
TEACHING RESOURCE:
IMMIGRANT STORIES –
SELAMAWIT ADEDA, ETHIOPIA



Selamawit Adeda, *ETHIOPIA*

My name is Selamawit Adeda. I am a U.S. citizen. I came to this country as a refugee from Ethiopia. My whole family faced persecution under the communists because of our faith. It took 26 years for our family to be reunited, for the circle to be completed. My younger brother was the first to flee Ethiopia. He refused to convert youth in his church to communism. He fled without documents. He had to travel among other kids of 16 to 19 years old during the night time, playing hide and seek with the soldiers of the communist government. After reaching the border of Sudan, he was hidden in the trunk of a missionary's car to come to the capital city, where he would have a better chance of applying for asylum. Others including myself later followed, because we are falling from the hands of one dictator to the other. Along that long journey, I and my family received support from so many people and organizations. They helped when visas ran out, gave us food and shelter, worshipped with us, and supported us when we had no one else to turn to for help.

In Ethiopia, when the communists came to power, they took our churches, they threw our leaders in prison. To maintain the faith, we had to worship in secret. When my brother fled, we were not able to mention his name even in our own home. We had to pretend not to know him. When he contacted us from a neighboring country asking for help getting identity documents, we could not go to the government for a birth certificate. The church was fearful of even issuing a baptismal certificate.

We came to America to get away from a government that persecuted faith communities for living out their beliefs.

TEACHING RESOURCE:
IMMIGRANT STORIES –
LO HER, LAOS



Lo Her, LAOS

I am Hmong. I was born in Laos. In 1975, I was forced to flee with four brothers and two sisters across the Mekong River to a refugee camp in Thailand. We were resettled in the United States as refugees in 1990.

I often think about those days now. I remember Laos and the war. I cry when I tell my children about what happened to us. When I was a young girl, communists attacked our village. I fled with some of my brothers and sisters into the jungle, and never found my mother and father again. My brothers and sisters and I hid in the jungle for three years, eating nothing but the roots of plants and the small animals we were able to kill. We finally had to surrender to the communists because we were starving. We were held in a prison camp for a year before we were released and started looking for the rest of our family.

My husband, as well as the other men in my family fought in the war against the communists. The U.S. C.I.A. recruited them to fight in General Vang Pao's army, and one of my uncles was even trained as a pilot. My husband was a soldier who lived in the jungle and fought for many years before he fled to Thailand when the U.S. withdrew from Laos. Many of my relatives were killed in the fighting.

My siblings and I fled on foot through the jungle, crossing the Mekong River. We found shelter in a U.N. refugee camp in Thailand—that is where I met my husband! We got married there in a traditional ceremony. Our oldest daughter was also born in the camp. We were all granted refugee status and resettled in the U.S. in 1990. The rest of my family was sent to France. Although we have lived in the U.S. for many years, neither my husband nor I know how to read, write or speak English.

Since our arrival in the United States, we have lived in California. We had five children here in the U.S. My husband and I have found work in Minnesota and we have just moved here. My husband works during the day and I work on the overnight shift so that one of us is always home with the children. We don't want to send our kids to daycare because it's not part of our culture. It is also very expensive. Our oldest daughter is very responsible and helps to take care of her younger brothers and sisters.

At times, I feel somewhat lost here. Our children speak English very well, but neither my husband nor I speak English. In fact, we don't know how to read any language. We rely on our children to help us with translation.

TEACHING RESOURCE:
IMMIGRANT STORIES –
JEFFREY SIRLEAF, LIBERIA



Jeffrey Sirleaf, *LIBERIA*

In Liberia, I lived in the capital city, Monrovia, and I was in seventh grade at B.W. Harris Middle School. My mother was a junior minister in the Ministry of Finance under former President, Samuel Doe, while my father owned a small shop where he sold foodstuffs and clothing. When a military coup overthrew Doe in 1980, my mother lost her job. Luckily, during most of the 1980's and the early 1990's my father's store was able to remain open so my family had some source of income. I, however, had to stop going to school because the ongoing fighting in and near Monrovia made it impossible for students to continue their education.

In April 1996, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, entered Monrovia. My dad's store was bombed, leaving my family penniless. In addition, NPFL rebels stormed my neighborhood of Sinkor. Somehow they discovered my mother had worked for the Doe administration. One day, about fifteen NPFL combatants came to our house and shot down the door. One of the bullets grazed me in the shoulder. The NPFL demanded we all come out. When they saw my mother, they viciously beat her and stripped her naked in front of us. They then tied her up and took her away. When my father tried to intervene he was beaten unconscious. The NPFL also warned us to leave the area or they would return to kill us.

With my two younger brothers, my father and I walked fifteen days through rough terrain to the border Liberia shares with Guinea. There again, NPFL soldiers met us. I was separated from my family and taken to an NPFL military camp in Nimba County to be trained as a fighter. When I refused to engage in military training, the Commander of the Camp placed me in a hole filled with water up to my neck where I was forced to remain for 3 days. NPFL soldiers regularly urinated on me and threw feces on me. As a result, I contracted cholera and became very ill. When I was pulled out of the hole, I was of no use to the NPFL, so one of the soldiers took me to a Red Cross makeshift clinic. I received antibiotics and other medical care until I regained some of my strength.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) then took me to a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, where I lived for almost two years. There I met someone who had the address of my mother's sister, Mildred. Aunt Mildred has lived in Minneapolis since 1985. I wrote to her, and she bought me an airline ticket and arranged for me to come to the United States. I do not know if my mother, father or brothers are still alive, since I have had no news from them since April 1998. I arrived in Minneapolis in the fall of 2000. Since my arrival in Minneapolis, Charles Taylor has left the country. However, my country is still not at peace. Taylor's forces still roam the streets and new combatants are fighting the existing government seeking power. I read in the newspaper that women are still being raped, and that men and women, and even children, are being intimidated, harassed and beaten.

TEACHING RESOURCE:
IMMIGRANT STORIES –
FATIYA ABDULLAHI, SOMALIA



Fatiya Abdullahi, *SOMALIA*

Back in Somalia, I lived in a small house on the outskirts of Mogadishu with my mother, father, and brother. In 1992, when I was three years old, fighting began in town between the Somali National Movement (SNM) and the government. My dad was at work and wasn't home when the fighting started. He didn't come home that day, and we didn't know where he was.

The fighting lasted for days. We could hear the noise, but couldn't go outside at all. Our house even shook. From inside our house, I could see dead soldiers lying on the street. I had never seen a dead body in my life. I started to wonder about my dad—if he had been killed, too.

A few days after the fighting began, my mom and brother and I were home and some soldiers with guns broke open our door and told us that we had five minutes to leave or we would be shot. We threw some dried milk, water, and rice in a bag. My mom grabbed a family picture we had taken last year. She looked so scared. Dad still hadn't returned, but we couldn't wait for him. We had to go. We said a silent prayer, and ran out the door.

By the time we had joined our neighbors on the road leading away from town, we could see smoke rising from the lane behind our home. We could not tell for sure if it was our house that was burning, but we also knew that it didn't matter. Home was gone. It made me sad to leave my house and all of my friends there. And I was so worried about my dad. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

We walked to Kenya to a refugee camp. The walk was hard; we could still hear bombs and fighting going on. We had to walk mostly by night because it was safer. It took days to get there—I don't know how many miles we walked! One of my friends told me that her uncle died in their house during the fighting, but they couldn't bury him because of all of the fighting.

The conditions in the Kenyan camp were terrible. Some people got sick; they didn't have very good medicine there. The woman who lived next to us in the camp died. We had to stay in the camp there for 7 years. The atmosphere in the camp was so depressing. Even when school was in session—which wasn't very often—I had a hard time studying and concentrating. I kept worrying about my dad and wondering if we would ever get out of this camp.

My family and I moved to Marshall, Minnesota in 1999. My brother and I attended a middle school there. When I got to school, the only words I knew in English were *Hello* and *Thank You*. I had no idea what people were saying. Also, the people who live in Minnesota don't wear the shador, and sometimes they give me funny looks when they walk by me. But I am happy there are some other people from Somalia here. I feel at home when I smell Somali stew cooking!

TEACHING RESOURCE:
IMMIGRANT STORIES –
MARIA HERNANDEZ, MEXICO



Maria Hernandez, MEXICO

I was born in Mexico, but I have lived much of my life in the United States. I am fifteen years old.

When I was a baby, my dad moved to the United States to find work. Later, he saved enough money to pay a *coyote* to help smuggle my mom, brothers and me into the United States. I remember going to the *coyote's* house near the border, dressing in dark clothing, and being told by my mom to be very quiet. I was very scared crossing the river, because we had to cross the river in the boat one at a time, and I was the last one in my family to cross the river with the *coyote* and I was afraid I was going to be left behind. Eventually we made our way into the United States, where we have lived together for years. My parents and I were granted amnesty in the early 1990s and we all have our green cards now.

My mom and dad have worked as farm workers since we came to the United States. For most of my childhood, we have lived in Texas, Arizona and California in the winter and Minnesota in the summer. Sometimes I get to go to school, but I have often had to help my family at work or watch my brothers and sisters. This is the first year we are staying in Minnesota for the winter, because my mom and dad have jobs all year round.

