OCEAN STATE Q&A

Documentary captures the courage and resilience of the Refugee Dream Center's founder

After a screening of "Unbowed," Omar Bah joined the directors and a civil rights lawyer in discussing current policies on refugees, immigration, and press freedom

By Edward Fitzpatrick Globe Staff, Updated October 12, 2026, 6:00 a.m.



Omar Bah, founder of the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, hugs members of a refugee family in Providence, R.I., in a scene from the documentary, "Unbowed." COURTESY OF DAVID H. WELLS AND MAE GAMMINO

PROVIDENCE — Omar Bah's story contains all the elements of a Hollywood drama.

After writing stories critical of a dictator in The Gambia, in West Africa, he was tortured and forced to flee for his life. Amid a national manhunt, his bus was stopped at the border. But he managed to escape when the soldier who shined a flashlight in his face turned out to be a former middle school classmate.

After arriving in Rhode Island, he formed the Refugee Dream Center, helping other refugees adjust and thrive in their new country. And he lived out the American dream, raising a family, earning a doctorate, and even running for Congress.

Bah's story is told in a documentary, "Unbowed," which was shown at Providence's Hope High School last week as part of a newportFILM program in partnership with the school's film production program.

The film is now available on PBS, including Ocean State Media, and on the Kinema streaming service. The producers are approaching high schools, colleges, and community groups interested in holding a screening and conversation about policy regarding refugees, immigration, and press freedom.

After the Hope High screening, moderator Jess Brown led a question-and-answer session with Bah, film directors Mae Gammino and David H. Wells, and Amy R. Romero of the Lawyers' Committee for Rhode Island. Here are excerpts from that discussion:


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From left, Jess Brown, Amy R. Romero, Omar Bah, Mae Gammino, and David H. Wells took part in a Q&A session after a screening of the "Unbowed," a documentary about Bah and the Refugee Dream Center, at Hope High School in Providence, R.I., on Oct. 6, 2026. ALEX DECICCIO/NEWPORTFILM

Q: Mae and David, you are both the co-directors of the documentary. How did you come up with this concept, or how did it come to you?

Gammino: A little over 10 years ago, during Trump's first administration and all the information in the press and false information that was going on about refugees and immigrants, there was a conference. I went as a private citizen just to get informed about what was going on, and that's when I met Omar. I was telling David about Omar, and I said, 'You know, I think there's an opportunity here to do a piece about the Refugee Dream Center,' and so we went and met with Omar and his wife Teddi (Jallow), and they agreed to allow us to come in and do some filming. As we spent more time with them, we recognized that there was a larger story here.

Wells: It started as a smaller profile, but once you start seeing Omar and the community and (his) boys, and Teddi as well, it just sort of took off.

Amy, you are a civil rights attorney who grew up here in Providence, and you're the chief legal counsel for the Lawyers' Committee for Rhode Island. How has your relationship with Omar and Teddi and other refugee families affected you and your work?

Romero: The Lawyers Committee for Rhode Island was founded in December of 2024 in the aftermath of the second Trump election. A group of lawyers got together after reading Project 2025 and said, "If this new administration or incoming administration does what it's promising to do, we need to come together to protect Rhode Islanders and to protect the organizations and institutions serving Rhode Islanders." We have brought a lot of cases in the last year and a half here in Rhode Island, and our cases have had national impact.

The first time we connected with Omar and Teddi was after one of their federal grants got terminated — frozen first and then terminated. More recently, US (Citizenship and Immigration Services) implemented these very awful bans — they called them pauses — for anyone from 39 countries, saying they wouldn't wouldn't process green cards, wouldn't process asylum applications, wouldn't process work permits.

We wanted to challenge it because it was unlawful, and so we were looking for plaintiffs. Refugee Dream Center was one of them that stepped up. We had six brave organizational and associational plaintiffs. There's no more ban because of that lawsuit, which has affected tens of thousands of people.

So I think my takeaway from knowing Omar and Teddi is not just resilience, but courage.

Q: (Omar), you've lived under a dictator before. You talked about that, and you barely made it out alive. What do you see right now in the US and what should we know about what's going on?

Bah: I see dictatorship. I call it dictatorship anyway, but I'm hopeful because I know the American character based on history — the history of the country. Actually, this film is an opportunity for me

to really reflect back on the journey of fighting and resilience.

I'm fearful because I see the trend. Amy talked about Project 2025. It's scary, and we see things unraveling in real time. Now we have to come together and speak up. It's about the resilience and the collective readiness of the American public to not ever accept what happens out there. It cannot be Russia. I mean, this is America. Dictatorship cannot walk in. We'll fight to the very end. So I'm fearful, but I'm hopeful.

Omar, maybe you could you could talk a little bit about when you were a journalist and when you had to stop writing publicly … and what's happening here with the press.

Bah: With CNN and others getting stopped from going to the White House — it started like that in The Gambia — journalists being prevented from reporting certain things or prevented from entering certain government offices because you are not writing what they want you to write. Then it went into journalists getting arrested, like me, or tortured. And then it went into journalists getting detained and disappeared and killed. And at some point, all of us stopped writing what they want, so we just shut down.

I started writing for a US-based dissident digital paper. So I would write under a pseudonym. The intelligence agency hacked into that website, and there was a national manhunt. That's when they declared me a wanted man. I hope we don't get to that.

(What are) some practical things that we can do as citizens to help Rhode Island refugees and immigrants?

Romero: Rhode Island is a home to people from all over the world, and if we want to best protect our neighbors and our friends, I think we we actually look to those with lived experience in terms of what is the best way to do that. I know it's tempting to just put your head down and kind of ignore what's going on, or just to doom scroll and just kind of vent in echo chambers. That's not helpful, quite frankly. It's probably not healthy.

What (have) you all have learned from Omar and his family?

Gammino: There's so much to admire about Omar and Teddi, and I think that it just reminds me of the community that we have here in Rhode Island. We're a physically small state, but we can do so much in this state because we are so physically close. My takeaway is just reminding me how special Rhode Island is and how unique it is, and how easy it is for us to help each other.

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