

Minority Business Award to:
African Chamber of Commerce
President Martin Mohammed

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MINORITY EXECUTIVE

Martin Mohammed

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

MARTIN MOHAMMED WAS ENTERING the banking industry in Somalia when the civil war drove him and millions of others into refugee camps and on to other countries. He arrived in Minnesota an educated man, but found there was more to his culture shock than just the frigid winters.

While working at FedEx he furthered his education, earning a degree at National American University and then earning an MBA from the University of St. Thomas. Through his classes, Mohammed realized just how different the business community was in the United States compared with Africa. Many immigrants didn't have the slightest inkling what they were in for when they arrived. For example, Muslims cannot take out traditional bank loans because they aren't allowed to earn interest. Nor can they buy insurance. Both practices violate their religious beliefs. Plus, they have no rental or credit history when they arrive, and typically they don't speak English.

"Five years ago when I moved here there were a lot of things I noticed," he said. "One of them was the whole issue of how immigrants, especially those who are very recent, being

challenged by the system ... of doing business. Having some level of background, I decided to do something to help the immigrant population."

In 2000, Mohammed founded Somali Credit Counseling, an organization that conducted programs to help immigrants learn about banking insurance and other business needs. The organization has gone through different iterations in the years since, but the purpose — helping immigrants better understand how to do business in the United States — has largely stayed the same.

Mohammed's latest project, the African Chamber of Commerce, aims to address these issues even further. Started last year, the chamber is a nonprofit organization that provides many similar services, such as micro-business development and family and financial-literacy training. It also will aim to create understanding between cultures, provide opportunities for collaboration between immigrants and existing organizations and offer networking events and resources for government and business officials.

"That's where the concept of the chamber emerged," Mohammed said. "We are still in the process of really clarifying what the chamber is going to look like in the future for this

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Founder and president of the African Chamber of Commerce, founded in 2007

Age: 30

Education: MBA, University of St. Thomas

Family: Wife, Zari Zari; three children, six of whom were adopted

Hobbies: Ice skating, traveling and meditating

community. You can say that we are very excited about this idea of creating the African Chamber of Commerce."

There are challenges to overcome. For instance, Mohammed said there are few groups of immigrants still looking for basic services and there are people who have been in the community for a dozen or more years facing more complex issues. Finding ways to serve both will take some work.

The chamber is trying to raise more than \$400,000 to meet its goals, and establish a 15-member board with business, doctors and other local immigrant and non-immigrant professionals.

"These people will be from all across the board," Mohammed said. "What we are trying

to do is create a board ... that is a little bit more able to bring resources to the community and can help us do some level of programs."

When he's not creating community organizations Mohammed is often working with others. He serves on the boards of Peace Partnership International, as well as the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce. He also works closely with the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, and has participated in roundtables and committees hosted by Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak and Gov. Tim Walleenty aimed at leveling the playing field for immigrant business owners.

Laisi Siyo, executive manager for the Minneapolis-based One Percent Club, commends Mohammed's leadership within the Somali and other minority communities.

Siyo, also a member of the African Chamber of Commerce board, believes Mohammed uses his vibrant personality to push for changes to the system that will help everyone thrive in Minnesota's business climate.

"Charismatic ... that word is overused, but that's him," Siyo said. "He is a passionate words person, and the mission, and his beliefs."

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.



AFRICAN
CHAMBER of COMMERCE