

the journey home

Carleton can seem like a foreign place to low-income, first-generation students. Four years ago, two freshmen from St. Paul met the first week of classes, bonded immediately over their similar backgrounds, and became each other's support system—eventually becoming campus leaders and effecting change for incoming students.

BY THOMAS ROZWADOWSKI | PHOTOS BY SARA RUBINSTEIN '98

Kifaya Taha '17 doesn't need to hear the rest of the question. The mere mention of her upcoming graduation from Carleton—and the days to follow when her best friend and roommate Jennifer Lor '17 won't be nearby—causes Taha to choke up instantly.

Lor—"JLor" to her friends—is startled by this. "Kifaya *never* cries!" she says. "I'm the one who cries!"

With two terms of their senior year left, graduation is still several months away. But on this late October day, as Taha and Lor sit in Sayles-Hill reflecting on their lockstep Carleton journeys, they succumb to nostalgia.

Minutes earlier, the two women were laughing as they recalled the day they met—as freshmen—in fall 2013. Not surprisingly, it involved Lor crying.

On the second day of their freshman seminar, Lor called her professor by his first name, something she had grown accustomed to doing with her high school teachers.

When the professor not so subtly reminded her of his formal title, Lor was visibly embarrassed—and began to break down. Taha approached her after class to ask if she was okay. Upon realizing they were both from St. Paul—the first of many commonalities the pair would bond over—they became inseparable.

More importantly, they found a home.





Kifaya Taha '17 (left) and Jennifer Lor '17



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Not as in a house you share with a loved one, but a true home. The place where you don't have to pretend to be someone else for the sake of fitting in, don't have to explain your feelings because the other person just gets you. And the place where your closest confidant finishes your thoughts and knows when you need a good laugh—or a good cry.

"I knew a lot of Hmong students and had a lot of Hmong friends growing up," Taha says. "So going up to her after class that day was natural for me—like latching on to home. And it's been like that ever since."

Crossing Cultural Borders

The distance from Northfield to St. Paul is fewer than 50 miles, but some days it can feel like 5,000.

When Lor was in high school, she used to visit Carleton's library while staying with a friend in nearby Cannon Falls. She remembers striking up conversations with Carls about books they were reading and feeling giddy when they treated her like an intellectual peer.

"But then I came here and realized how much I didn't fit in," she says. "It was much harder to be an actual Carl than to pretend to be a Carl. In the fall of freshman year, I was already isolating myself because I didn't know where I belonged. And, of course, I didn't want to share how I was feeling with anyone. Except Kifaya."

Lor says meeting Taha was "destiny," but it may have been inevitable that two students with so many similarities would cross paths.

Both were born in California and moved to St. Paul when they were young. Both are from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and attended inner-city high schools: Taha at Central High School and Lor at Open World Learning Community. Both are from large families: Taha is fourth of eight children, Lor is sixth of nine. Both are low-income, first-generation college students who learned to navigate the admissions process without any assistance from their immigrant parents: Taha is Oromo, Lor is Hmong. That's where the symmetry of their lives becomes particularly meaningful to them.

"Our cultural practices and traditions are so similar, it's uncanny," says Lor. "We talk about it all the time. The idea of crossing a cultural border—going home to St. Paul on the weekend or over break and being one person, and coming back to Carleton and being someone different—is something I don't share with a lot of people. But I can talk about it with Kifaya, because she goes through the exact same thing."

At her parents' home in St. Paul, Taha speaks only Oromo. Even if she addresses her parents in English, they will only answer in their native tongue.

"They both speak English fine, but that's how I grew up," Taha says. "We were very aware of our roots and where we came from. It's very easy to grow up as a first-generation American and not pay attention to where your parents came from. My parents never wanted us to lose a sense of who we were."

While St. Paul has a strong Oromo community, Taha struggles to explain her cultural background to people outside her neighborhood. She used to say she was Ethiopian because it was easier—even though the Oromo are a distinct indigenous people with their own land inside the East African country.

"It wasn't until I was in high school that I finally felt comfortable explaining what Oromo meant to me," she says. "I'll be honest, it's exhausting to have to explain your heritage all the time. But now I view it as an opportunity to tell people who we are so that they're aware of this marginalized group that exists in Ethiopia."

"I remember being at a welcome event on campus where [dean of admissions] Paul Thiboutot ran through a bunch of numbers: 'At Carleton, there are students from all 50 states, this many countries, this many languages.' And he mentioned Oromo. I'm pretty sure I'm the only person who speaks Oromo here. I felt really proud of that."

Similarly, Lor's Hmong heritage is her North Star. Lor's parents, who fled Laos 40-plus years ago during U.S. bombing campaigns known as the Secret War, speak glowingly of "reaching the American dream." However, Southeast Asian traditions and comforts were never far away. Lor and her family cook traditional meals, shop at Hmong Village in St. Paul, and celebrate Hmong New Year, dressing in hand-stitched garments adorned with jangling coins.

Lor's parents divorced when she was a teenager, a stigma in Hmong culture. It often means an automatic loss of connection with your father's side of the family. The split put added weight on Lor to serve as an auxiliary parent. She bounced among several homes—first living with her mom, then with an older brother and his family, then with another brother and his family, and finally back to mom—always acting as a caretaker to others rather than enjoying life as a teenager. Even the income from her job at Dairy Queen—disposable income for most American teenagers—went to family living expenses or field trips for her younger siblings.

While it would have been easy to resent the hand she was dealt—"and at times I did. I hated everything," Lor



says—her saving grace was high school at Open World, where a community of teachers encouraged her to pair cultural curiosities with academic interests.

“In Hmong culture, it’s normal for teenage girls to become pregnant, get married, and move in with their husband’s family. My family put a lot of emphasis on making sure I didn’t end up that way,” Lor says. “I knew I had to go away to college and get the best education I could. That goal allowed me to reflect on my place in the world and how I want to make a difference for my family.”

For her part, Taha had siblings to show her the ropes. Her oldest sister, Maria, earned a Gates Millennium Scholarship to attend Wellesley College. Maria was also the first member of her family to study abroad and challenge the conventional wisdom about what it meant for Oromo students from her neighborhood to explore opportunities at elite institutions.

Despite the support from their family and friends, it hasn’t been easy for Taha and Lor to enjoy college on their own terms. Even as the women have excelled at Carleton, both are firmly rooted in their shared responsibility to family, yet another thing that is uncommon among their peers.

“In American culture, once you’re 18, you grow up and move out. I’ll be 31 and still paying my parents’ bills. And that’s okay. That’s a cultural tradition both Kifaya and I have, but it’s not easy to talk about with people who don’t understand it,” says Lor, her eyes welling up again. “Kifaya and I joke about becoming successful and having all this money—how we’re going to buy boats and go boat racing. It’s silly, but it relates back to our most important goal—to be successful enough so that we can take care of our families. It’s on us to break the cycle of adversity, of just getting by.”

No More Excuses

At first, Carleton didn’t seem to be the place where they would reach their lofty goals. Late-night talks in the dorm often left Taha and Lor feeling conflicted. But they are not prone to lamenting the obstacles they’ve faced. In fact, they’re proud of how their experiences have shaped their personalities and worldview.

That said, both are aware that they live on a campus that is roughly 70 percent white and 10 percent first-generation college students. Taha and Lor can never walk into a Carleton classroom and see a majority of faces that look like theirs. Or swap stories in the dining hall and know that most students

“To unapologetically be who you are, especially as a person of color, is not easy.”

can relate to their experiences. There is no safety in numbers for them.

It’s these experiences that make students of color feel ostracized, says Lor. Which is why they feel strongly about having conversations that acknowledge the often-invisible privilege that white students enjoy and routinely take for granted.

When those concerns are invalidated or denied outright, students of color may question whether their voices are truly welcome on a college campus. “We had friends here who were talking about the same issues, and it just made us all feel miserable,” says Taha. “Finally, we reached a breaking point. Jlor and I made a pledge that we would leave Carleton better for students like us. No more excuses.”

Representation was their main goal. Lor began working in the Student Activities Office, where she sought to bridge class divisions and find suitable, accessible entertainment options (for example, hip-hop nights at the Cave) for interested students. Taha joined the Career Center staff and became a liaison for students of color, including facilitating tutorials on how to deal with workplace racism and encouraging students to seek professional guidance from the center earlier.

As their confidence grew, Taha and Lor no longer felt the need to change themselves in order to fit in at a predominantly white college. Instead, they embraced their identities and slowly began to reshape how others might view diversity on campus.

“You can always go to professors and advisers to solve problems with academics. There’s help if you’re struggling there,” Taha says. “But [adjusting to] the social part of



college life? That responsibility falls on the students. We are the ones who live here. We know what's missing."

Taha joined the Black Student Alliance and Muslim Students Association. Likewise, Lor headed up the Coalition of Hmong Students. Both have been instrumental in shaping campus conversations about diversity, especially during New Student Week when incoming students may feel especially vulnerable and displaced.

Taha is particularly proud that under her leadership as president, the Black Student Alliance jumped from an average of 5 members to upwards of 30. Also, during her junior year, she spearheaded a campus dinner for about 70 students and staff and faculty members of color. For her efforts, Taha received the Class of 1966 Diversity of Achievement Award in 2015—another point of pride.

"They are more than leaders. They are change agents," says Carolyn Livingston, vice president for student life and dean of students. "The Carleton community has this notion of 'Carls helping Carls,' but Kifaya and Jlor go beyond that. Both brought their experiences from the Twin Cities to campus, and their approach to making change happen here has been so thoughtful. They not only care about what you do, they also care about who you are."

Meek and standoffish at first, Taha and Lor hardly recognize the deferential freshmen they once were. Both bring a strong sense of cultural humility to everything they do, but they're also not shy about showing off their senior swagger.

When they walk across campus, younger students routinely approach them and ask, "Are you Kifaya? Are you Jlor?" It's an ego boost to be sure, but they revel more in being seen as emphatic voices for conversations about race, identity, and inclusion.

They have an unofficial name for their group of like-minded friends: Team Shut It Down. "The work that we've done has not always been understood by our peers, or even by administrators. They haven't known how to react to the issues

we're raising, or they've been hesitant to acknowledge that certain issues need to be addressed," Lor says. "But we've created distinct changes in student leadership in the Carleton Student Association and in the membership of student groups to allow a platform for voices of color. Along with our friends, we've made changes in places where we're not often heard or well represented, like in the Career Center, the Gender and Sexuality Center, and the Office of Intercultural and International Life. That's given us a new kind of solidarity."

Taha and Lor hope that by encouraging frank discussions and challenging indifference or outright intolerance, they have inspired younger students to carry the torch once they leave.

"When you see these strong student leaders on campus, you think, 'Wow, they're being themselves. They're not being what anybody is asking them or expecting them to be,'" says Decker Schneider '19 (Omaha, Neb.), who succeeded Taha as president of the Black Student Alliance. "To unapologetically be who you are, especially as a person of color, is not easy, but it certainly makes me feel like I can do the same thing."

Finding Home

Taha remembers a conversation she had during her freshman year with then-senior Halah Mohammed '14.

Mohammed, who knew one of Taha's older sisters, often served as a sounding board during their early struggles. Except, during one venting session, when she challenged Taha and Lor to think about what they were saying.

At that time, "We weren't happy that we chose Carleton. So it was a lot of, 'Oh, Carls think they're this. Carls think they're that,'" Taha says. "And Halah turned to me and said, 'Kifaya, you're a Carl, too. Don't talk about yourself that way.' That stuck with me. Yeah, I am a Carl. But in order to be comfortable with calling myself a Carl, I have work to do."

Taha and Lor continue to talk about the importance of home. Home in Oromia and Laos. Home in St. Paul. Home with each other on campus. It took a lot of work, but Carleton finally feels like home, too.

"With everything I've done or tried to do, I've always had the same thought: Would I want my younger siblings to come here and experience the same things that I did? Or would I want them to have a different experience?" says Lor. "I feel like it's better here because of something I did."

"We know what it took to build this for ourselves and for others," adds Taha. "There are no more excuses. We absolutely are Carls." ♡