



FROM SOMALIA TO MINNESOTA — THE ODYSSEY OF AN ENTREPRENEUR

Abdimalik Askar's odyssey from Somalia to Minnesota and back to Somalia took 15 years and many stops along the way.

When civil war erupted in Somalia in 1991, the Askar family fled to Kenya where they spent two years in a refugee camp. Abdimalik was 17 at the time. In 1993, his aunt brought the family to San Diego—a big city where jobs were scarce and Abdimalik took three buses to work.

The first wave of Somali immigrants was reaching Minnesota in 1993, so Abdimalik rode the wave to Marshall, where factory-farm workers were welcome but only on the graveyard shift. Within three weeks, he moved on to Windom for a better factory job—but summer layoffs forced a move to Minneapolis.

“I was interested in computers and knew that, to get a good job with a good future, I had to go to college,” said Abdimalik. It was then that he began another odyssey: to get a college education.

Business school was Abdimalik's first stop. He graduated in 1998, but his credits would not transfer to the University of Minnesota. That's when he discovered Normandale Community College.

“I knew Normandale was the place for me,” said Abdimalik. “It has a 64-credit transfer curriculum that allows you to take courses while building your English language skills and earning your AA degree.”

Abdimalik was among the first Somali students at Normandale. “We were a very active and energetic group,” said Abdimalik. “A few of us started the Somali Student Organization to help

each other ‘navigate the system.’ We built relationships with administrators and faculty who encouraged us to use the Writing Center, the Student Affairs Office, financial aid and part-time jobs.”

It was within this new environment that Abdimalik's leadership skills and entrepreneurial spirit began to flourish. He became a role model for other minority students and active in the Somali community. In 1998, he founded Somali TV and became the producer and anchorman of a one-hour show on the public access channel. In 2006, Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) picked up the show for Sunday nights during the winter.

One of Abdimalik's mentors at Normandale is **Ralph Anderson**, dean of Student Affairs. “Abdimalik is a very gifted young man,” said Anderson. “He uses his computer, media and public relations skills to help the Somali and other minority communities. Everyone knows and recognizes him—including the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul, college presidents and the chancellor of the MnSCU system.”

Abdimalik received his AA degree from Normandale in 2002. He then transferred to St. Mary's University where he received his BA in Information Technology in 2004 and his MA in Project Management in June 2006. On that day, he completed his educational odyssey and became the first member of his family (13 brothers and sisters!) to receive a master's degree.

For the past year,

Abdimalik has been the outreach coordinator for Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). In that capacity, he works with the 11-college Metro Alliance to develop programs, events and workshops that bring minority, low-income and non-traditional high school students into the colleges and help retain them until they graduate.

He is also working on a documentary based on a recent trip to Somalia with a film crew and several MnSCU faculty and administrators. There they visited Nugall University, which has online courses that are connected to the curricula and resources of its sister institutions, Inver Hills and Normandale community colleges.

Abdimalik, who says his “heart is with Normandale,” brought college t-shirts for the Nugall students—something he could never have dreamed when he fled Somalia 15 years ago and began an odyssey that would bring him full circle. **CF**



Abdimalik Askar moderates community panel discussion.