

Willmar mourns drowning of two fourth-grade boys

Dozens of women crowded the homes of fourth-graders Ahmed Hashi and Idris Hussein, whose families live not far from one another in Willmar, to offer the families comfort and prayers.

By Jenna Ross (<http://www.startribune.com/jenna-ross/10645826/>) Star Tribune |

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WILLMAR, MINN. — The women gathered around Lul Mohamed, putting their hands on her shoulders, the back of her neck, the crown of her head. She cried, clutching a photo of her son, Ahmed Hashi, and the homework he never he had a chance to complete.

Hashi, 11, and his friend Idris Hussein, 10, were found Tuesday night in the shallow water of Foot Lake, less than a block from Hashi's house. Neither of the fourth-graders could swim, Mohamed said, via an interpreter. But just the other day, she had decided to enroll Hashi in swim lessons.

"If they knew how to swim, they would be alive," Mohamed, 37, said Wednesday, hours before the Somali-American boys' bodies were buried. Dozens of women crowded the homes of Hashi and Hussein, whose families live not far from one another in this western Minnesota city, to offer the families comfort and prayers. Hundreds of neighbors, relatives and teachers later gathered at the cemetery, where one leader called for changes that would prevent another child from drowning.

Minority children are more likely than white children to be victims of drowning, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for reasons that include less access to pools and swimming lessons.

Hashi and Hussein, classmates at Kennedy Elementary School, had gone missing Tuesday afternoon. The pair had played soccer together, then asked Mohamed whether they could walk to the nearby mosque. But Mohamed asked them to wait for her, stepping inside the house to change.

By the time she went back outside, the boys had "disappeared," she said Wednesday. She asked her other children, then looked around the neighborhood. Floating in the lake, near the dock, she saw a sandal.

Mohamed doesn't speak English, so she called Hussein's father, asking him to alert the police.

Dozens of Somali community members gathered, including Najib Abi, a cultural liaison with the school district. They prayed together, he said, telling the parents "hopefully we will have good news before the end of the night."

But hours later, police had bad news. After a search of the nearby Kandiyohi County Fairgrounds and Foot Lake, they found the boys after 10 p.m. in the shallow water near a public access point in the lake. Emergency medical personnel tried to revive the boys as medical helicopters were standing nearby. They then brought the pair to Rice Hospital in Willmar, where they were pronounced dead, police said.

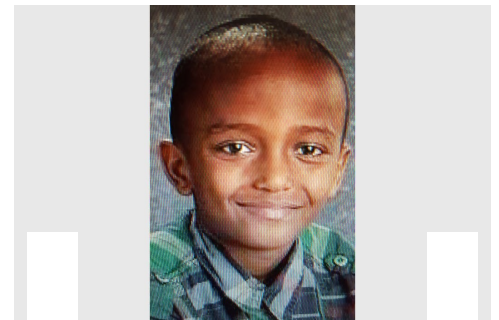
By Wednesday afternoon, people had placed flowers on the dock, tying a blue balloon to one bouquet.

"No one saw what happened," Abi said, walking up to the makeshift memorial. "No one. No one except God."

GALLERY

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RICHARD TSONG-TAATARI, STAR TRIBUNE

Lul Mohamed, far right, grieved for her son Ahmed Sahane Hashi, 11, who drowned along with childhood friend Idris Hussein, 10, at nearby

Willmar, a city of about 19,600, has seen great growth in the number of residents originally from Somalia. Abi and other community leaders guess that the number is at least 2,000. Both boys' families moved to the city about a year and a half ago, he said, drawn here because of relatives and jobs at the Jennie-O meatpacking plants.

Family members remembered the two boys Wednesday as bright, athletic and adventurous. Hussein loved to play baseball, bike and play at the park across the street from his home, said his second cousin, Siyad Ahmed, 24. Hashi, too loved to bike and play sports, Mohamed said.

He loved to draw, knew how to read Arabic and dreamed of studying engineering in college. Mohamed pulled out a work book: "Look at me playing soccer," the boy had written. "My friend his name is Idris."

After prayers at a mosque near Hussein's house, hundreds of people went to Fairview Cemetery. The boys, wrapped in muslin, were laid to rest according to Islamic custom on the southwest shore of the same lake where they were found.

Dozens of men crowded around the deep graves. A concrete vault, open on the bottom, was lowered over Hashi's body, then Hussein's. Men began shoveling, sweating as they heaved dirt into the graves. Then they handed the shovels off to another group of men. Once the two graves were full, the group grew quiet.

The men sat on the grass, their palms up, as Imam Sheikh Aden Hassan said final prayers for the two boys. A man translated, turning to the teachers and others standing nearby. Mayor Marv Calvin spoke, then a state representative and another Somali leader. Abdusalaam Hirsi first spoke in Somali, then turned to translate his message: That no other child die by drowning. Many in the crowd nodded. Some cried.

After the group stood and began to scatter, Calvin and Hirsi grabbed one another in a long hug.

"You don't know how much I love you," Hirsi told the mayor.

Calvin pledged to support a plan to prevent drownings: "We have to work on that together."

Staff writer Paul Walsh contributed to this report.