

# Omar Khalif's Story

Born in St. Louis, Omar grew up in south central Los Angeles. As a teenager, he knew he had to get out of “the wild, wild west.” He saw many friends and neighbors killed in Los Angeles at the height of cocaine/crack epidemic. He attended Pasadena City College and played football there. Omar came up to San Francisco to attend San Francisco State University in 1997 and felt this was really his “only choice” to get out of Los Angeles.

While at school, he spent most of his time in the area around SFSU and in the dorm, so he didn't see much of the rest of San Francisco. The first time he went out to Bayview with a friend (by car), he remembers coming over Palou, thinking “Why is it so dark and gloomy? It has a cloud of darkness over it. I could never live here.”

Omar met his future wife Carla at SFSU. They were married in 1988. Her family has been in San Francisco for a long time – her parents came here in the 1950s/60s, bought property and raised their family here. There was an uncle who came to work here during WWII.

In the late 1980s, moved to Fresno to pursue football; signed by BC Lions in Canada in 1989.

Omar returned to SF around 1990, wanted his daughters (Joi, Jazzmine, Lailah, Aneesah) to grow up in an urban/metropolitan environment and have access to culture and education. The family moved into the Bayview to a home that Carla's parents owned. Omar began working in juvenile probation.

The family lived in a two-bedroom apartment that was so small they had actually had to be close to each other (!). Omar worked and was the primary childcare resource as his wife worked a swing shift. He was at home with the girls every day.

“I thought my children would never hear gunshots, like I heard them.”

During these years, Omar saw many kids struggling, getting into trouble, and following the same patterns of violence and poverty that had been going on for generations. He saw kids that were headed down the wrong path, even as very young kids, and inevitably they would end up in trouble, dead, or in juvenile justice. He never saw a kid who turned things around. “It happens time and time and time again – I see young kids and know I will see those kids in the juvenile system.” Omar did not believe in public schools because he saw that they were failing kids in his community.

His perspective on public education began to change with his exposure to the work of Dr. Arlene Ackerman, then the Superintendent of San Francisco schools. Dr. Ackerman introduced the program of school choice and the Dream Schools, which were radical changes in response to the failure of students in public schools, especially low performance of African-American students.

Around 2004, Omar became inspired by the possibilities in public education – he did a “180 degree turnaround” and became a strong advocate for public education. The Gloria R. Davis Dream School especially inspired him.

When he started advocating for public schools, a variety of people in City politics, including District Attorney Kamala Harris, approached him to run for school board, “You are a leader in your community,” she said, “Why don't you get involved in politics?”

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Running for office was not a natural thing for Omar – he came from a place of not trusting people and didn't know how to engage with the political environment. He was not interested in playing politics and wanted to speak the truth to help improve his community as well as the opportunities for all students in San Francisco. The political system is very entrenched and he was unwilling to play the game of favors. He didn't want to fundraise, because "he only wanted to get what he had worked for." Omar ran for school board in 2006 and 2008.

Raising consciousness and awareness was the goal of his 2008 campaign, to show that black people are unique and not simply interchangeable, that "we (as individuals) all have different resources and experiences."

Omar felt he had to engage in the process, because "I KNOW all the young men who are killing and being killed." They are his daughters' friends and classmates, his neighbors' children. "My oldest daughter buried fifteen people before she graduated high school."

Realizing he would have to cut a path outside of the San Francisco political scene, Omar became a fierce advocate for charter schools. His own children are very successful in school and life – one daughter is in college, one daughter is a senior at Gateway on her way to Prairie View A&M University, one is on scholarship, and the youngest is attending KIPP Bayview Academy and seeking to join an elite boarding school. He wants to apply his family's experience to charter schools so that more kids can have a chance at such success. Working to start a charter school in Bayview encourages African-Americans to clearly "look at a new way of doing things!" He wants to foster an environment that is loving and that nurtures all kids.

The poor African-American community is the "least informed, last to engage, and least likely to question the system. Our legacy is completely different than everyone else's." It is these people he wants to shake up and move to action! San Francisco is still a racist city, a segregated city. "Everything we have we owe to someone." "If it's just you reaching the plateau, you'll be by yourself." Omar teaches his daughters that they must contribute to the larger community, but he is fine with their desire to leave San Francisco for school and as adults – "You don't owe the city much," he says, "because you haven't got much from it."

He feels today's students are not divided by ethnicity and race. They are all so connected via the Internet – "this is the melting pot, they are now all American." The Internet has broken down barriers between kids.

Yet "Every African-American starts at **start**."

Omar is descended from slaves, changed his name in the 1990s when he started reading and becoming aware of the legacy of slavery and racism. Seeing the actual written proof of his ancestors' slave status, "brings closure – at least I know the work that they did. It brings my children pride in their father, of who they are and where they came from. This is the legacy I want to leave my kids and grandkids."

Omar feels immense pride and finds significance in the 2008 election ballot, where his name was on the right side of the page across from Obama. "I really love San Francisco because of all of this – this is shaping me and my kids. These are the lessons my kids learn in San Francisco."