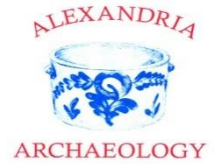




City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Aida Abdul-Wali*

Date of Interview: *August 25, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Aida Abdul-Wali's Home in Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Apasrin Suvanasai*

Transcriber: *Adept Word Management*

Abstract: Aida Abdul-Wali was born in Ethiopia. She has lived in Alexandria since 1980. She talks about leaving Ethiopia to the sound of machine-gun fire and escaping to Yemen and Egypt before finally reuniting with her mother in the United States. She discusses the differences in culture, schools, and food of the many places she has lived. Years later, she revisited all those places with her daughter.

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Introductions	
Apasrin Suvanasai:	My name is Apasrin Suvanasai. I am here with Aida Abdul-Wali. It's August 25, 2015, and we're at Aida's home in Alexandria, Virginia. And she is helping us with our Immigrant Alexandria oral history project. So thank you very much for taking the time to do this with us today.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	My pleasure.
A.S.:	Great. Okay. So, Aida, let's begin with your background, where you're from, where you were born.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Okay. I was born in Ethiopia, and I was there until I was eight. And the war was breaking out at that time. And my father was from Yemen, so we migrated to Yemen out of Ethiopia. And we stayed in Yemen for about three years. And my mother was high on education, so she insisted that, "My kids need to be educated," so we moved to Egypt. And we went to boarding school there for about three years. At that time, my mom had moved to America, so she asked my dad, "I want my kids to be with me," and that's the reason we came into America. So I came here in 1980, and I was just turning fourteen. And I started school in eighth grade at that time here. So that's how I came to America really.
A.S.:	Okay. So that's a great overview about what we're about to experience with you. So starting with Ethiopia, what city where you born?
Childhood in Ethiopia	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I was born in Addis Ababa, the capital.
A.S.:	Okay. And so you were there until—how old?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Eight.
A.S.:	Eight years old.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	So what are some of your memories that stick out the most to you of being home in Ethiopia?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	In Ethiopia, I remember just playing soccer—coming home after school, changing my clothes and going outside just to play soccer.
A.S.:	Soccer.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. That's the big game. So that's what sticks out.

A.S.:	Okay. And so your home life, who did you live with at home?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	At that time, my father had left for Yemen, so I just lived with my mom and my grandfather.
A.S.:	Okay. So just—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. I had my brother, my sister, and my mom. And my grandfather was like the main—you know, family figure—.
A.S.:	Yeah. Okay. And so what was school like?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	School was really strict. I went to a Catholic school—uniforms—and I remember that was a big contrast for me. It was a strict discipline, respect—that was a big thing. So when I came and started school here, that was a big shock. That was a culture shock.
A.S.:	Probably we're not as strict as—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Not at all. And it was a shock to see how the kids spoke to the teachers, really bad, put their feet on the tables and what not. It was just like really shocking to see. It was undisciplined, no restrictions at all. It was disrespectful.
A.S.:	I was going to say—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	Okay. What were some of your favorite subjects in school?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	From back home, I really can't say much because I barely got into like the heavy-duty school work and all that—I was really early. So just going to school was a big deal.
A.S.:	Okay. Yeah, that makes sense. And so you said you left because the war broke out, so there was conflict at home. Can you describe what you remember from that?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	What I remember from that is it was a peaceful time, and the next thing you know, it was like a military takeover. And I remember one day—like the next day, there were just like bodies outside, like we'd never seen it before. But it was just like literally blood coming down the hill because they had just taken and killed so many people.
A.S.:	So you remember seeing that?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I remember seeing that. I remember that there was blood running down the street. And that was like immediately my mom was like, okay—everybody was just scrambling to get their families out as best they can. People walked out, you know? But we were lucky.

A.S.:	Do you remember what your mother or grandfather were telling you as to what's going on outside your door?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Basically it was like—everybody was just like, “Don't go outside,” because you could literally hear the machines guns just going for hours. And you just knew those people were being—and you could hear it from everybody, like somebody—so-and-so got snatched up last night. And they'll take you out and they'll kill you.
A.S.:	And who was invading?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It was like a military such and other. Then they were—the Communist Party basically came into Ethiopia. So that was their way. They'd just kill anybody who was—that they thought was over-privileged, which was anybody that was educated. But that was it. It was just like a really harsh thing.
A.S.:	So were you able to go to school still through this?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I can't even remember. It was so quick. We pretty much left within a couple of weeks.
A.S.:	Oh, okay. That's fast.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	And then you went to Yemen.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	So how was that—do you remember what it was like getting everything together and leaving?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It happened really, really, really quickly. I remember, like a week before we left, me and my brother had gotten in a fight, and I had a hurt hand in a way. And I didn't get punished for that because we were about to leave. And I also remember that—it was like, oh, my mom didn't even get mad at me [laughs].
Childhood in Yemen	
A.S.:	Least of her worries.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, yeah, exactly. And it just happened really quickly, and then in Yemen, it's a completely different culture. They're from Middle Eastern background, speaking Arabic, and Ethiopians speak Amharic. So we're going to meet family members that we've never met before.
A.S.:	Even your mom?

Aida Abdul-Wali:	Even my mom, because that's my father's side of the family. So like we're going—and my mom didn't come with us. So it was just us three kids that left.
A.S.:	Oh. So who's the oldest?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	My sister. She was about twelve. My brother was about eleven. And then I'm eight. So the three of us left. Yeah. And we're meeting family members who did not speak our language.
A.S.:	So you had no clue—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	We had no clue what was going on, but we just knew, okay, these are our relatives, and we're okay. Some family members spoke broken Amharic because they'd been in Ethiopia. And basically my father at that time was in the U.S. He had married—remarried—and had a family here in Connecticut. So he was being called back—you need to come and take care of your other children.
A.S.:	Right. Right. So did he come back?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So he came back. It took a little while for him to get there. So we were just waiting on him. And once he got there, my mom was like, "Okay, make sure they're enrolled in school." And I remember, there was not any English-speaking schools in Yemen. So we had to go to Egypt because Egypt had them.
A.S.:	So how long were you in Yemen?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Three years.
A.S.:	Three years.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	And there was no schooling at that time.
A.S.:	Do you remember anything from Yemen?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yemen was really interesting because I met like hundreds of cousins I'd never met before. It was a culture shock because there a female has to be covered up. You cannot be outside. Here I come from Ethiopia, which was a free society, and I'm outside playing soccer. Now I can't play. Isn't that amazing?
A.S.:	Yeah. It's tough for a kid too.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. And there's no—like how do you?—why not? I want to play.
A.S.:	You couldn't understand.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. But that was like a big culture shock. It was like, okay, you've got to be covered up. You can't be out. You can't go outside

	without a man escorting you. And we come from a free culture, and I'm like, what's going on? What's all this? So that was pretty hard.
A.S.:	And you didn't get a chance to go to school?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I didn't go to school. So I asked my father. He kept looking for schooling, but there was nothing equivalent. So it was like, okay, the only thing he could do is like, okay, I'll take you to Egypt because I know there are schools there.
A.S.:	Okay. So did you learn Arabic while you were in Yemen?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	While I was in Yemen, I kind of started picking it up, but not that much. I really—I learned it once I got to Egypt.
A.S.:	Oh. Okay. So then you arrived to Egypt. Were you with your siblings?
Childhood in Egypt	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. So my dad took us to Egypt, and we found a boarding school, he enrolled my brother and me, and he went back to Yemen. So at this point, we were just on our own too again.
A.S.:	Really?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	So no family in Egypt?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	No family members at all in Egypt.
A.S.:	Wow.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So we stayed in the boarding school for one year, and that was, I guess, too costly. So the following year when he came, he was like, "Okay, this is too much. You guys can still go to school, but I'm going to rent an apartment for you." So then, at that point, I'm like eleven. My sister was about thirteen. So we were in an apartment on our own.
A.S.:	Wow. Preteen and teenagers.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, yeah, living on their own, and we could do—like my sister took the role of mother. So she would make sure to cook for us and what not. And my brother became like a father, you know, protecting. I had a good time. [laughs] There was no parent to tell me what to do. And at that time, it was a really safe country anyhow, so like we would go out late with no fear.
A.S.:	So it was just—was it more like Ethiopia?

Aida Abdul-Wali:	It was kind of—it was like Ethiopia in a way but with a Middle Eastern culture. And it was like really free. It wasn't as strict. Islamic laws were not there at that time.
A.S.:	You didn't have to cover up.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	No. None of that was there. People were free to walk around wherever they pleased.
A.S.:	Did you play soccer again?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I could play soccer again. I played soccer in the boarding school. [laughs] Yeah. So, yeah, yeah, that was fun.
A.S.:	Okay. So you went to a different school. You stopped going to the boarding school.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	We still attended the school, but we did not live there.
A.S.:	Oh, okay.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	But for one year, we lived in the boarding school.
A.S.:	Okay. Okay.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. But it was fun.
A.S.:	So mostly good memories of Egypt?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Good memories of Egypt. I really didn't want to leave Egypt. The first time I ever cried leaving a country, it was then, because I just fell in love with it so much. I picked up the language really quickly. So even my Arabic was like relaxing. And I was just—and with that, my Amharic language kind of dropped. So I picked up the Arabic really well. And I really did not want to leave.
A.S.:	How long were you there?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Three years.
A.S.:	Three years.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. And because I was a kid, you pick up languages really quickly. And it was just so freeing, because neither my father nor my mother were there. We had an apartment. I could do whatever I wanted to do. Not that I went crazy, but still just kind of like, as a kid, you're like, oh—you're coming into your own as a teenager. And that's the age you're going to be, "Don't tell me what to do."
A.S.:	Right. You were an adult at that time. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Okay. [laughs]

A.S.:	So were you taking school seriously?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	You were?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	So you were doing the right thing.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. The school was good, and they teach you like British English there. So coming to America, that was another thing. It was like, okay, some of the words I learned in English were British English and not the American English. So I'm like, okay, this is different here. [laughs]
A.S.:	Oh, when you came here—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	So did you—now that you're older—did you kind of have like a subject that you leaned towards? What did you kind of like about school most?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I loved English.
A.S.:	English, okay.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, English was my favorite subject in high school and what not. I loved learning. I just really liked English. I was in drama club in high school.
A.S.:	Oh, okay. So you were artistic as a child.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. I was. I wanted to be a famous actor.
A.S.:	Okay. There's still time. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. [laughs]
A.S.:	Okay. Let's see. Okay, I'm going to go off on a tangent, but how was the food different from like Ethiopia to Yemen to Egypt?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	That's the difference. That's the difference. Ethiopian food is really spicy, and we have a bread called injera.
A.S.:	Right. Yeah.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	And so we eat with that. It's really spicy. Yemeni food was really, really bland. The only thing they had in common is we—both countries ate with their hand. But it was like rice—really there was no flavor with the Yemeni food. It was just really not that interesting. So I was like ugh [laughs]. Yeah. It was hard to get

	accustomed to it. Egypt—they had their own flavor of food, and a lot of what was fun in Egypt is also—like you have a lot of street vendors. Like you have the food trucks here and what not, there’s a lot of things that are sold on the streets. So it was like yeah, yeah, yeah.
A.S.:	Well, that’s nice.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So it was fun to kind of like try out different things. And they are really big on sweets. And I have a really big sweet tooth [laughs]. So Egypt was perfect.
A.S.:	Like chocolates and like candy—?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	No, they have like their own different types of sweets that they make.
A.S.:	You can’t even compare it?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	No. No. You know like baklava?
A.S.:	Um-hm. Oh, yeah.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Like that type of sweets.
A.S.:	Oh.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, but nothing you can compare to like here.
A.S.:	Sounds good.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. So I loved that.
A.S.:	You must miss that.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I indulged. [laughs]
A.S.:	Okay. So you were really upset when you had to leave Egypt. Why did you have to leave?
Coming to America	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Because at that point my mother had come to America, and she was like, “Okay, I’m settled here. I want my kids.” So my brother, when we were younger, he had already left when I was two. So really he wasn’t used to my mom anyway. So he just came into it because of the war situation. So when she—I guess possibly he was with her anyhow. So she said, “Okay, I want my kids back.” And we had to come. And I really didn’t want to leave Egypt because of just the freedom of it. I just enjoyed it. I enjoyed the culture. I loved the people. It was just—I really loved it over there. And I just—oh, I left crying—and showed up in America in 1980.

A.S.:	Yeah. So how old were you then?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I was just turning fourteen.
A.S.:	Fourteen.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	Okay. And were your siblings the same way—your brother and sister did not want to come?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Hmm, I don't—I don't think they felt the same way. I think they were looking forward to it, like being with my mom. I mean, I wanted to be with my mom, but I wanted the freedom too. [laughs]
A.S.:	You weren't done yet. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I wasn't done.
A.S.:	Okay. So you came to the U.S. Where were you? Where was your mom?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Well, initially we landed in [Washington] D.C. We were in D.C. for about three months or so. Then we moved to Annandale [Virginia]. And we stayed in Annandale for another—I think until I finished high school. Once I finished high school, me and my mom moved back to D.C. for a little bit. And we lived there for a while. Then again we migrated back to Virginia because we loved Virginia really. D.C. wasn't too much for us. So we've always been between Annandale and Alexandria really. And so I think around—by 2004—I purchased my own home in Alexandria. And so it's like I've always been between Annandale and Alexandria, just moving back and forth. And my mom had also moved into Alexandria.
A.S.:	So you guys just really like this area?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	This area, yeah, by far.
A.S.:	So backtracking, you didn't see your mom for about six years?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	So how was that reuniting with your mom and coming to the U.S.?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	In a way, because I was getting into the teenage years, when you kind of like really think you're on your own, and it was like, "I have my own mind. I can do what I wanted to do," type of age—not that I was that rebellious, but I also had the freedom of no one being—to bug me. That was hard. Like reuniting with my mom at that time because she automatically fell back to the role of the mother. You know what I mean? And she hasn't seen the change in me, and I'm

	like, “Oh, you can’t tell me what to do.”
A.S.:	Yeah, you don’t know what’s going on.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. That’s right. [laughs] Yeah, so I was like—oh—so that took a little bit of adjustment. So like being in eighth grade, ninth grade, I was kind of like—it took a year for me to kind of say, oh—like my attitude—but then I’m like, oh, okay, back to reality. And that was it.
A.S.:	You adjusted.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, just really quickly.
A.S.:	Okay. So you had already learned English, or at least the British English.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	So that was—how was it going to school?
School in America	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It was good. I mean, when we came here, in eighth grade I was in Glasgow Elementary School. And just because we were first coming in, I guess everybody had to go through the ESL [English as a Second Language] program. And so they put me in there, but I didn’t really have to stay there too long. So I was out of it really quickly and then just regular classes. But initially coming here, like I said, you feel like the culture shock of seeing the students, and there was just no respect for the teacher. And so that was a big shocker for me.
A.S.:	Okay, so through Ethiopia and Yemen and Egypt were just really strict—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. The teacher—teachers are held in high esteem, in such high esteem, in all those cultures. So even to the point, when the teacher comes into the classroom, we stand up and say, “Good morning”—not the teacher trying to get your attention and saying, “Okay, quiet down, quiet down.” No. Everybody stands up and says, “Good morning.”
A.S.:	So it was a major shock for you.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. And just—you would see the desks just defiled and carving on them and all that. I was like, wow.
A.S.:	You were saying, what’s going on? [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	What’s going on here? [laughs]

A.S.:	Oh, wow.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	So that's interesting.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, a little bit of culture shock, really.
A.S.:	Did English still remain like your favorite subject when you were here?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. It did. It did. So I was just getting—I loved writing—so my papers were always A's. So even in college, I loved English.
A.S.:	So was it easy to make friends? Was it hard?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Well, what I noticed was like, okay, when I came in, I was in the eighth grade, and those kids had pretty much grown up together. So it was like cliques.
A.S.:	Yeah.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So in high school, I kind of befriended—I was like the semi-popular kid, where everybody kind of knew me. I said hi to everybody. But my cool friends were like outcasts.
A.S.:	Outcasts?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. It was like, even though those are the ones I eat lunch with, but the cheerleaders and the football players are the ones that like to say hi, you know?
A.S.:	So you were friendly with everybody.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I was friendly with everybody, yeah.
A.S.:	That's good. So that wasn't too hard for you.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It wasn't really too hard.
A.S.:	Sometimes it's hard just to move to a different city to kids—
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	No friends and things.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	But like in eighth grade, I kind of just absorbed. In ninth grade, I kind of knew who was who. So it was like, yeah, okay.
A.S.:	That's good. So what did you think about American culture and food and just leisure and life and everything compared to Egypt?
American Culture	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Well, my first impression of America—when we came here, we

	came like two days before Halloween.
A.S.:	Oh! [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Okay? So as soon as the jet lag was over, they took us to Georgetown. That was my first impression of Americans. [laughs] And I was like, okay, these people are crazy.
A.S.:	They're crazy. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	What is going on? Because I've never seen anything like that. I don't think other countries celebrate it like America does. I don't know any people who celebrate it like they do here.
A.S.:	I don't know. So definitely not Egypt. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Oh, no, no. Definitely not. [laughs] They don't have anything like that. So that was really a wild introduction.
A.S.:	And Georgetown was like the prime spot for Halloween things.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. So I was really scared. [laughs] But food-wise, I didn't care for pizza for a long time. I still have not had a hotdog.
A.S.:	Really?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. I refuse to eat hotdogs.
A.S.:	I mean, that's good, because they're horrible for you. [laughs] So that's good.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	But I've never tasted them. I like McDonald's. I got hooked on the junk food really, like Honey Buns and Twinkies and stuff. Those were my friends in high school. And, yeah, Diet Coke.
A.S.:	Diet Coke. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	That was the staple diet.
A.S.:	And it wasn't like Egyptian desserts. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	No, it wasn't like that at all. [laughs]
A.S.:	Okay. And so what happened after high school? You went to college?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	After high school, I went to NOVA—Northern Virginia [Community] College. And I finished there. And my goal from there was to go to law school at GW [George Washington University]—I was just stuck on that law school. And I transferred to GW. And I went one year, and then I was kind of getting—.

Secondary Education	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I didn't know if this is what I really wanted to do—which at that point I met my ex-husband and kind of left that, became a mom, and then three years later I started planning to go back to school, and I went into computers.
A.S.:	Computers.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. So I changed fields altogether.
A.S.:	Okay.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	That's good. You went back to school.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	And got your degree and everything.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	How was it going back to school with being a mom?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	At that point, it got hard. I was a single mom then. I had divorced, so that was that. And it made a necessity for me to go back to school because I wanted to show my daughter—and I was beginning to—elevate yourself and schooling is important.
A.S.:	That's awesome.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. And so that was my main reason. And I like to follow a different course, even where computers are right now. So I became a certified computer engineer. So I've been in that the last twenty-seven years.
A.S.:	That's great. So you were able to find a job after graduating—
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	And provide for your family. That's great. That's great. So you moved to Alexandria what year? Oh, you said you were back and forth.
Family and Traditions	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	We were back and forth, like real close to Annandale, and then my mom purchased a condo in Alexandria. So in 2004, at that time I wanted to get my own condo, but I like to be close to my mom as well. So I ended up being in Alexandria with her. But she's back in Annandale. So Annandale and Alexandria—we've been going back

	and forth. But for me, Alexandria fits.
A.S.:	And what made you just cling to Alexandria? What do you like most about it?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It's close to D.C. and right off of the highway so that—Virginia is quiet. It's fast enough but at the same time slow enough. There's a lot to do in Alexandria. I love Old Town [Alexandria]. I love that Crystal City [in Arlington] is close by.
A.S.:	Everything is just very close.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Everything is close, yeah.
A.S.:	That's good. And so do you have family in the area?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah, my whole family is—my immediate family lives like in Annandale.
A.S.:	So it seems like for you, adjusting to coming to the United States was pretty easy, right? There wasn't really—
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. Unlike most immigrants, we didn't have to go through paperwork and being like a green card and all that ordeal, because my father was an American citizen. So when we came here, he basically sponsored us. So we had our green cards and what not when we arrived. So that was a big blessing because we did not have to go through all that—that most immigrants go through.
A.S.:	That's good. That was your whole family?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah. So that's big because in order to get jobs and stuff like that, sometimes that's a big hindrance for a lot of people. So we didn't have to experience that.
A.S.:	That's good. So now, I mean, do you still stay connected with your family?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	I'm connected to my mom and my siblings. But I mean, we're all here. And my dad had gone back to Yemen, and he passed away there. So that's been a long time ago.
A.S.:	Are there any I guess cultural traditions or family traditions that you have had through all these years, traveling and coming to the United States? Do you guys still do anything specific?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	They do. And that is out the fact that my family—well, my family is a Muslim family. So they still practice all of that. In 2008 I got born again, so I'm a Christian. So I no longer participate among them—
A.S.:	Their traditions and like that?

Aida Abdul-Wali:	Ramadan fasting and what not. So I'm out of that, per se. But one thing I still do, though, is—I love the Ethiopian food. So when I don't cook it, maybe once a month or something, I have to go down and get a carryout and bring that in.
A.S.:	That's good.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. And so like wintertime, you know that comfort food?
A.S.:	Um-hm.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	That comfort food for me is Ethiopian food. So thank God there is a huge community around here.
A.S.:	Yeah, that's true.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, there's a lot of restaurants close by.
A.S.:	With your daughter, did you ever—did you try to—I guess with the food—did you try to have her—did you incorporate the food with her too?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. I mean, the food she knew growing up, and amazingly that she was—even as a baby—she could stand the spice. That was shocking.
A.S.:	Oh, wow.
Going Back	
Aida Abdul-Wali:	And I was like, “You're just a baby.” And she's like, “You know I like the hot stuff.” But when she turned ten, I took her back to all the countries that I grew up in, as a tour to show her where I came from. So I took her to Ethiopia and then Yemen and Egypt. And then we came back.
A.S.:	Wow.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So I showed her everything that—all the countries—that was part of my childhood.
A.S.:	Um-hm. Was it shocking for you too?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	It was shocking for me because I hadn't gone back in twenty years, so it was really—like what I thought was big, like the house and what not, from an eight-year-old perspective—it was like—the house was so huge. When I went back, I'm like, wow, this is really tiny. And even the capital city, it was like a fifteen-minute travel, I was able to see the whole Addis Ababa capital. I was like, wow, it's not as big as I thought. But it was really nice to take her and show her everything.

A.S.:	Did she love it?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Well, she liked Ethiopia. Yemen was too much for her. As an American kid, she's used to running around in shorts. And I had to cover her up. And she didn't understand what's going on.
A.S.:	The same thing that you kind of went through.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Same thing I went through. So it was pretty hard for her. At one point we were shopping. And she had a scarf, and the scarf fell off. And these two men were kind of passing by and saw that. And one said, "What is this girl doing?" So they came back and were staring at us—.
A.S.:	Like do something—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Do something about it. And I made her cover up—because they have the right to do whatever, you know? Like women don't act that way. Basically I couldn't wait to get out.
A.S.:	Yeah.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. That was just like—and also kind of solidified that I don't belong there anymore, you know? So I might not have been born in America, but this is home now. And this is where I belong basically, because I know I can't fit in those other countries.
A.S.:	So you feel like your home is here.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah.
A.S.:	Okay. That's good. And you've spent a lot of time here too, so it should—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. I've been in this area for thirty-five years, so I'm like, okay, this is home. And even in Egypt—Egypt has changed a lot. So I'm like, okay, I wouldn't fit in there either. And that was that.
A.S.:	So your only desire to go back would be to just visit?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah, unless things drastically changed politically and so forth. Honestly, too, look at it, I would not go back. I know that. It won't happen. But even for a visit, most people from my country tend to go back there every year for their vacation. That's not me. I'd rather see places I have not seen.
A.S.:	That makes sense.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, and that was like, okay—yeah, so, it was like, okay, I've seen it. I don't think—this is not for me anymore.

A.S.:	Um-hm. So would you say your experience coming to the United States was unique, being that you had to transfer from two different countries to come here?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah, because—I mean, in a way, most people come here because this is the land of opportunity and what not, whereas it was more or less out of a custody issue that I ended up here, you know? And I really didn't want to come. I don't know what my story would be like if I had stayed there. But I came in under different circumstances a bit. I didn't come in how most people are, like coming in from a boat or walking or what not or being an immigrant seeking asylum. I didn't have to go through all that. So pretty much I was blessed that everything was just lined up for me. It was an easy transition as far as coming in.
Advice to Immigrants	
A.S.:	Okay. Well, even it being easier for you to come here, would you—do you have any advice that you would give to people that are coming—immigrants that are coming to this country?
Aida Abdul-Wali:	If they are able—and I don't know—I know there's some sort of like a lottery for them now, where people come in with a green card or what not—if they're able to come in with that, it's the best thing that can happen for them, because even job-wise, a lot of jobs want to know, "Are you a citizen?" Especially like—okay, I ended up in the federal government. There's no way I could have gotten that job if I wasn't a citizen.
A.S.:	Um-hm.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	So it's like, if somebody has an opportunity to have a green card and then come in, then that's the best thing that can happen for them. And another thing is just really assimilate with the culture. A lot of foreigners tend to stick with their own kind, and a lot of people don't even speak the language yet. That's not good. That doesn't help them in any way, shape, or form. So it's like, learn the language. Learning the language is a big deal. I was still young enough, I picked it up really quickly. So it was easy for me in a way.
A.S.:	Yeah, it does seem that way. The language really helped. You just adjust a lot easier—.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. Yeah.
A.S.:	With everything. The school was important.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Exactly.

A.S.:	That's a big factor.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Yeah. But I mean, I can see adults right now—coming as adults. And it might be hard for them, but still, you can make the effort. Like at a certain level, to whatever extent, learn it. That way we're all able to communicate. But now I love it. [laughs]
A.S.:	Um-hm. [laughs]
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Even though it's like coming back.
A.S.:	Well, this is great advice. And thank you so much for your interview with me. The information that you gave is very valuable.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	Okay. Thank you so much.
A.S.:	Thank you.
Aida Abdul-Wali:	All right.
A.S.:	All right.