

Suspect's family fled bloodshed, now faces new despair

by [Lynne Terry](#)

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) Mohamed Mohamud was born into chaos, his family fleeing a bloody civil war in Somalia to a crowded refugee camp in Kenya. The family left behind a comfortable city lifestyle, scrambled for survival, and then eventually was reunited in the United States.

But now, nearly two decades after fleeing the bloodshed in Mogadishu, the family is again facing wrenching despair as Mohamud, 19, stands accused of plotting to detonate a van full of explosives outside a crowded Christmas tree lighting ceremony on the day after Thanksgiving.

Before their flight to safety in Kenya, the teen's father, Osman Barre, was a professor of computer engineering with a knack for languages. His mother, Mariam Barre, was a businesswoman who worked in banking.

The family got separated in the exodus from Somalia, with the father ending up in a sprawling refugee camp and the mother and baby stranded behind. For more than 18 months, Barre had no idea whether they were alive.

Osman Barre fled Mogadishu in early 1992 with 21 members of his extended family to the Utange refugee camp outside Mombasa, Kenya. The camp, which grew to 40,000 refugees, taxed international officials as

they tried feed everyone. Barre pitched in, teaching United Nations officials to speak Somali.

The United States was one of the countries offering asylum. The family, with no kin in the U.S., gained the sponsorship of several churches in the Portland area.

After 18 months in the camp, the 22 Somalis arrived at Portland International Airport at midnight on Oct. 27, 1993. Barre never gave up searching for his wife and son as he melded into American life.

"It was our responsibility to help them find a place to live, get to appointments and get settled," said Sylvia Eagan, then pastor at the Peace Church of the Brethren. "Only four of five of them spoke any English."

It didn't take long for her to appreciate Barre and the rest of the family. "I can't say enough about what wonderful people they are," Eagan said. "They went through a very hard time."

Eagan and Eileen Wilson, another member of the church, found the family temporary housing, helped them get food stamps, taught them to ride the bus and steered them to free English lessons for immigrants.

Barre, who was 32, scrambled to find work. A former professor at Mogadishu University who speaks five languages, he got a job on the floor of a bottling plant. But he kept searching for a position that matched his skills and education.

"He's an intelligent man," Eagan said. "He was very willing to do

whatever he needed to do to start at the bottom and work up.

Regularly, he would go to Eagan's house to call a contact near the refugee camp, trying to track down his 21-year-old wife and son. "He wanted very badly for them to come," Wilson said. "He was going to do whatever it took to get her here."

Around 1995, Barre was hired as an engineer at Intel. Then there was more good news: His wife and son were coming to Portland. Eagan, who took him to the airport, recalled Barre as a bundle of joyful nerves.

Mohamed Mohamud, about 5 years old when he emerged from the plane, was shy around his father.

"Osman was overjoyed to have them with him again," Eagan said. "He was very proud of his son and his daughter, who was born the first year after his wife arrived."

The family settled into life in suburban Beaverton, home to a large community of Somali immigrants. Mariam Barre, gracious and intelligent, quickly learned English, Eagan said, landing a job at a company that contracts with the U.S. Postal Service.

Mohamud, who has a different surname from his father (which is typical in Somalia), was known in school as "Mo Mo" or "Mo squared." He had an easy smile, quick joke and enthusiasm for basketball, friends say, and was known as a class clown.

The changed during his sophomore year, when friends say he buckled down.

"He had a whole new perspective on life," classmate James Hickey said. "Everything was really serious. He was getting straight A's."

It's about the same time he starting thinking about jihad, he later told the FBI, according to court documents. Mohamud went through extreme phases, bouncing from being a party boy to a pious teen. At times he advocated his religion, saying it was the best in the world.

Although Mohamud had a wide circle of friends from a wide range of backgrounds, the closest were Muslim immigrants, schoolmates say.

He didn't talk much about his family, who embraced American life while maintaining relationships in the Somali community and an observant Muslim lifestyle.

In his junior physics class, students had to give presentations on the workings of a mechanical device. Several students picked staplers; Mohamud discussed the intricacies of a rocket-propelled grenade.

"That's what a lot of terrorists were using," said Ross Thoresen, a classmate. "The fact that he's a Muslim and then does (the project) on the RPG" made everyone wonder about him.

"He was nice on the outside," said Wesley Naylor, who saw the RPG presentation, "but you could see that there was something iffy about him."

When he graduated and enrolled at Oregon State University to study engineering, his father was thrilled. "He was very proud of him being such a good student and doing so well," said Eagan, the pastor who

helped settle the family.

But around campus, he became known as a drinker, smoker and partier. In October 2009, he was accused of date rape by a student after late-night revelry at a fraternity house. Police investigated but did not pursue charges.

Occasionally, he worshipped at Salman Alfarisi Islamic Center in Corvallis.

"He would come once a month or once every two months," said Imam Yosof Wanly. "It was minimal."

About this time, according to the FBI, Mohamud sought to go abroad to train to become an Islamic terrorist. He told undercover agents that his parents -- and a spot on the do-not-fly list -- stopped him.

Osman and Mariam Barre, who were having problems of their own, separated about a year ago. But they were worried about their son becoming radicalized, said Isgow Mohamed, head of the Northwest Somali Community Organization in Portland.

Osman Barre reported his son to the authorities, Mohamed said.

"When you have a feeling that your son will end up dying on the street, you'd rather put him in a jail than on a suicide mission," Mohamed said.

Mohamud attended classes last spring, but dropped out in October.

The morning of the planned bombing, he appeared to be in a jovial mood, insisting on buying coffee for Muslim students. The next day, he was behind bars.

The news has bewildered and shocked former classmates, friends and associates.

"I was just crushed," said Eagan, thinking of Mohamud's father. "I knew how proud he was of his son. Regardless of whether he is found guilty or not, this is a devastating blow for a parent to have their child in this situation. He had big dreams, like all parents do, for his children."

(Lynne Palombo, Candice Ruud, Molly Hottle, Wendy Owen, Allan Brettman and Brent Hunsberger contributed to this story.)