



About 400 Somali residents gathered in front of City Hall on Dec. 30 to protest the shooting of Nasir Abdi (opposite page) by a Franklin County Sheriff's deputy.

# Beyond the shooting of Nasir Abdi

Protests and threats of legal action followed the killing of a Somali man by a Franklin County deputy. But behind the story is an emerging problem: the need to treat East African immigrants—traumatized by a brutal civil war—for mental illness.

By Alice Hohl



COURTESY OF FRANKLIN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Four Franklin County Sheriff's deputies pulled into the Cassidy Village Apartments complex a couple of miles south of Easton at about 1 pm on Dec. 28. They were there with a court order to take Nasir Abdi to Netcare, a psychiatric clinic where the 23-year-old Somali immigrant had previously received treatment. The officers had been warned Abdi might be armed.

According to an investigative report, the deputies saw Abdi standing outside his apartment building, a Marlboro Light in his left hand and a steak knife in his right. The deputies approached, with guns drawn, and called for him to drop the weapon, but Abdi yelled back that he would kill them and raised the knife. Deputy Mike Wiley sprayed Abdi in the face with Mace, causing him to bend over and shield his eyes. When Wiley grabbed his jacket, Abdi stood and slashed at him. The other three deputies later told investigators they thought Wiley had been stabbed.

Abdi thrust the knife again at Wiley, who was moving away. Deputy Jason Evans, a seven-year veteran of the force, fired one shot, striking Abdi in the chest. He was pronounced dead at 1:29 pm at Grant Medical Center.

The shooting sparked a protest by about 400 Somalis at City Hall. Their anger was fueled in part by two witnesses who reported seeing no knife and Abdi's making no movement except to wipe his eyes. (The police say the knife matched a set found in his kitchen drawer.) Members of the Somali community also were upset when a grand jury in April cleared Evans of criminal charges, with leaders talking to reporters about legal action. Tensions were heightened when some police and residents, upset



Nasir Abdi was shot in front of his apartment at 3079 Cassady Village Trail on Dec. 28 by Franklin County Sheriff's deputy Jason Evans (top left), who was cleared by a grand jury in April. Remnants from the crime scene altercation included an officer's canister of Mace (right), a bent steak knife (below) and the casing from the bullet fired into Abdi's chest.



by the reaction, lashed out at the city's relatively new but fast-growing group of immigrants.

While Somalis and the police have been meeting to try to resolve their differences, the tragedy has exposed an issue with ramifications beyond the killing of Nasir Abdi. It's the suspicion that a significant number of Somalis are suffering from mental illness after fleeing a bloody war, living in lawless African refugee camps and moving to a drastically different climate and culture. And counselors and other experts say the problem is complicated by the fact that Somalis don't put

much stock in Western medicine.

Hawa Siad, head of the Somali Women and Children's Alliance, notes, "Little or no attention has been paid to . . . the background of a people who bore the brunt of a brutal civil war, and who still carry the scars."

**M**any Somali immigrants—now estimated to number up to 40,000—have settled in northeast Columbus, with some helping to revive fading north-side strip centers by opening small businesses. A building on Morse Road that once housed T.J. Maxx is now home to the

Global Mall, the brainchild of a young Somali entrepreneur. Inside the space filled with kiosks is Abdul Abdi, a clerk at a stall selling cellphones. He talks quickly into a phone in his native tongue, then switches to English to wait on a customer.

Abdul Abdi was a friend and distant relative of Nasir Abdi. He says Nasir began to show signs of mental illness after moving here from a refugee camp in Kenya in 1999 with his mother, two brothers and an uncle. He was hospitalized for more than a year at Netcare shortly after arriving here.

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But he recovered and was all right for a time, helping his neighbors at Cassidy Village, the aging apartment complex near Agler and Sunbury roads. At one point, Nasir held a restaurant job, Abdul says. "He wasn't a bad person," he says. "But when he was mentally ill he didn't know anyone," including friends and family. "That's where his problems came in."

Nasir Abdi's mother and brothers called for him to be picked up and taken to Netcare four or five times, says Fred Gittes, the respected civil rights attorney who has been hired by Abdi's family. He also had a police record, which included menacing and assault. In one case, in May 2005, an

he says. Ali says a Somali would never say, for example, "I am feeling bad today; maybe it is because my mother was killed several years ago on this day." Instead, he says, Somalis simply don't talk about the past. "We always say, 'The more you forget, the better.'"

Angela Plummer is a lawyer who works on refugee cases at CRIS, a converted motel on Sinclair Road where Somalis flock to seek help in finding work or reaching relatives left behind in Africa. She says Somalis have good reason not to think about the past: They have endured horrendous brutality in refugee camps, watched loved ones die in a vicious civil war and left behind children and spouses in their quest for safety in America. She speculates that

raged on and his friend never had a chance to return.

Southern says it's common for Somali men to want to go back home. In many cases, Somali women have found more freedom and power in American society, but the men left behind their status in a patriarchal society, as well as good jobs, political positions and familiar places where everyone understood their language. Such falls from power take their toll, Southern says. Often the best way she can help Somalis address depression and mental illness is to try to provide services to improve their lives; so Southern spends more time taking clients to job interviews or signing them up for benefits than talking with them in her office.

MICHAEL A. POLEY/PICTUS ASSOC.



**"This does not mean that I want to justify any illegal acts or actions committed by the Somalis, but we believe it is important for the representatives of the law enforcement and the community as a whole to know that violence and ill-treatment is what forced us to seek a safe haven in this country."**

**—Hawa Siad, head of the Somali Women and Children's Alliance**

18-year-old neighbor of Abdi told police Abdi threatened to kill him and punched him in the face. In other instances, Abdi's brother and uncle called police because Abdi wouldn't take his medicine, was sleeping with a knife under his pillow and threatening to blow up the apartment building.

In Somali culture, regular medical care, even for physical health, is not commonplace. Going to counseling and using antidepressants are unheard of. In fact, a person either is fine or crazy (and therefore institutionalized), according to several Somalis who help immigrants at Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS). The belief that there is no emotional middle ground can make it difficult for people, such as Nasir Abdi, who are released from mental health clinics, but still need to take medication and attend therapy.

"It's really cultural that you just keep to yourself your problems," says Mohamed Ali, who works with refugees at CRIS. "Talking about it is not the best way to go,"

many may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Laura Southern, who counsels Somali refugees through a program established by Jewish Family Services, says, "There are a lot of them out there with depression. They don't trust taking medicine. They don't want to sit with me in an office and talk about their problems. Their view is Allah decides how our life is going to go and this is apparently what Allah wanted us to experience and we just go on. Who am I to argue with that?" (Sharif Ali-Hashim, another CRIS worker, says Somalis will allow elders at a mosque to try to help the mentally ill through prayer. In fact, Ali-Hashim, an elder himself, says Nasir Abdi's uncle asked him to "read Koran over him.")

Abdul Abdi says he and Nasir Abdi's family thought if Nasir could get back to his home country, his mental illness would subside. "We have a hope that if he goes back to my country—well, there is war in my country—but we were hoping he was going to get much better." But the war

"Getting a job can help a little bit," she says, but the harsh reality of making a life in Columbus earning a minimum wage can be more difficult even than dangerous refugee camps. "In the camps, there is that hope that conditions are going to improve," she says. "There's uncertainty about the future, but with that, there's hope. It's still Africa, so there's a lot of familiarity there. Conditions are crappy, but people speak their language and they at least know how the system works." After arriving in America, she says, "They are thinking their lives would be turning around. Now what? I'm here, and it's not happening."

She adds, "The group that's the most marginalized are young adult Somali males, 18 to 19 and through their 20s. A lot of them don't have the education to get a decent job. Some of them don't have a good command of the English language. They're just kind of wandering around with nothing to do. And they're having these mental-health symptoms."

**T**he series of events that led to Nasir Abdi's death started when his family members asked Netcare workers

