

Great Expectations

Whether in school, work, or life, Abdul Kulane has big goals and the confidence to achieve them.

By Gail Ivers

Abdul Kulane arrived in the United States with one thing. Not money...not a home ...not a job. What he brought with him was confidence.

“I’m resilient,” he said. “I do what I set myself to do.”

And what he set himself to do was take advantage of what he saw as the boundless opportunities of his new home. “Here is where everything is possible,” he said. “You can beg in the streets or you can work hard and do well. You can study hard and learn, or you can drop out of school and become a criminal.”

After a short stay in Columbus, OH, he moved to St. Cloud where his brother was living. Here he found a job at New Flyer and quickly integrated into the local Somali/East African community.

He and two partners purchased a convenience store on 33rd Avenue and 3rd Street North in St. Cloud. “It was a little traditional convenience store,” Kulane said. “I would work mornings at the store, then leave at 2 p.m. to go work at New Flyer. I wasn’t paid for working at the store – I just received a revenue split at the end of the year.” It didn’t take long before he decided that his future was not with the store.

“The only people who came to the store were East African and Somali,” Kulane said. “We didn’t get mainstream customers. We weren’t able to grow or expand because our customer base was too small.” So he sold his shares in the business and applied for school at Saint John’s University.

“When I went to Saint John’s I thought ‘What is going on in Somalia? We’re 26 years in conflict. How do you resolve this? How do you anticipate conflicts? How do you intervene and stop or prevent them.’ It was because of these thoughts,” he said, “that I studied sociology and conflict studies.”

After graduating in 2012 he started applying for jobs. But the economy was still struggling and instead of hiring, businesses were downsizing. “I had three ideas when I graduated,” Kulane said. “I could work for a corporation where I could get a promotion. It wouldn’t matter where I started in the business, I thought, because I would get a promotion. I know myself and I would work hard and make that happen. Or, I could start my own business. Or, I could move on to graduate school – law school.”

He chose self-employment, starting The Language-Bank in 2012. Kulane provides interpretation and translation services in Somali, Swahili, Arabic, and Spanish. He’s received a number of certifications that qualify him to translate complex legal documents that must be accurate and grammatically correct. Organizations such as the St. Cloud HRA, St. Cloud School District 742, and Stearns County District Court have used his services.

Of course, his services aren’t limited to legal documents. One of Kulane’s niche services is what he calls cultural translation. A strict translation often fails to communicate thoughts and intent accurately. “That’s where Language Bank can be of service,” he said. “Our expertise includes an understanding of how cultures impact understanding, and how to translate the intent of the message accurately and respectfully.” Kulane also offers training to help staff adapt to a diverse society, and upper and mid-level management

understand the culture of potential clients and customers. “This is particularly important,” he said, “when you have customers and you don’t understand their culture and way of life.”

The business has grown slowly. He uses qualified independent contractors to assist with interpretation services, but does most of the translation himself. (Translation is written, rather than oral, communication.) He also does sales and management. “I make sure the contractors are qualified, have the correct certifications, and that they show up on time and do the job they agreed to do,” Kulane said. “That’s my job. And I also translate and interpret.”

Despite the slow start, Kulane is not discouraged. “I am making a living, but I want to do more,” he said. “I am determined to make the Language-Bank work but I want to do something bigger and better. Sometimes challenges are my biggest motivators.”

That’s probably a good thing.

Kulane was born in Somalia in August 1982. The civil war began in January 1991.

“I was going to school and suddenly rockets started going off over our city. I ran back home. We were trapped in our home. We knew there were rebels in the area. My dad knew this was coming – he knew the government would fall.” Within a few days Kulane and his family walked to the other side of the city where it was safer, then moved to south Somalia. Fifteen days later they crossed into Kenya.

Kulane and his family – parents, four sisters and one brother – lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for about a year. “It was a long time,” he said. “There was no school, no hospital, no sanitation. People were dying. We had a little oil, some beans, yellow corn, cooking utensils, and a tent for the eight of us. It was a tough life.” His father eventually went to Nairobi where he found work fixing cars. “We were lucky because there were no jobs. But he had technical skills so he was able to find work.” The rest of the family soon followed.

The national language of Kenya is Swahili. Kulane spoke Somali and had just started learning English in Somalia before they left. “It was a struggle,” he said. “You had to understand Swahili and English to go to school. It was tough. It was also necessary. I had to learn the languages to survive. It’s all about the mentality of the individual.”

Kulane’s mentality was that he had to graduate from high school, speak two languages and excel in his academics. “Our parents had high expectations for us. They made sure we were safe. They talked to our teachers. They made sure we had tutors if we needed them.”

His interest in business began shortly after he graduated from high school, when he started working for the International Rescue Committee (IRC). As a field officer he worked with the micro-loan program, helping refugees become self-supporting. He would spend his days at the refugee camps looking for people who were doing something that showed initiative.

“We would interview people to see if they had any business knowledge,” Kulane said. “If it seemed like they did, we would send them to school for eight months to teach them economic skills. If they finished that and were still trustworthy and came up with a business proposal, we would give them money.” Once the money was distributed, it was Kulane’s job to follow-up regularly with his clients, check their books, watch their sales, and ensure that they were following the repayment agreement.

“I learned a lot about human interaction and a lot about business,” he said. “You needed to ask good questions so you could tell if people were on the right track, if things were going the way they said. Some of our clients fell behind, but we had very few businesses that ever failed.”

The field agents took the business failures personally. Kulane’s clients never defaulted, but others did. “Every failure came back to us. We failed at making a good decision. Maybe we rushed into a decision. Some business ideas were not sound. We worked with one man who was a talented craftsman, but there was no market for his goods. The field agent didn’t stop to think about the market for the product.”

There were far more successes than failures. Kulane helped set up many shops, and even a beer factory. One budding entrepreneur wanted to start a bar soap factory. Kulane did a background check by asking friends and neighbors if the man had the skills he claimed to have. “There were no social security numbers for us to check. We just had to talk to people and try to determine if we were hearing the truth. I told my manager, ‘This guy has these skills. I believe he does.’ We gave him \$25,000 and he paid it all back.”

At his peak, Kulane had 65 clients and was making 15 visits a day.

In the early 2000s, Kulane’s brother immigrated to Columbus, OH, and his three older sisters to Australia. By 2006 the brother was in a position to sponsor his parents, Kulane, and his youngest sister. Immigration was a long and complicated process. Kulane could no longer spend days in the refugee camps working with clients. He had to be available in Nairobi for interviews, background checks, screenings, DNA testing, finger and eye printing, and unlimited paperwork. He quit his job with the IRC and went to work for Amahl Bank in Nairobi while he waited for their petition to the U.S. to be approved.

In 2007 Kulane and his family landed in Newark, NJ in a snow emergency. “That was different,” he said. As were many other things. “Drinking fountains. That’s not something I knew, not something we had. Power dryers for drying your hands in the restroom. In Kenya you can eat a good lunch for a \$1. When we arrived we had to pay \$1 to make a three-minute phone call. My dad said, ‘Don’t make those comparisons. We’re not in Kenya.’”

Working for the IRC was a hectic life, according to Kulane. That’s what he likes - a fast-paced life with lots of things happening. In addition to running the Language-Bank, Kulane is considering a job offer from Charter Communications. It is a residential sales job working evenings and weekends. It won’t interfere with his work at the Language-Bank, but it will force him to do sales. “I have to learn to do sales if I’m going to be in business,” he said. “This is a skill that I need to learn and build so I can bring it back to my business.”

Kulane is already working on his sales skills in a different way – he’s door knocking. As of this writing he is running for St. Cloud City Council. “I’m not a long-term political guy,” he said. “I just want to see things better in my community.” His focus is on improving the safety in his neighborhood and cutting down on the number of abandoned and rental properties.

“The neighbors are complaining about the short-time renters and the properties are not being maintained,” Kulane said. “Some of the families are very emotional about it, wanting to move. Things are getting worse and worse. We need a leader to help make a difference and I think I can do that. The City is responsible for public safety so you need to be a city official to have influence.”

Door-knocking has been a valuable experience, according to Kulane. “I learn a lot. I learn the concerns of the people. I’ll knock every door. I’ll listen to them on whatever they want to say – city, business, safety, whatever.”

So far he has enjoyed the experience. “I enjoy the variety. The people guessing where I’m from. I’ve had a good reception – 99.9 percent of the people are positive.”

So is Kulane. “My live depends on me. I have this education...this experience...this commitment. Some people may not consider that. They may consider the color of my skin or my accent. This does not deter me. These are a small minority who think like that. And when we talk, we find we have common goals.”

One of those goals is be a very successful person in business, Kulane said. “Either my own or someone else’s business.” He’s working on that by building his own company, improving his skills, and engaging in the community. “I might invest some money in a business in Kenya some day,” he said. “If you know how to do it you can be successful. I don’t see myself ever living there again; it’s just a place I know.”

When he was in college thinking about conflict and ways to anticipate and intervene in conflict, it was in part because he thought those skills would help him if he ever moved home. But today home has a new meaning for him.

“Where is home,” Kulane mused. “In 2008 it was Kenya. Now this is home. This is where I know how to live. This is where I can call a friend and say what I need. And here is where I want to contribute.”

Gail Ivers is vice president of the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce and managing editor of *Business Central Magazine*.

PERSONAL PROFILE

Abdul Kulane, 32

Owner, Language-Bank, LLC

Hometown: Nairobi, Kenya

Education: High School in Nairobi, graduated Saint John’s University, Colledgeville, with majors in Sociology and Conflict Resolution

Work History: International Rescue Committee (IRC) Kenya; Amahl Bank, Nairobi; New Flyer; 33rd Street Convenience Store; Language-Bank

Family: Wife Asha Ali, two daughters ages 6 and 7; mother and one sister live in St. Cloud, father lives in Columbus, OH; a brother in Fargo; three sisters in Australia

Hobbies: Watching soccer, football, and basketball; playing softball. “I want to try golf.” Reading - “I read five books a month.”

BUSINESS PROFILE

Language-Bank, LLC

18 23rd Ave N, St. Cloud, MN 56303-4899

Phone: (320) 310-1172

Email: akulane@lang-bank.com

www.lang-bank.com

Owner: Abdul Kulane

Business Description: Interpretation, translation, and cultural training. Primary languages: Somali, Swahili, Arabic, Spanish, English

Number of employees: 1; primarily uses independent contractors for interpretation services

TIMELINE

1991 – Civil War breaks out in Somalia; the Kulane family leaves for Kenya

2000 – Kulane’s brother immigrates to the United States; two of his sisters immigrate to Australia

2002 – Abdul Kulane begins working for the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

2007 – Kulane begins work at New Flyer in St. Cloud; buys a convenience store with two partners

2008 – Kulane sells his shares in the convenience store

2009 – Kulane starts school at Saint John’s University in Collegeville; he resigns from New Flyer

2011 – Kulane becomes a U.S. Citizen

2012 - Kulane graduates from Saint John’s University with a major in sociology and conflict studies; he joins the Chamber of Commerce and opens The Language-Bank, providing interpretation and translation services in four languages

2014 – Kulane runs for St. Cloud City Council