on like, like different things. I have it on my phone. But my job right now is like to get the kids and the youth to like, join those Zooms. So I'm just sending them out and talking to them, but they're doing a lot of things. I can't give specifics right now I'd have to look at the list. Okay, yeah.

Jamilah Bellinger: Um, how has your daily routine changed slash remained the same due to COVID?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Workwise, or just in general?

Jamilah Bellinger: In general.

Abdirizak Ahmed: It changed big time. Like I used to, like, wake up, go to the mosque, come back home, go to work. And then probably go to the mosque after work. Go to the gym, and then come home. But now, all I can do is go home. I can't go to my gym I can't go to the mosque. It's really just working from home.

Jamilah Bellinger: I get that. Is there like anything new you've been trying to do? So I've I've like, I bought a bass just to pass the time.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Video games. That's about it. I mean, I just had a baby. My wife just had a baby. Last week.

Jamilah Bellinger: How has that been?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, it's I feel like it's easier. Because we're both home and give her all our attention. So she doesn't have to do it on our own and stuff.

Jamilah Bellinger: Okay, is there like? Well, I guess being home that is like a major plus when having a baby to take care of. But is there like any type of difficulties or just in this time?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, there's like no diapers in any stores. So. Yeah. And then like, Amazon takes like, 15 days now to just order one pack of diapers. So luckily, we stocked up before.

Jamilah Bellinger: Oh, that's good. Yeah, totally forgot about the diaper thing.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah, like we're about to run out right now.

Jamilah Bellinger: Hopefully, y'all get some soon. Okay, so I'm just gonna go on to our closing questions, because I've pretty much asked everything. Yeah. Um, is there anything else that you would like to discuss or clarify? of something we've already covered?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Not really.

Jamilah Bellinger: Um, and what is the main thing you want people to take away from this interview?

Abdirizak Ahmed: Oh, I would say like, there's people that care. There's people like, especially within City Heights, there's communities and there's organizations like UWEAST that actually care about people want to help people out. And they're experienced, and they've been through most of the things people are going through currently. So I mean, like, don't be shy, that's what I would say like, don't be shy, ask for help and getting to know people. People that don't look like you especially.

Jamilah Bellinger: That's great. Well, thank you for your time. I really appreciate it. I hope you have a good rest of your day. And just get out.

Abdirizak Ahmed: Yeah. Thank you. Take care.

Jamilah Bellinger: You too. Goodbye.