Ali Breaking Down Barriers and Sharing Culture

by Edmund Frazer Myer

Due to civil war in Somalia during the 1990s, Fadumo Ali, student mentor for the Native American Programs at WSU, and her five siblings moved to Egypt when she was two years old. Then, two years later the family moved to America. Ali lived in Bellevue, Washington since 1999. All of her siblings went to the University of Washington and since Bellevue is a suburb near Seattle, none of them had to leave home to attend college.

Ali said she always loved politics and the media. She recalls following the coverage of Somalia on CNN, and reading the Seattle Times at a young age.

In high school, Ali was in journalism class where she wrote for the school newspaper for two years, and that’s when she realized her passion for newswriting and reporting.

Ali is Muslim and wears the head-covering of her religion, called a “hijab.” Considering that there are not many “hijabi reporters,” Ali said, “I was intimidated by television and wanted to be a newspaper journalist.” After much thought and reminding herself that there have been individuals who “broke down barriers before,” she decided to work toward being a television news correspondent.

Ali said once she figured out what profession she wanted, she started looking for programs that offer opportunities for broadcast journalism. She was planning to go to UW, and carry out her family tradition. However, she attended their advising fair and as soon as she expressed an interest in journalism the advisor told her to go WSU.

She is now a junior at WSU, double majoring in Journalism and Global Politics, with a minor in film studies. Attending WSU and being the first child in her family to leave home was a tough decision for her at 18 years old. “I didn’t want to leave my family, but I felt that if I didn’t take the opportunity to go to WSU, that I might regret it for my entire life,” she said.

Because there isn’t a big Somali–American population at WSU, it was difficult for her to adjust at first. Since she grew up with essentially the same peer group in Bellevue, she said she never felt like she was different from the people at her school. It was at WSU where she felt she was being perceived as “different” for the first time.

She realized that people don’t always grow up in areas where they’re exposed to diversity, and the fact that WSU is such a diverse campus is Ali’s favorite part about the campus. She has found that WSU’s students are “always open minded and willing to learn.”

She explained that during her freshmen year she felt like she didn’t have a community, which made the transition from home to Pullman hard at first. She even had to celebrate Ramadan by herself.

So, in attempt to find her community, Ali started to get actively involved with many different clubs and organizations. For instance, last semester she worked for WSU TV station Cable 8, was the president of the International Student Council (ISC), and became a mentor for the Native Programs.

She wanted to be a mentor, because she’s never been exposed to Native American culture, and she saw it as an opportunity to learn from and connect with students from the Native American background.

She said that being around people that you’re not used to gets individuals out of their comfort zone and helps them to grow. She wanted to learn about Native American ethnicity and cultures, in addition to learning about their perspective, “and the challenges they faced as undergraduate freshman so I could help them as a mentor.”

Ali realized that with everything she was involved in, plus being a full-time student, that she might be getting too involved. She said that Venice Lacy, graduate assistant in the Native American Student Center, talked to her one day about burnout and suggested Ali cut back on her involvement.

She decided to stick with the Native Programs, since they “showed they cared about my well-being,” Ali said.

Ali really appreciates the connection she made with Lacy. Although Ali is a student mentor herself, she said she feels like Lacy is, in a way, her mentor.
Recently, Ali started a job as a religion blogger for *The Huffington Post*. She said, last year she “reached out to some editors,” but they informed her that there were no current positions.

Ali was persistent, though. She kept reaching out and gave a person at the news company her information. That networking paid off, because *The Huffington Post* contacted her and offered her the opportunity.

Right now she’s working on an article that pertains to why Muslim communities and Muslim Student Associations (MSA) are important to college campuses. One aspect of that is “everybody who is a minority has a place on campus where they feel like they belong and fit in, a place specifically for them on campus,” Ali said.

Another reason why Ali believes MSAs are important is because they “preach against Islamophobia.” Ali said that she wishes people would get to know one another before judging, and if this could happen she believes that would stop racism before it even begins.

Having communication and television reporter skills will help Ali when she eventually dives into her “true passion” of politics.

“My end goal would be to work for the United Nations. I’ve always had a passion to help other developing nations (Somalia included) and to give back in a way,” Ali said. “I’m currently participating in Global Case Competition at WSU, which allows us to solve cases for the UN and the winning group gets to present their ideas to the UN in Geneva.”

Furthermore, she said, “I’m also hoping to do UN modeling next year, and to get a feel for how the United Nations operates. Most importantly, I feel a sense of duty to help other individuals (especially refugees) to find security, and to help (in some way) through peacekeeping.”

For three months, beginning on May 13, Ali is going back to Somalia for the first time in 20 years. She will be staying with her uncle and interning for HCTV, doing field work. While there, in addition to learning how to speak Somali better, she wants to interact with the people and gain an understanding and appreciation for where she’s from and her culture.