

NINA MOINI: My next guest is Fowzia Adde. She's the Founder and Executive Director of the Immigrant Development Center in Moorhead. It's an organization that helps immigrants and refugees navigate everything from higher education to entrepreneurship, small business loans. She's also leading an ambitious effort to create a cultural mall in downtown Moorhead, a project she hopes will become a hub for immigrant-owned businesses and community gathering.

Fowzia, thank you so much for being here.

FOWZIA ADDE: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: So you came to the United States with professional experience, like many people do, as a nurse in the '90s, I understand. But you found out, like others do as well, that your credentials didn't transfer here.

FOWZIA ADDE: To America.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, so how did that experience lead you to found the Immigrant Development Center?

FOWZIA ADDE: I started-- 1997 is when I arrived here in Fargo-Moorhead, and my caseworker is still my friend. Her name is Barbara Hanson. I want to say hi to her. I provided my certificates to her, and I said, "Barb, won't have any problem finding me a job." And she said, "Well, I will try my best."

So, after six months, Barbara had to come to me and say, Fowzia, I'm sorry to tell you, have to start over. You have to go back to college. And I was like, wow. And I was like, my English and all that stuff. So I enrolled with a program that's used to call Learning Center, where they will match you with a professional, and she will come at home and help you first navigate and learn.

And so that's when I start thinking about well, I'm going through all this. Well, how about the other new Americans who are coming? And then, I start working in another project. It's called Dakota Inc. And we had so many different immigrant communities from Vietnam, from Somalia, from Bosnia. At that time, we were arriving heavily. We had Sudanese community. And the radio was talking about, well, we are receiving all these refugees, and oh, they are costing us a lot of money.

And for me, it was like how-- I was checking with my colleagues, and I was like, how are you, doing, and how can we do better? And what used to happen at that time, we had to drive four hours to Minneapolis to get any spice. If we want to go deep, we used to go to Chicago for just having the right spices.

And so, I'm part of the history of Fargo-Moorhead, and we changed that concept. We flipped it through the whole Immigrant Development Center. Our first project that we have done in Fargo-Moorhead, it was the International Market Plaza. And so when I first said, I am a refugee, and I want to work on the Immigrant Development Center, everybody was saying, she's crazy. I don't think she can do it. But I have proven to my colleagues that it can happen.

So now, we work with a lot of community partners. We work with MSUM. We work with M State for workforce training, entrepreneurial training. We also work with CAPLP to help our community navigate those resources.

NINA MOINI: So you saw a need and a gap in resources services for people, and you said, I'm going to do something about that. And I feel like that is the magic of entrepreneurship and how really great ideas start, is that somebody decides, I'm going to be the one to fill this need or to help try to begin to fill a need. But that takes a lot of courage, too.

So fast forward now, to this idea of the cultural mall. How does that take what you're talking about and elevate it to even another level?

FOWZIA ADDE: Well, the cultural mall came about when I heard there is downtown Moorhead is changing. There is an economy development happening. And the new Americans were not part of those conversations. Nobody invited us to the table. So we had to invite ourselves and say, what's going on? We want to be part of this growth. We want to be-- since we are part of this community, we want to be part of this growth. We want to make sure our community have a history here.

So first, it was like, we were pushing, and city of Moorhead was gracious enough to say, hey, we like your idea. They didn't take it as push her back, but they said, we are welcoming the idea you are bringing to our community. And this will create an opportunity for the immigrant community, the business-minded, and it will actually encourage our children. It's a generational growth. That's how I see.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and what would it look like? What do you picture when you picture it?

FOWZIA ADDE: I have a big dream. So I can start small and grow from it. That's what I am going with right now. We are from a border state, like Moorhead is next to North Dakota. We are also in greater Minnesota. The resources that the Twin City has, we don't have it. The advocacies that Twin City has, we don't have it. The organizers, we have less funding. So I actually-- the project I'm going to start with small, but our plan in Immigrant Development Center is to grow from that. And we have secured a space right here in downtown and working towards raising money to fix the space and create jobs. But our plan is to grow from there. This is our first starting point.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you're talking about incremental growth and change and progress. You've been here for many years or almost 30 years now. When you think about 30 years from now, in the city of Moorhead, what do you envision just in terms of even more access to different cultures and resources? What do you hope it looks like then?

FOWZIA ADDE: My hope is we've paved enough for our youngsters who are going-- actually, we are in a college town, so there is a lot of education around this area. So my plan is to pave the road, and the next generation will take over, and the next leaders will do better than I did. I'm just a first foot on the door.

And my plan is to see our community grow here, and we are already growing. Most of the immigrant community here are home owners. They own businesses already. There is mothers and aunties and uncles, restaurants that's happening. And so, we just need to have that courage. And immigrant community are the fastest group who start business. They like to take risks because they already come from a risky life, so.

NINA MOINI: Just day-by-day, just growth, growth and progress. Fowzia, thank you so much for your time and for your work. We're so glad to have you here on *Minnesota Now*. Thank you for being here.

FOWZIA ADDE: You're welcome. Appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: And that was Fowzia Adde, Founder and Executive Director of the Immigrant Development Center here in Moorhead.