

1 00:00:01.829 → 00:00:22.860 Kimberly Merene: Hi! Okay, so I want to introduce myself before we start the interview. So my name is Kimberly Merene. And I'm a fourth year undergrad student at UC San Diego taking ETHN 120D for Spring Quarter 2020. I'm currently interning at the Refugee Health Unit and I'm excited to be interviewing you today. Can you please tell me more about yourself?

3 00:00:23.700 --> 00:01:23.940 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes, I'm excited to be here with you. Kimberly. I think this is an awesome project. So a little bit about myself. My name is [Ismahan] Mohammed Abdullahi, a Somali refugee born in Somalia during the height of the Civil War. It was a really difficult time for my family. We were displaced. We had to be in a refugee camp for a couple of years, and just growing up in that kind of open air prison, we were one of the lucky ones who were able to come to the United States. Early on, we resettled in Denver, Colorado. And from Denver, Colorado, we decided, you know what? We cannot handle the snow. So we moved to San Diego, California. We've been here since then. I serve as the Executive Director of the Muslim American Society's Public Affairs and Civic Engagement Division and I'm a community advocate.

8 00:01:25.560 --> 00:01:35.970 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing your story! I'd like to ask you more questions about your occupation. How did you get your current job position? And how long have you been working as an Executive Director?

9 00:01:36.690 --> 00:02:26.790 Ismahan Abdullahi: So I just became the Executive Director of MAS in January. Before then, I was serving as the National Deputy Director. And so I feel very, very blessed, especially during this time of the global pandemic that we're facing that I'm blessed to have a job and I can still continue to provide for my family, and I'm blessed to really be in a position where I get to serve my way, my community. I get to walk with my community, hand in hand, as we advocate for justice, as we build towards political empowerment and as we center the most vulnerable and disenfranchised of our community at the forefront of a lot of the social inequities that has impacted our community throughout the year. So really grateful for that.

14 00:02:28.140 --> 00:02:35.250 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe any particular experience in school or outside of school that made you want to go into this field for advocacy?

15 00:02:35.760 --> 00:04:13.560 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think it was mainly life experience at the age of the tender age of five, six years old. I got to experience what racism and Islamophobia was like. I had to navigate a world where others saw me as being different, whether it's the color of my skin or whether it's because of the veil of the hijab that I wear. It's always been difficult to kind of navigate in a world that sees you as a threat--in a world that sees that you don't belong. So I think my life experiences, my political activism, and my community involvement throughout the years since I was young has really pushed me to this role. While I do have formal trainings, and while I do have the traditional methods of, you know, experience when it comes to school when it comes to certification, I think, more so than that it's really my life experiences that has

brought me here that allows me to approach my work from a place where my worldview is shaped by that world life experience. So that way, when I take on the trainings, you know and certifications that I have--I have my master's degree. I have my bachelor's degree, numerous different certificates, and trainings. But I think, more than a lot of that is on paper. It is my life experiences that have brought me here. Those were able to shape who I am, especially through this role as an executive director and mass pace.

23 00:04:14.520 --> 00:04:21.390 Kimberly Merene: Did you have any other previous experiences before you gained the Executive Director position?

24 00:04:22.500 --> 00:04:29.910 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes, so I was serving in my community as a community advocate--I want to say, for over a decade. Whether it's really working my early, early years with survivors of torture as a translator or interpreter as a part of their programs that they conducted for survivors of torture, really putting that experience of being a refugee. Connecting with the current asylum crisis that we have that is on the border and just being able to witness firsthand the atrocities that is happening in our detention centers, followed by my experience with community organizations multiple different community organizations, whether it is Horn of Africa, whether it's PANA, and just really thinking about how can I continue to utilize the experiences that I've had in other previous occupations or other previous positions to continue to shape my worldview, and continue to ground we in my values and my approach to justice, especially in the current field that I'm in right now and in the current position that I'm in

31 00:05:34.860 --> 00:05:36.060 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing! Do you face any particular challenges as a community advocate? And do you fear some things as a part of the leadership board?

33 00:05:47.670 --> 00:05:59.760 Ismahan Abdullahi: For me, I think the fear that comes with this territory, so to speak, is always reminding ourselves that the work that we do cannot. The change is not going to happen overnight. That this is not a sprint, as they say, this is a marathon. So that means that a lot of the social inequities that we see whether it's the impacts of racism, the impact of xenophobia, the impacts of Islamophobia. And the increased rate of hate crimes in our community. You know, it really puts us in a difficult situation where we know that as we continue to build people power as we continue to confront a lot of these social inequities that are going to take time, but that sense of it. Taking time. You never know the toll is going to have on your community. I mean, just the other day, I was working with community members during this global pandemic and there's a lot of misinformation that's been going around so you have parents, especially mothers, who who are dealing with anxiety, who are dealing with a sense of urgency about really trying to understand some of the miscommunication or the misinformation that they've been receiving from multiple different places and creating that sense of fear. About, you know, their family being torn apart. So for me, the fear really comes from a place of, you know, we want to solve these things overnight, and we know that's not possible. So we don't know how many lives will continue to be impacted, you

know, in a strong way as we continue to fight a lot of the social inequities that we are dealing with.

42 00:07:25.680 --> 00:07:33.780 Kimberly Merene: For your current position as Executive Director, how did you know about the Refugee Health Unit at UCSD?

43 00:07:34.470 --> 00:08:15.630 Ismahan Abdullahi: So I know I'm gonna share from Hammond. And so I've known her for over Many, many years. We've worked together in numerous different spaces in different Coalitions. We were Part of the Rockwood Cohort as Fellows. And so my introduction to the Refugee Health Unit is through her and so, maintaining that really beautiful relationship and figuring out ways that we can always just work together and lift up each other and then the different programs and looking at the different ways things intersect to better help the communities always critical. So I know the Refugee Health Unit through her.

48 00:08:17.760 --> 00:08:23.010 Kimberly Merene: What do you enjoy most about working for Muslim American society?

49 00:08:23.850 --> 00:09:53.910 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think what I really truly enjoy is just the work that we do in general and the values that we espouse to. It's really a space of the people, for the people, by the people, which the American government should be right so thinking about how blessed I am especially during this time, you know, even with a pandemic massive unemployment. You know it's employees and continuing to pay them being able to work from home and adjusting things as necessary. So it provides me an opportunity to really continue a deep in that community work that I've been doing for so many years. Especially since I've come on board to MAS of last year. And the one thing that I truly, truly value in this space that I'm in, which I find is so different if you look at it from an economical perspective, and a lot of other spaces is how the worker is centered and the workers needs are centered. So it's not about how organizations can just, you know, figure out how to best, you know, utilize their employees times without investing in them, but with MAS. I feel invested in as I continue to invest in the work that I do and invest in my community and walk hand in hand with my community to really bring about that positive social reform that we're that we're striving for. So it's good to be in a place where you're valued and it's good to be in a place where you're invested in.

58 00:09:55.530 --> 00:10:07.380 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. I'm going to move on to your educational background. Can you tell me more about your experiences at UCSD and what degree you were pursuing?

59 00:10:08.070 --> 00:10:12.960 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes. So at the time I was attending UCSD, I was a pre med student, so my degree is in Human Biology and of course, on the side of, you know, really thinking about, "What does it mean for me?". My father was a doctor. And so thinking about me being a refugee and Somali refugee immigrant woman. What does it mean for us, for me personally, to walk in the legacy of my father right and to continue that legacy and

walk in his footsteps? So for me, a way, despite all the community advocacy and community activism that I was doing on the side, for me, what was critical. And my understanding at that time was that medicine and being and going into med school was the path for me. So I was in med school of Men in the career of trying to go towards med school and become a doctor that career path. And for me, I realized after my graduation and really kind of thinking through what does legacy even mean and how can we honor our father's legacy and for me and honoring of his legacy means doing the things that I'm really truly passionate about. Rather than just, you know, following in his footsteps by the career wise, so my use of the experience was really filled with political activism. I remember during the time that I was there, the content cookout was happening. So my organization--I was the president of the Muslim Student Association--at that time, along with a lot of our other organizations, especially the Black Student Union, MeCHA, Cross Cultural Center, and so many, so many other wonderful organizations were the front lines of making sure that our African American voices were centered in that fight, and that we all really came together as allies in show true solidarity true intersection will fight for justice and being heard. And so that experience has really pushed me, and I mean, there was so much that was happening at UCSD during those years, but it has really shaped my experience of me, leaning more towards the community advocacy path.

72 00:12:28.290 --> 00:12:32.340 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe a favorite memory you had in college?

73 00:12:33.300 --> 00:12:44.940 Ismahan Abdullahi: A favorite memory. College is definitely an interesting time. I think, in a memory that just happens to come to my mind right now is more of a funny memory more sold when I remember, and I was really, really blessed to be on the stage with Angela Davis. And so it was one of the most beautiful moments of really meeting and talking with and introducing a Shiro of mine and as I was kind of like moderating the session, she was coming out and I didn't realize she was coming out. So the entire audience started to clap. And I said, "Okay, well done!" Like, you know, I didn't even introduce our speaker yet, you know, and so I didn't see her coming out. So I thought they were applauding me, so I just tried--it was really funny at that moment. So just really beautiful moments and this beautiful community that I got to build, and the beautiful folks that I got to meet and really work with as we tackled a lot of multiple different issues that are impacting us as students, whether it's that march that we did for education, or really talking about Islam Awareness Week, or Justice in Palestine, or working with our community members to tackle hate and other organizations. So it was it was definitely a time that pushed us as students to think that we are college students that are there--not just to pursue an education, but also to work together to try to build a better world. And what does that mean, within the context of being used as the students? And then also understanding where we are. We're in a very, very privileged area in La Jolla, and how we can really give back to our community. We did high school conferences to make sure that we provided a pathway for high school students that may not have thought about coming into UC schools and realize that they have a choice, and they have an opportunity as well. And the UC system has to invest in our communities that have been described as disenfranchised for so long. So those are a lot of memories that are just coming to my mind right now.

87 00:14:49.110 --> 00:15:00.090 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing! Aside from the extracurricular activities and involvements, did you have any interesting classes that you took as a college student?

88 00:15:00.600 --> 00:15:07.560 Ismahan Abdullahi: Professor Provence classes were one of the most intriguing classes that I was blessed to take. I think--just his outlook. And I think at that time also, Gary Fields. Professor Gary Fields, with the first Israeli-Palestinian course, was offered just to really take a deeper look into that specific issue. And so what I remember is the classes that stood out to me were classes [in which] professors really took their teaching to the next level engaged with the students. And, you know, in a way where they didn't just see them as students, but they saw them as individuals that will be going out into the world who are going to create change and really arming them with the tools that they need to become critical thinkers and approach things from a different perspective. And then the cut, you know, cardboard-like cut out kind of method of traditional education. So those are the two memories that are coming to my mind right now.

96 00:16:06.450 --> 00:16:15.120 Kimberly Merene: Thank you! So after you attended UCSD, did you pursue any other degree afterwards?

97 00:16:15.570 --> 00:18:01.590 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes, so I received my Master's and _____. My Master's was really focused on education counseling and trauma-informed care, working predominantly within the refugee community. One of the things that really inspired me was recognizing the work that I was doing, that when it comes to mental health when it comes to education of our community. It's not really that much cultural competency, you know, opportunities for us to really engage with refugee communities, unless it's by refugees themselves and the fact that children are not screened when they're coming in to the United States, they're there, they're forced and I'm saying that in a light in kind of, quote, unquote, to assimilate to kind of just pick up from where where they are and get a custom to the new school come get a custom to, you know, just life in general here in America without really a lot of programs put into place to kind of help them in through that transition phase. So for me it was really my experiences within the refugee community and recognizing that I needed to further my training in that and really dive deep into trauma informed care because so much of what's happened, what happens politically has a direct impact on the very lives and mental well being of our communities and just seeing that connection between political advocacy and thinking about what is what is investment and are very communities to look like push me towards that field so that can continue to supplement that in in in in the political advocacy world that I'm in.

00:18:02.910 --> 00:18:12.690 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing. Can you describe an important lesson or accomplishment that you could take away from your educational experiences?

109 00:18:14.730 --> 00:19:34.770 Ismahan Abdullahi: Hmm, I think for me what I can take away is the beyond just so I tend to be an individual that as much as I value the teaching and instructions and just the readings and the immense amount of reasons that are given when professors and programs really push students to think about the real world applications of what they're learning, and how that shows up and it's not something that you just like, Okay. Learn tick. Let me just cross that off my checklist and then move on to the next course or move on to the next phase of life. As it relates to education, when you really adopt and adapt to real life experiences and you're able to apply that in your worldview. I think that's where the magic of learning happens. And the magic of really going beyond just the classroom setting to the world setting is critical. So for me, I think that was one of the biggest takeaways. I've been blessed to have professors along the way. Some professors. I'm still connected to, so when that merge happens between classroom setting, learning education, and real life application, that's when growth happens. And I've been blessed to be in those spaces.

116 00:19:35.670 --> 00:19:40.260 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. Can you describe why education is valuable to you?

117 00:19:41.310 --> 00:19:52.350 Ismahan Abdullahi: Malcolm X said that education is a passport to the future. My mom has always told us at an early, early age that education was our liberation. And for us to really pursue higher education... I mean, all my siblings are pursuing higher education. Currently, right now, my brother is a second year in med school. You know, just really thinking about what education will look like for us. It is completely tied to our liberation. So for me, education is a religious and spiritual grounding where one of the first verses in the Quran that was revealed was to read and just thinking about, especially being a refugee, being a Muslim woman, and just navigating in a world that sees you as different education becomes a tool of enlightenment that you can use and that you can utilize to better yourself, to better your world, and and to really give back in a beautiful way by investing in your own learning changing a worldview pushing yourself to really develop intellectually. So education is our collective liberation. And a huge blessing I recognize that which is many folks.

124 00:20:58.980 --> 00:21:06.060 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. If you could be a college freshman again, would you want to change anything in your college career?

125 00:21:07.440 --> 00:21:11.760 Ismahan Abdullahi: I believe that our past kind of helps us shape our future. So I actually would not change anything. I think every single decision that I've made has led me to where I am today. And I'm very grateful and blessed for that and so I like to think about what looking forward looks like and approach life from that perspective. So, as if I was a college freshman, I probably won't make the same choices because those very choices are what made me become who I am today.

129 00:21:42.330 --> 00:21:51.180 Kimberly Merene: Thank you! Did you experience any particular challenges as a first generation individual like in terms of fitting into a community at UCSD?

130 00:21:51.990 --> 00:21:59.910 Ismahan Abdullahi: Absolutely. There weren't that many black students. There weren't that many Muslim students on campus. So just navigating through that has been difficult. And just trying to find your footing in that especially some of the programs. You're not aware of some programs that are available to you. I mean, I've seen an improvement. I'm not sure how things are right now at UCSD, but at least my brother was attending there. There were some programs that were available that you know at that time that weren't available to me. So really, I think the challenges at that time, especially as the first person in my immediate family to attend university came with his challenges. I had to learn things on my own. I tried to find someone to kind of like mentor me. But again, it's just it was difficult. So for me, it was just really that challenge of, you have to navigate the system on your own and you have to figure things out on your own, which is so different from how high school really treats students, which is really holding your hand through our up until the moment you graduate. Even then, for me, like I was co-valedictorian so you know in high school I was really, really blessed to kind of go through that navigation, be able to just focus solely on education, but then I realized coming to UCSD, you know, it's very, very competitive and I hate saying that, but it's a reality. And it's just a reality of being students. So it was just different from the way I operated on. So I think that was one of the challenges is, how do you navigate that on your own, and figure out what resources are available? I didn't realize they were available, up until doing my senior year. So in my mind. I was like, I wish I knew about this. So I could have taken advantage of it in earlier stage, but at least I was able to pass that knowledge on to others who were incoming freshmen, especially through the MSA and so on.

142 00:23:50.670 --> 00:23:54.960 Kimberly Merene: Do you remember what college you were in when you got into UCSD?

143 00:23:55.080 --> 00:24:08.640 Ismahan Abdullahi: Absolutely. I chose Warren College and it was my first choice of college. I got to be in Warren. It was between Warren and Thurgood Marshall, but [I chose] Warren college.

144 00:24:11.640 --> 00:24:18.330 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe, like what your experiences were with the courses that were required for a Warren if you still remember?

145 00:24:19.080 --> 00:25:29.370 Ismahan Abdullahi: I remember the writing program. I didn't understand why it was so necessary. So some courses that were like, you know, you're required to take. I remember some of the other colleges so every time they talk about Roosevelt. I was very, very grateful for some of the courses that Warren College asked us to take. So I think it becomes the conversation of, you know, as a standalone your life, but I don't understand what's the point of this. But when you look at the context of other colleges, each one chose courses that were kind of to the theme of that specific College, which I appreciated. But for me, it was just really a requirement that I just engaged in and took advantage of in terms of learning. But since I love writing, writing is just really something that I truly enjoy. It also challenged me to

think about structured writing in a different way. So I appreciated that. And so it was helpful, but it's one of those things that you don't realize what the necessity of it is until you're done with it.

152 00:25:29.370 --> 00:25:35.010 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe your high school experiences and how it was different from UCSD?

153 00:25:35.790 --> 00:28:00.270 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yeah, I was in a high school that had predominantly folks of color. And so in majority, Latin/Latino, Filipino folks with a smaller percentage of African American students and also just the Muslim population was barely, barely 1% I think that I could count on one hand how many were there overall. So for my high school experience, I think I was blessed to really attend a high school that invested in students. I was really so focused on education and being able to move on to higher ed that I was very focused in my studies. And I had wonderful teachers. I remember just teachers that really made you fall in love with the different classes and the different courses that were available, but I think the only thing that made it difficult was that my high school was also the era of the immediate aftermath of 9/11. So, of course, you had to deal with Islamophobia here and there. I was really blessed to have friends that you know that didn't really engage in that kind of frivolous conversations and hate talk, but then there are incidents where you had to deal with Islamophobia from the larger student body and those were instances in which, looking back at it, I just probably wish I spoke up a little bit more strongly about. I remember there are times that I was praying one of the prayers and folks would throw like small rocks and then by the time I was done with a prayer, I would turn around and leave. And there was no one there. And so looking back at it, it's one of those things that really young students should not have to go through. But at the same time, I was privileged, even then, by not facing too much of the bullying that was happening nationwide and I recognize these instances of hate. But they were so sporadic that I am grateful that it never escalated to something else. But it's definitely a difficult era to grow up in, especially as a Muslim student.

166 00:28:01.740 --> 00:28:02.790 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing. So in San Diego, where was your hometown and can you describe your childhood experiences?

168 00:28:11.790 --> 00:28:14.220 Ismahan Abdullahi: Of my hometown in San Diego? You mean one part of San Diego?

169 00:28:14.550 --> 00:28:16.290 Kimberly Merene: Yes, which part of San Diego [was your hometown in]?

170 00:28:16.500 --> 00:28:21.150 Ismahan Abdullahi: So I have two parts of San Diego: City Heights and South Bay. So those are the two areas, especially right now with City Heights, that's home for a lot of our refugee communities and just seeing the growth in the area, but I've also seen the gentrification that has happened where a lot of families have been pushed out and just dealing with a changing landscape in the three ways that cut through our

neighborhoods is really devastating. But yeah, I am very happy to see that it still continues to be a vibrant space for families and so many other families.

173 00:28:58.080 --> 00:29:01.500 Kimberly Merene: You said you were born in Somalia, is that correct?

174 00:29:01.590 --> 00:29:05.940 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes.

00:29:01.590 --> 00:29:05.940 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe your memories of Somalia?

175 00:29:06.900 --> 00:29:18.900 Ismahan Abdullahi: I was very, very young. So the memories that I have are more of, you know, just like memories from my young, you know, I'm not necessarily that, you know, but I'm so custom saying, you know, the memories that I have is the past where memories of us really trying to escape with our with our with our lives. Our lives are being impacted because of gunfire, those kind of traumatic memories, but also memories of some silly things like when me and my sister tried to ride a donkey. We both fell off. And until this day, I still blame her. But it's just memories when we were really young kids. So my memories are kind of not as clear, especially as the older we get.

181 00:29:59.100 --> 00:30:03.150 Kimberly Merene: How many siblings do you have?

182 00:30:04.620 --> 00:30:08.550 Ismahan Abdullahi: I am the second oldest out of 10 kids. Seven sisters and three brothers.

184 00:30:15.240 --> 00:30:15.840 Kimberly Merene: Did they go to UCSD?

186 00:30:18.210 --> 00:30:23.550 Ismahan Abdullahi: A majority of them did. I have my older brother--sorry, not older brother. One of my younger three of my siblings went to SDSU and two of my siblings went to UCSD, and the other ones are still young.

188 00:30:35.880 --> 00:30:36.780 Kimberly Merene: That's a big family.

189 00:30:38.010 --> 00:30:38.940 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes! Very grateful.

190 00:30:39.810 --> 00:30:45.540 Kimberly Merene: What made your family choose to live in San Diego, out of all places in the U.S.?

191 00:30:46.410 --> 00:30:57.540 Ismahan Abdullahi: The sun. I wish there was another reason. But I think it was just dealing with blizzard after blizzard at the, you know, and just dealing with the cold temperatures in Denver, Colorado. It has pushed our family to think outside the box by moving and they knew some folks here in San Diego, and when they heard about the continuous sunshine, we decided to move over here.

193 00:31:10.710 --> 00:31:13.620 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe what Denver, Colorado was like?

194 00:31:14.580 --> 00:31:27.960 Ismahan Abdullahi: It was beautiful. I think Denver has definitely been a place that I look back at fondly, mainly because of our specific individuals that really made up our living that first year, two years of living as refugees and that we settled there. We had neighbors that came out who did not know us. But when they realized that we were new to the neighborhood--that we were new to America in general, they came over and really helped us survive our first blizzard bringing in blankets and, you know, just thinking about what community support was like at that time. I'm thinking about the teacher that has really impacted my entire family. We've been trying to find her all these years, but just the impact that we have. While there are some memories that are not so well I think overall, it was, it was a beautiful experience.

199 00:32:11.370 --> 00:32:12.510 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing your story. Based on your living experiences, what are the similarities and differences between Somalia and the US, from your perspective?

203 00:32:28.770 --> 00:34:02.070 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think people want to live dignified life and people really want to live a life that safeguards their liberty, that safeguards their rights, safeguards their right to exist and the right to live happy and be able to thrive. And that's the universal feeling of everyone across the board--is really just understanding how we can really think about how some decisions that we make, as a country, or how certain struggles or hardships that folks face really impacts them. In Somalia, so many millions of people got displaced because of the Civil War, or because of climate change. Same here in the United States, people don't realize that, you know, recognizing that there are so many people that are continuing to be displaced by gentrification because of our lack of prioritizing vulnerable communities that have been disenfranchised and marginalized for so long that we're creating our own sense of trauma, especially the original file instead folks have basis, you know, for me, the Islamophobia. So, for me, really thinking about what makes us similar is thinking about--despite the language, despite the faith, despite the cultures, despite the backgrounds. That we're all trying to survive, and we're all trying to have that opportunity where we can thrive and if we focus on what makes us connected as a human race, then I'm hoping that we can at least, strive towards building that better world.

213 00:34:04.320 --> 00:34:10.800 Kimberly Merene: Do you think that San Diego has a vast number of resources for the refugee population?

214 00:34:12.480 --> 00:34:18.210 Ismahan Abdullahi: As a County, I feel like they should definitely invest more right now we have. Their immigrant office space that was created, but one is really heavily focused within the refugee community as we always say it's not all immigrants are refugees, but all refugees are immigrants. And understanding the difference between that, you know, someone could immigrate over here for numerous other reasons. Refugees are those

who fled war, who fled persecution, or from the impacts of global climate change. So, really redefining those terminologies and us understanding that as a deep investment in our communities. This means that we really have to change the conversation and change the existing ways of doing business, which currently does not work for our community. Oftentimes, like, I'm just thinking about this global pandemic right now. Our organization has provided an opportunity for us to tell these town halls in different languages to make sure the communities were being informed. And something that should be offered on a county-wide level. I know there's different translations in different languages. We can't capture all the different languages that currently exist within the refugee community. So for me, I would like to see more with deeper investment and a lot of the policies and other programs for our community.

224 00:35:42.750 --> 00:35:48.540 Kimberly Merene: Thank you for sharing your thoughts. As a first generation student, how often do you experience racism?

225 00:35:50.670 --> 00:38:54.960 Ismahan Abdullahi: Um, whether I'm experiencing it or whether I witness it. I think racism is just one of those things that we can become normalized to whether it's on a phobia--xenophobia, you know, any type of phobia that you can mention or talk about. For me, there's sometimes incidents where you don't even realize you're being discriminated against because it's just happened so many times that you're unaware. You just become numb to it or unaware of it. And there's some times that it just stands out to you starkly. You know, sometimes, every time you go on a plane. You're just walking down the aisle. Everyone just looks at you or whether it's because of the veil that you're wearing or just that they're nervous. I think one time I was talking on the phone in my own language and some folks felt uncomfortable, but I had to finish this call before I sat down. Like as I was walking to my seat actually so just thinking about, there's so many different ways that hate shows up, you know, but I think there's always that that sense of us if we don't, we don't speak up if we just become silent in the face of hate crimes or in the face of hate when we see it, or when we hear about it. Just like the recent killing of the husband that we witnessed in Georgia. It makes us become even more numb to really standing up against this, and for me, is just really the collective trauma that comes with hate crimes. When we see the collective trauma, even if something's not directed towards me, and is directed towards someone else of my faith or someone else of my race, then that has an impact on us psychologically as well. And in the community, and a lot of the different programs that we do, we try to center that collective healing and the understanding of that collective trauma and how our individual experiences are connected to the collective experiences of everyone in the intersectionality. Because right now, we've seen not just Islamophobia during this global pandemic where there was a ban on Europe and a lot of the images coming from the media showed pictures of a mosque, which had nothing to do with Europe to show pictures of mosques in Turkey and they talked about the ban. In Europe, and then, for instance, when this administration and others are talking about this virus and they kept, you know, calling it the Chinese virus or, you know, the derogatory terminology that they've used towards our Asian community, and then also the racism that we've seen that continues to go on. That's taking the lives of so many black men and women. So thinking about the intersections of hate. And how we can and maybe I'm getting too much into this because this really speaks to

the core of who I am and what I do, but just really approaching things from a perspective of connecting our individual experiences to the collective

244 00:38:56.760 --> 00:38:58.530 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. That was beautifully said! So how can younger students like myself be involved to help your organization's mission statement.

246 00:39:09.270 --> 00:39:58.410 Ismahan Abdullahi: That there are so many different ways for mass pace. We have different communities that really focus on tackling hate and taking charge of our own narrative, whether it's our immigrant justice space and speaking 24/7. For folks who are detained in detention centers and centering the freedom of children from cages and really thinking about the different programs, we have what we call the Ramadan Advocacy Program Planner or Advocacy Campaign where we will have continuous calls to action throughout the entire week for folks to kind of get involved with. So there are ample opportunities for folks to get involved, to intern, to plug into some of our existing coalitions and our existing work.

249 00:40:00.330 --> 00:40:21.420 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. I'm excited! Can you describe one important life lesson from your experiences, as a person of color, and what you would share to people who are younger than you that come from similar backgrounds?

252 00:40:22.980 --> 00:41:20.340 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think the biggest advice that I have is that you have to be your own best advocate. When you live in a world that tries to dim your light and you have so much to give, so much to offer, and you can be whatever it is that you want to be in this world, pursue whatever career path that you want. Understand the hurdles and challenges that you will face, recognize that nobody can take that light away from you and that nobody is going to give that light to you. That light, you already have it. You're born with it. You know, you grow and as you grow, you have so much of it to give and your life will never diminish your light to either. So step into your power, step into your voice, step into who you are. Be unapologetic about your experience and your life, and that of your ancestors, and breathe in with joy and breathe out with life.

259 00:41:21.930 --> 00:41:31.920 Kimberly Merene: Thank you, that was so inspirational for me! For your culture., do you have any favorite traditions and why?

261 00:41:33.660 --> 00:42:29.580 Ismahan Abdullahi: Oh, someone has got so much traditions. It's so hard to choose what--I think for me is I love our cooking. I love just the spices that are used in so many Somali dishes and a sense of generosity within my community, say for instance, if someone is hungry and all they have is a piece of bread, they tell you that they have the entire world and they share that one piece of bread with you. Our culture is so deeply grounded in our Islamic faith and to really living out its values. So for me, it's just a joy to be part of a culture that, you know, despite the challenges that we faced, and with everything else, that we're always blessed to be generous folks, and we eat banana with almost every meal. It's one stereotype that is kind of true.

267 00:42:32.160 --> 00:42:36.420 Kimberly Merene: What is your favorite Somali dish to make at home and why?

268 00:42:38.040 --> 00:43:06.450 Ismahan Abdullahi: Oh, I know many folks say sambusas, but for me, there's a specific type of rice with the raisins and religious sweeteners of the whole meal. And so for me it's to really make the different types of races that we have in our culture. And I can just think of three off the top of my head. But yeah, it definitely has to be our rice dishes.

271 00:43:08.160 --> 00:43:10.200 Kimberly Merene: Can you walk me through the recipe? I'm curious!

273 00:43:12.030 --> 00:43:19.920 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yeah, so for the rice for the rice recipe, one of the things that we do is first we take meat we started off with the meat. And we just kind of like to make a soup style and let it boil for a bit until we mix all the different seasonings, and the different vegetables until it becomes really soft and chewy. And then when we use the exact same water, we don't throw out that water that doesn't become soup. When we're making the rice, we use that water with the rice and that we add in. So we just add in the water on the rice as we're cooking it and we add in the different seasonings that we want. We add in will be conscious that Fran, which is to change the color of the rice, whether it's red to orange to yellow and just mix it up. But then again, I'm shortening the entire recipe. And then we put it in the oven for it to bake for a little bit and then we add raisins towards the end. We make reasons and French fries, but they're not French fries American style. The French fries Somali style are softer and we put it on the top of the Rice served with the banana and hot sauce.

282 00:44:36.210 --> 00:44:37.350 Kimberly Merene: Wow, I'm hungry!

284 00:44:39.120 --> 00:44:41.910 Ismahan Abdullahi: Tell me about it. I'm fasting now thinking about it and I'm hungry.

286 00:44:44.790 --> 00:44:46.470 Kimberly Merene: Do you have any favorite East African food places or restaurants in San Diego?

288 00:44:52.350 --> 00:45:06.090 Ismahan Abdullahi: There are plenty of them or restaurant for Reba Cafe. Well, yeah, I love, love, love Rosie, which is a new European restaurant African spices. There's so many that we're blessed to have here in San Diego.

293 00:45:24.810 --> 00:45:30.840 Kimberly Merene: So in terms of growing up in San Diego. What was your first spoken language and did you have any difficulties learning English?

295 00:45:36.840 --> 00:45:43.890 Ismahan Abdullahi: First Language was Somali and surprisingly for me, I pushed myself to learn English. I realized at an early age that it really put

me at a disadvantage when communicating and so I tried my absolute best to learn the language. I read a lot. I actually started to memorize the dictionary on my own here and there. So it really pushed me to push myself to learn the language.

298 00:46:13.980 --> 00:46:19.800 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe how difficult it was for your parents to learn English?

299 00:46:21.570 --> 00:46:24.000 Ismahan Abdullahi: It was really difficult. I think my my mom--it took her a while. But I was so proud of her. She got her degree from a local community college, despite the challenges that she faced raising 10 children and then continuing to provide for our families. So I think just the struggle that refugees face is when they're told--when you come here, you have to learn English. You have to, you know, assimilate right away when people don't realize that, you know. Our market intelligence does not mean how well you speak in English, the fact they use two languages and that you're really, really, you know, doing the best that you can, to learn English as well just shows you the resiliency and the tenacity of our refugee community and that's so beautiful to always center.

304 00:47:13.890 --> 00:47:20.250 Kimberly Merene: Did you grow up with your whole family with all of your siblings in one place?

305 00:47:21.180 --> 00:47:24.330 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yes, I was. I was really blessed to do that.

306 00:47:25.980 --> 00:47:28.680 Kimberly Merene: Can you describe your parents occupations?

307 00:47:29.940 --> 00:47:39.120 Ismahan Abdullahi: Yeah, so my mom is currently working with schools, even though with a global pandemic, everything has kind of shut down and so she's been doing that beforehand right now for those parents that are unemployed, because of the way our economies are looking. But my step dad was in the gig economy with Uber in transportation and really providing for their families from their own hard work and hard labor.

310 00:48:06.810 --> 00:48:11.970 Kimberly Merene: How has the transition from Somalia to U.S. affected your parent?

311 00:48:14.190 --> 00:48:24.600 Ismahan Abdullahi: Maybe I should have mentioned this earlier. My father actually died in the Civil War. So when we came here, my mom got married and so far, it was definitely an adjustment. But I think over the years. You just become accustomed to the circumstances that you try your best to make the best out of that situation.

313 00:48:37.980 --> 00:48:43.680 Kimberly Merene: Has the ongoing civil wars in the East African countries affected you and your community?

314 00:48:44.790 --> 00:48:55.140 Ismahan Abdullahi: Absolutely. A lot of our families, always, and community members continue to send money back home to support their other family members who are not able to come here. So I think the ongoing challenges that currently exist. I mean, for the first time in a long time. We moved away from a transitional government in Somalia to an actual federal government. Seeing that change and the impact that it has, it's still an uphill battle. So our families, we continue to be directly impacted because we all have family members that are still back back home in Somalia.

317 00:49:24.480 --> 00:49:34.110 Kimberly Merene: What are your thoughts as to how the US is supporting the Muslim community? And are there any issues that are prominent that you continue to see?

318 00:49:35.940 --> 00:51:23.580 Ismahan Abdullahi: So for me, I think, let me start off with the problem. I think the problem is we still see Islamophobia as a huge, huge, huge impact in our communities. We continue to be surveilled we continue to be seen as others, you know, and I think if we really change our attitude towards how we view folks of color, folks from different faith, and our foreign policy stances, and really build a sense of belonging in this country, then we might improve the current situations that we're in. But I think, for me, it is a different answer when I think about the government, and a completely different answer when I think about the American people. And while they are here, there are folks who want to diminish your light. There have also been folks who were allies. I remember when the Muslim Ban came into effect and when there was some ban came into effect and it was so beautiful to see the amount of support that we received. Folks were flocking towards the airports and protesting. You know, conducting the struggle of the Muslim community, the refugee community, and, you know, that realizing that Islamophobia is just as harmful as all the other different forms of phobia. There was just a really beautiful shift to see within the public space. But I think we have a long, long way to go before we can really enact policies, whether domestic or foreign on a national level, state level, and on a local level to be more inclusive to create that kind of belonging within our different communities.

329 00:51:24.870 --> 00:51:48.300 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. That was beautifully said! I'm now going to ask questions about the COVID-19 pandemic. Tell me what you know about COVID-19?

332 00:51:41.220 --> Ismahan Abdullahi: So, so much. I've just been keeping up with it. I remember when things broke out, actually. And around the end of January, or the beginning of February, actually--I should say the beginning of every month towards the end of February that month. That's the month that I actually was encouraging my family members and myself to not travel to really start, you know, just taking precautions, because we live in a global world. So it will be just a matter of time before we're faced with this global pandemic. In the uncertainty, they kind of came with that. So as they continue to enforce the self-quarantine home measures, and understand that COVID-19 really is as a respiratory illness, and the impact that it's having, especially in communities of color--how that's been ravaging communities that have already

been dealing with the social inequities that has been exasperated by this pandemic. I think for me, what's there to know is not necessarily just the medical background, which is, I think, is important, and we should definitely listen to medical advice from our doctors and our scientists. But I think what's important to know about COVID-19 is how it is ravaging communities and those stories are not being told. Mass pace is a proud partner and supporter of the Black Muslim Coalition and COVID-19 response. And just really thinking about how our communities, especially the refugee community, may not be able to obtain the resources and the information that's needed to help navigate during this pandemic. So for me, it's more of providing that space to educate our community to engage our community. We've been providing food--we serve over 2000 people. We are providing them with meals and through the Muslim Leadership Council, we sit on the board as we provide over 4500 warm meals as well. So just been about rising to the occasion and making sure that we're ready to serve.

344 00:53:58.920 --> 00:54:05.610 Kimberly Merene: Thank you! What was it like for you personally to suddenly transition into a quarantined lifestyle?

345 00:54:07.770 --> 00:54:15.420 Ismahan Abdullahi: For me, in the beginning, I really focused on rapid response in the community, especially being a community advocate in my role within the MSA. So for me, it was an adjustment of trying to figure out how to meet the needs of the community, especially since folks are going to be at home. So my phone number became a number for the community to call along with our other staff and volunteers. So for me it was really a rapid response and then realizing that as I'm engaging in all these different calls and zoom meetings and fielding calls that I also have to take time to make sure that I'm breathing and I'm able to process this as well, both spiritually and emotionally. So setting time aside for me to be able to do that--especially since we weren't able to go hiking or go to the beaches and whatnot.

349 00:55:02.640 --> 00:55:09.180 Kimberly Merene: What have you been doing to take care of yourself physically and mentally during quarantine?

350 00:55:10.650 --> 00:56:29.010 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think the time that I'm spending with my grandma. We take walks around our neighborhood. You know, it has been really beautiful and a bonding experience. We don't really get to spend too much time with our grandparents, and especially for those of us who are blessed to have grandparents who are still living. And then also, spiritually, we're in the month of Ramadan. So we're fasting praying, even though we're not able to go to the mosques, you know, we're better able to, you know, just really center our religious kind of space by doing more of our reading of the holy book or and just remembering a lot in everything that we do and being grateful for this opportunity to kind of connect with him in a deeper way. So for me, spiritually and mentally even doing the best that I can. But I do need those reminders once in a while, especially since I'm so community focused. It's about finding your rhythm and really making sure that you're keeping to a schedule. To hold yourself accountable and to make sure that you're carving your time right where you have your time to work, your time for yourself, your time for your family, you know, you can do zoom calls you

know other ways to kind of make sure that you're practicing that social distance or physical distancing, not social distancing physical distancing

359 00:56:29.010 --> 00:56:34.710 Kimberly Merene: Has the pandemic interfered with any of your cultural practices, besides Ramadan?

360 00:56:35.790 --> 00:56:46.620 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think, especially right now, we're hitting the last 10 nights of Ramadan, which we are really blessed with. We try to see what we call a night of power. And just the community aspect of things, community congregation that has happened, you know, in the head that normally happens where the entire community comes out to the mosque, they break fast. Together they pray together. They are in conversation. And so that opportunity has been lost. But again, with the way we approach it is that the doors of the mosque may be closed. But the doors of God are never closed. So for us, it's really about adjusting during this time, especially for so many people, it's having an impact on them because they're there. They want to see others, they want that physical kind of interaction which we're not able to have right now. So thinking creatively about how to have a way to meet that

367 00:57:33.930 --> 00:57:41.970 Kimberly Merene: Thank you! What are the rising issues that you see that are happening in the media and politics surrounding refugee communities?

368 00:57:43.140 --> 00:58:56.940 Ismahan Abdullahi: There hasn't been an investment. If we look at our undocumented, you know, family and documented communities, especially those within the refugee community. Or the larger community, I should say. A lot of folks have not received their stimulus check. So I'm thinking about housing instability. I'm thinking about economic instability. I'm thinking about the impact that this is going to have mentally on folks, especially for folks who are not able to handle the anxiety that they have been inside a home for for a while. So for me, it's just really thinking about the different issues that were that we're facing and how federally we have not responded. I mean, we've been building out corporations and we were expecting everyday Americans, whether they're refugees, undocumented immigrants, or just the American people in general. We're expecting people to have kind of like they're raised that really the savings but we're not expecting corporations to have that. So for me, it has been really, really disappointing to see how Congress has continued to bail out corporations and they're not building out the people.

374 00:59:00.000 --> 00:59:06.930 Kimberly Merene: Has the COVID-19 pandemic taught you any important lessons in life that you weren't aware of before?

375 00:59:08.640 --> 00:59:10.800 Ismahan Abdullahi: Important? Sorry, can you say that again?

00:59:11.430 --> 00:59:17.340 Kimberly Merene: Has the COVID-19 pandemic taught you any important lesson in life that you were unaware of before?

377 00:59:18.600 --> 00:59:28.680 Ismahan Abdullahi: I think it's really-- necessarily taught that reminded me more like, I think we're always on the go. We never slow down to check up on each other, to really just take the time to spend moments with our families moment with ourselves to spend time to reflect and read that we've gotten so accustomed to this hustle bustle, kind of like a busy lifestyle where we're always kind of on the go. So this has really slowed me down and has not slowed down the work, but it has pushed me to figure out how to better slow down. And really just live in the moment, as we continue to give and serve. How can I be more mindful of really checking up on our loved ones and our friends--folks that we were blessed to meet within this world that we may not have been able to have that chance to kind of like follow up? So this really, I guess, forced us to think about what's considered normal, what parts of normal do we want to go back to and how do we define that. And what is essential was not essential, then what can we do to really declutter our lives.

383 01:00:32.370 --> 01:00:39.420 Kimberly Merene: What are some changes that you would like to see in the broader society after the pandemic situation is lifted?

384 01:00:41.190 --> 01:02:08.460 Ismahan Abdullahi: Um, I think one thing that I was really appreciative of is just the focus on how we can really think creatively--think about changing the systems that currently exist right so now folks are getting up, going to school, going to work, you know, just rushing through things and then we can't wait for the weekend to come. The weekend comes, and you're trying to catch up with everything else that you haven't had a chance to catch up on. So I think, you know, redefining what life is going to look like. After this, and then also the impact that we're having globally in the world and thinking about just clean air that we've been able to enjoy. And how can we continue to build towards more of a sustainable life in a sustainable system that prioritizes the synergy and the alignment of the nature of humans and our current existing ways of doing things? So I'm looking to come back into the world as we lift these quarantine measures. That we're imagining what schools look like. We're reimagining what workplaces look like then. We're imagining what it means to invest in essential workers and folks who are on the front lines of this pandemic and, you know, our farm workers and things that we've taken for granted, or we didn't pay too much attention to...that this pandemic is forcing us to pay attention to.

392 01:02:11.190 --> 01:02:20.970 Kimberly Merene: Have you ever experienced or witnessed xenophobia in San Diego ever since the pandemic happened this year?

393 01:02:21.930 --> 01:02:26.580 Ismahan Abdullahi: I actually have. I've seen two instances where it wasn't really direct, but it was interactive fear of the other. I was taking a walk around our neighborhood, and there was a young African American male that was walking through or running through the area and there was a young girl who was walking her dog. And as soon as he dropped by--he was just running there--was just that immediate look of like, pause, in her demeanor, her posture, and she just kind of like pulled her dog in a little bit closer. And it was just interesting to know. Again, I don't want to make any assumptions. But it since it happened like right after some other guy walked through and there was no interaction or no physical

reaction to that guy who walked through, but in the end, of course that guy was a white guy, but there was no reaction towards that. But when the young African American brother walked through...it was just on kind of high alert, but you never know. You never know exactly what people's experiences are. It was going from my personal view that was what I was thinking about, but from her perspective, it could be trauma-informed. You know, again, we would never want to jump into any assumptions, but then also the seeing that happened with estimate arbitrary the shooting that happened with Sean read. That's what's been happening with law enforcement targeting young African American boys and arresting them for social distancing but then in different communities--in white communities--they're handing out masks. Especially in New York. So just really seeing the different disparities, I think there were 40 arrests in one place. That was really 40 arrests happened because of social distancing. And out of that, African Americans. They were Black folks. So thinking about the disparities that exist and what are some of the biases that we need to confront and deal with during this reality of, like, you know, even as we face global pandemic. We can't escape racism like these xenophobic events in our community.

407 01:04:39.300 --> 01:04:39.900 Kimberly Merene: Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to share about the COVID-19 pandemic to younger individuals who learn about this in history?

409 01:04:54.000 --> 01:04:55.950 Ismahan Abdullahi: I'm sorry, say that again?

410 01:04:56.010 --> 01:05:02.010 Kimberly Merene: Yes. Is there anything else that you would like to share about the COVID-19 pandemic to younger individuals who learn about this history?

411 01:05:03.330 --> 01:07:00.570 Ismahan Abdullahi: Um, I think, recognizing that there are two different alternative narratives and recognizing that unless we sent our histories. I know for the Black Muslim Coalition, they're centering the stories of elders who have faced a cholera outbreak web based the flu pandemic in the past. And I think this is a time where history is in the making, and capturing these stories, reflecting on them, especially for the younger generation who will be learning about this through textbooks. But recognizing that there's two Americas here. I'm thinking about Charles Dicken's book, you know, the tale of two cities, you know, it was the best of times and it was the worst of time. You see how the rich kind of billionaire class--the 1% of America is spending their time in quarantine in mansions and spending their time in these fancy places and their yachts and whatnot. And then you see how everyday Americans are living, especially those who are in the front lines of this pandemic--our healthcare workers, our: refugee community, our communities of color, and just how they're struggling to pay rent, how they're struggling to put food on the table. I think one place had over 10,000 people lining up to receive food from a food bank, you know, the fact that we're serving over 2000 people. There's two tales of America right now and we, we have a moral duty right now to choose what kind of America we want to be, you know, do we want to continue this status quo as is? Or do we really want to make sure that our communities are in the front lines

of justice and making sure that we're building an America, and a country that's for all people and not just those who are rich or white?

423 01:07:04.380 --> 01:07:13.170 Kimberly Merene: Thank you! Is there anything else that me or students like myself could do to help refugee communities and City Heights or El Cajon?

424 01:07:14.280 --> 01:08:22.980 Ismahan Abdullahi: Absolutely! I think students are in a unique position, especially. I'm just thinking about the the value of time, you know, there's time to get out of the comfort of the La Jolla area for folks who, you know, when I say are used to in that area. In that comfort, in the bubble that we're in, some folks are from that community so they understand it. Other folks are not in that community. So it will take getting out of your comfort zone to be able to do that. But we are living at a time that you know. We know history, we've seen history and how students have been at the front lines when it comes to really changing the narrative--when they say the youth are the leaders of tomorrow. I always push back and say, no, the leaders. They are the leaders of today. So I think students are in a unique position to think not beyond just their education, but also think about the kind of legacy that they want to leave behind. A legacy of service and really giving back to our community. So there's numerous different opportunities to kind of get involved in. Numerous different organizations that are the forefront of helping our refugee community. And so just get involved and go beyond the classroom!

433 01:08:24.000 --> 01:08:25.380 Kimberly Merene: Thank you so much! So that concludes our oral history interview today. Thank you so much for your time--for taking the time to share your experiences with me!

437 01:08:42.630 --> 01:08:45.750 Ismahan Abdullahi: Thank you so much. This has been a pleasure. So really appreciate it!