

## College of Arts and Sciences

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# Omar Bah '10: "Whoever you are, you are valid."



Omar Bah

Imagine yourself at twenty-six years old. Now imagine being forced to leave everything you know behind and flee your country at that age. This is the story of [Omar Bah '10](#), a graduate of URI's College of Arts & Sciences (A&S) with a B.A. in [Communications Studies](#) and a minor in [Political Science](#). Dr. Bah was kidnapped and tortured for working as a journalist in Gambia under a dictatorship in the early 2000s. He left with nothing, not even his wife who he had no way to communicate with. "I did not plan to ever leave my country. I just wanted to live a normal life and I woke up one morning and I had to leave," he says. "I had the name Rhode Island the day before my travel. So, imagine coming to a new place and you are not prepared, you have to start from scratch, from the bottom, no family and no friends." With the chance to start over, Dr. Bah had no intention to continue being a journalist as he says, "I was traumatized. I was scared. I wanted to move on."

Now, Dr. Bah is decorated in degrees from URI, Roger Williams, and William James College, as well as holding a trauma treatment certification from Harvard Medical School. He is the founder of the [Refugee Dream Center](#), a non-profit organization that helps thousands of refugees a year. Dr. Bah also sits as a board member on the [Brown Center for Human Rights](#) and has been an active member of the diversity committee for Congressman Jim Langevin. Now, as Representative Langevin seeks to retire from his office, Dr. Bah sees a new opportunity ahead of him as Rhode Island's Congressman. With much to reflect on and much ahead for Dr. Bah, he sits down to discuss his journey in A&S, where his core values lie, and his bright future.

## A&S Support Systems

Dr. Bah saw studying at URI as an opportunity to rebuild himself. "I was experiencing culture shock. URI was part of my journey to be integrated to American society," he says. "What URI did was build me for the future." When discussing this transition, Dr. Bah is thoughtful in his use of the word "integrate." He notes, "A lot of people say assimilate or acclimate. I

don't use those terms because I know that it is beyond that. There are things that I can take from my culture and balance the two." He continues, "The most important part of anybody coming to this country is integrating, is self-sufficiency, and URI gave me that." Dr. Bah noted the tough experiences that came with his integration to the U.S., including learning to make eye contact, attending classes mostly at night, and learning to navigate new experiences. "It was a tough challenge. I wanted to challenge myself. A lot of refugees that came with me did not want to go to school because it was hard there. It was high levels of stress and trauma, but I wanted to be an example. I wanted to inspire others," he says.

Dr. Bah says he found that the community at URI was highly supportive and gave him the skills and the confidence to succeed. He recognizes his rhetoric courses as being especially helpful in strengthening his ability to communicate confidently. He also saw what he offered as a refugee to the A&S community as "an opportunity to bring that into the university and college culture where people can learn to walk with students from different backgrounds." He says that his time in A&S led him to want to help other refugees, and that his work with the Refugee Dream Center grew his interest in studying psychology "because I wanted to be able to work with people who are experts in trauma and help refugees in a more cognitive way." Subsequently, he did his Master's in Counseling and eventually his Ph.D. in Psychology.

## **The Power of Voice**

Dr. Bah has a distinct passion and belief for the power of voice. "It is important to have a voice, it is important to speak for yourself," he says. "You can have all the thinking in the world but if you don't voice it out, somebody will speak for you." He holds firm that his education and support systems in A&S played an instrumental role in developing his sense of voice. "After my experience and education at URI, I am not comfortable being spoken for. I want to speak for myself because my voice matters," he says. "I now comprehend and understand that words matter, that voice matters. That is all that will make a difference in this world." Dr. Bah further recognizes the power of voice as being the essence of

democracy, which he was denied in his native country. He views voice as a means of validity and noted that in A&S they wanted students to see that, "Whoever you are, you are valid."

## Future Possibilities

Dr. Bah's strength in voice stands as a major underpinning of his congressional campaign. "The most important part of this journey is for me to show Rhode Island — to give Rhode Island — the opportunity to be different, to make a difference, to be an example to the rest of the states, to make a statement that we are diverse, we have people from different backgrounds, and those people can be represented too. It is not okay to speak for people all the time, they can also be at the table to speak for themselves," he says. Having faced the ugliness of dictatorship, and with American democracy having undergone recent threat, he wants voters to see, "this guy, he fought against fascism. I'm going to fight for people, working class people, middle class people, and fight about issues that I think Rhode Island and American people in general care about." Most of all, it is important to Dr. Bah that he not only show his gratitude and give back, but also to remind people that we can do better when it comes to health care, education, minimum wage, and the protection of the environment. Dr. Bah will be pulling back from the Refugee Dream Center during his run but is incredibly thankful for his team there. After bravely continuing to share his story as a refugee, Dr. Bah closes, "I'm doing this for home, and home is Rhode Island."

~Written by Sabrina Fogarty

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