

Marcelle Medford (MM): Can you start by introducing yourself? Tell me your name, your age, nationality and how long you've lived in Lewiston.

Fuad Abdi (FA): My name is Fuad Abdi. I'm 24 years old. I'm Somali. I've lived in Lewiston for about 16 years now. Definitely most of my life.

MM: So how old were you when you came?

FA: Five, so maybe 19 years, actually.

MM: You've been here since you were five years old. So, how did you come to Lewiston? Why did you come to Lewiston? Tell me that story.

FA: Well, I'm an immigrant. I was born in Thailand. I was born in Bangkok. So my dad initially came to America. And he was living in Chicago for the first five years of my life. I would see my dad a few times, he would come back and forth and visit. And he heard there was a big community of Somali people in Lewiston, and that it would be easy for my family to get settled in with the support of the others in the community. So I came when I was about five. And once we were allowed to come, with all the paperwork and documents and stuff. Me, my mom, my dad, and all my sisters, we all came together at one time. And then we initially were in Chicago, where he was for about a year. And then from there straight to Lewiston, Maine. I haven't turned my back on it since.

MM: Why have you stayed? Some people come to Lewiston but then they move. Why did you stay?

FA: I've made lifelong friends. Since I've been here, my whole life, pretty much. I've made lifelong friends. There's a lot of really good people. I think there's good people everywhere. But I've met people who I want to be involved with for the rest of my life, just in a small community. So that's not the only reason why I've stayed. Obviously my family's here, my family like they've worked. And my parents, when they think about retiring, I'm sure they'll go back to Africa at some point. But I've always just wanted to be close with my family and stay around them. So they're ready to maybe get into the next point in their life. But yeah, I just want to stay. I think it's the best thing to do for me, is to be around my family. They make me very happy. And I haven't had a hard time in Lewiston. There's a really strong Somali community here. There's a big Muslim community here. And I like to be involved with my mosque right there. And that's what's kept me around. I've met lifelong friends. I'm not gonna complain.

Of course, after maybe a few years I'll relocate. I'm interested in Texas. My best friend lives there, and we grew up here together. And he's down there. And I'm thinking maybe going. I visited him multiple times. But I'm thinking about eventually going down there, and maybe working with him at his company, he's an electrician. And that's what I want to be doing. So until my mom is ready to relocate and retire, and my dad, I'll probably still be around here because I have a grandma as well. She's 96. And I don't want to move when she's that old. I want to spend the last few years with her. I hope she can live forever but that's just not how life works. So I want to be around her as much as I can. Because you don't have forever with people. And my grandma was a huge part of my life growing up. I lived with her more years than I lived with my mom. Because we lived in the same apartment building upstairs and

downstairs at first. And my mom has six kids. So there was more room for me at my grandma's. And it was just up the stairs anyway. And I grew a relationship with her and I was so comfortable with her that I don't think I moved back into my mom's until I was in high school, from literally being in elementary school, that whole time I just lived with my grandma. She means everything to me. So I just want to be around her until that's not an option for me anymore.

MM: Tell me a little bit more about your family. So you all live in an apartment building, but you spent more time with your grandma....

FA: That was my early childhood, probably for the first five years. So by the time I was 10, my mom moved in Lewiston a little bit further away. And I just ended up staying with my grandma, still, because there's more room for me there. And I was just already comfortable. She was my second mom, kind of. I obviously always wanted my own bedroom and that's a luxury when you're a kid. So I wasn't going to get that at my mom's because I'm the youngest. I was the youngest of six. So then I had a little brother. He was born in 2005. When I came to America, a little bit after that, you know, I'm pretty sure my mom was pregnant, but he was born here. Right at the hospital right there. CMMC. After that I wasn't her baby anymore. So it was always okay to be at grandma's full time. She had to raise a whole other kid now and he's the youngest. He will be 18 in August. I'm 24 so I'm six years older than him. He's going to have to be here for longer than I am. So, I'm gonna be going to Houston maybe in the next few years. But after I'm finished with school and stuff like that.

MM: Is all your family here in Lewiston or are they in different parts of the state?

FA: All my family's here, thankfully. I have three older sisters. My oldest sister was born in Saudi Arabia. And the next two sisters were born in Moscow, Russia. My family has seen a lot of things, you know. And then I was born in Thailand. And then my brother was born right here in Lewiston, it has no interesting backstory.

MM: Except being in Lewiston. You mentioned that your father and family decided to move to Lewiston because there was a large Somali community here and a large Muslim community here also. Tell me a bit about how you define community. Is it through that lens?

FA: Yeah that's a part of it. I think community is everybody who's in town, we're all a community, you know, not just Muslims and Somali people, the community is everybody who lives here. You want to be really good to your neighbors. That's something we grow up believing. That is a big part of me. Because as a kid you know kids go to religious school or things like that. So I grew up going to the mosque, and trying to learn the Quran and stuff like that. And every weekend, and after school. So it was a big part of how I grew up, and I still go to the mosque every Friday. And I pray my Friday prayer there, and I try to pray as much as I can.

But I just think everybody's part of my community, you know, like, I don't necessarily just talk to Somali people, like, that's not it. You know, that's not how it is. I talk to everybody. But I'd say when you live in a small town, your families know each other's families and you just end up knowing everybody. It's not like we live in like New York City or something where there's millions of people in one area. I run into

people that I might not want to see that day at Walmart all the time. Like, oh, my god, I can't believe they're here. Since I've been here my whole life, I feel like I know everybody. I feel like in the community, at least, or everybody that I want to be around. I definitely don't need more people. I'm always willing to meet new people. But I've met really, really good, kind people. And I want to be around them, like even this guy here, like, you know, I grew up around him. So that's just important to me - being somewhere for a long time and building community roots. My dad is really religious and he wants me to be very involved in the mosque as much as I can be. And family's the most important thing to me. So that's why I'm still here.

MM: Tell me a little bit about the role religion plays in your life. You said you go to the mosque every Friday.

FA: I got to the mosque every Friday. And as a Muslim, you're supposed to pray five times a day. And unfortunately, I don't always do that. But I'm working on it. And religion is the most important part of my life. I have deep faith in God. I think everyone is in some way or another a sinner. We weren't born to be perfect. But I strive to be because I believe in God so much. So that's it. That's the most important part of my life. When I wake up, first thing I say is Ham Doula, which means thank you God. Every morning I take a deep breath, and I'm grateful for the day. You never know when you might pass away or what can happen. Everything that goes good for me I believe was thanks to God. So that's the most important thing to me, to be grateful, to remember, just remembrance. I'm not perfect, by any means. But I think as long as you remember what you have faith in, I just think faith is really important. You have to believe in something bigger than yourself. And bigger than any figure of authority that you might feel nervous about. You have to believe there's somebody above them, that makes me feel calm.

MM: You talked about your father wanting you to be religious.

FA: That's the most important thing to me. He won't even be like, are you doing good in school? Or he will obviously ask me that. But it's the most important thing to him. Are you praying to God, who's given us this opportunity? He's not a freak about it. But says he wants to see me in the mosque. Because he's a truck driver. So I don't see him every day or every month. When he goes on the road, sometimes he goes for two, three months at a time. He always tries to come as much as he can. And I see him at least every month to month and a half, but he's on the road most of the time. So he just, that's the first thing he'll ask me. Have you been going to the mosque? Because he knows that it will help me get to a calmer place. And he just wants me to be content. Even if I'm a rich man or a poor man, it doesn't matter to him, he just wants me to be spiritually content. He just tells me all the time, everything else will work itself out. It makes sense to me. I know he's doing well. It's worked for him. And obviously, everybody's hero is their dad. So I want to be just like him. And take all the good things I can from him. So I know that's worked for him, and it will work for me.

MM: And so going to the mosque is really important to you. Are there other types of customs or cultural practices that you and your family practice?

FA: Just to be praying five times a day, going to the mosque as much as you can. Paying the zakat, which is donating money to the mosque, whatever you can. It's really important. That just will set you up for later. Whatever you put out, or donate, it will come back to you in another form of blessing. I believe in that. What's a \$20 bill compared to a blessing that God might just throw at you? As long as you work, if you care enough, you should be able to manage to do a \$20 share.

MM: So tell me a little bit more about the work that you do.

FA: I just got involved with Amran and her Generational Noor, and I just recently became a board member. It made me happy because she's a lifelong friend of mine. All I want to do is meaningful work. I never would want to be a robot or like working at an assembly line kind of thing. I want to do something that makes me feel good. And she's doing a lot of good things. So the only type of work I want to do is things that are important in my community, in my life, in any aspect. [Pauses to check cell phone message]

Now that I'm involved with Amran, I feel like more doors are opening. Like, I would have never met you if I hadn't gotten involved with her. So like, this is the first thing. So you're a new person in my life now. You can work at a big company and get an assembly job but I don't think you'll feel fulfilled. When you just know that you're not making a difference. I want to make a difference. I want to do something important. That really matters to me more than anything. And she's a lifelong friend of mine, we went to school together, I've known her since I was a kid, and our parents are really close. My dad and her dad are really, really close. Whenever my dad's here from trucking I always see his car parked right on the street, because her dad owns a store there. And he just sits there and gossips or whatever they do, you know. My dad is not really that social of a person. That's why he's on the road all the time by himself, so for him to go out of his way and be sitting at the same store. Yeah, he definitely loves this guy.

MM: What was the work that you were doing before?

FA: The last job I did was canvassing for Jared Golden. Okay, doing political canvassing. So what they did is they gave me a phone and all these addresses to go to door to door and just tell people to get out and vote if they can, obviously not pressuring anybody. But the way it worked was through an app and a device you could use if you wanted it but I just used it off my phone, I downloaded the app. And it just gives you people who have already been voting democratic, you know. So it's not like you're bothering anybody, just kind of go to their door and ask them their opinion. So I jumped on it. I was like, give me all the hours.

MM: That's interesting, because that was actually my next question about how do you participate in politics or does politics play a role in your life? Did you do it just to work? Or also you wanted to get involved that way?

FA: Yeah, I just think it's important. It is important to me a little bit. I'm not obsessed with politics, I don't like to watch the news. I think the news is depressing. But when I think people are going to make a difference in the town, of course, I want them to be in office. And everybody wants whoever is out for their agenda, to help them out the most. And I'm just like that, I want someone who's gonna take

charge and help out the immigrant community because I'm an immigrant. I love Janet Mills, [because] she does a lot. And I vote because it is a privilege. You know, there's a lot of people who can't vote. So I just think it's an easy thing to do. And you should vote who's going to help out your community. Don't complain about problems if you're not even going to take the time to go and vote for a few minutes. It doesn't take that long. We don't live in a huge place where you're going to have to wait hours and hours for a ballot. I was at the voting place in Auburn. There were so many Somali people coming in. I was shocked because I was there to translate. I couldn't believe I was doing that much work. I thought I would just be sitting on my phone. But it made me happy that people are actively coming out. Like they're coming throughout the day so that means they're involved in the community. They want to make changes that are gonna help them. So it's a blessing to be bilingual, but for me to be able to help them know what's going on, it just makes me happy. These are people I know from the community. I ran into a bunch of people's parents and people that I went to school with. And just explain to them what was on the ballot, like this is the name of the person that you're looking for right here. That feels good, doing stuff like that.

MM: That's actually my next question about the role language in your life. So you've used it in work to translate?

FA: At home, I just speak Somali. My mom is very fluent in English. To my siblings, I always speak English, because that's just how we've gotten accustomed to speaking English to each other. But to my mom, I just think it's good to practice those kinds of things. So with my grandma, there's no English going on. So I think it's good for your brain to practice, use words in a different way. Obviously, with friends and stuff like that, I always speak English. But why would I want to lose a skill, like knowing the language of where my family's from. So it's important to me. If I didn't know it, I wouldn't have been able to translate for people. I did it for this company out of Maine. And just for me translating one day, they gave me \$300 bucks. Because it's really important. It was on voting day. I sat there from 10am to 8pm. Just sitting there. Whenever a Somali person came in, I would just walk over, talk to them. And these people they know my mom. So they hold me like, I'm their son, whispering in my ear thank you so much. It just feels good. It makes it easy to smile.

MM: So that actually brings me to one of the last questions that I have for you. So you've been here since you were about five years old. And now you're 24. So over that time, how have you seen Lewiston change?

FA: I think the biggest change I see is in the Somali community [is that] they don't need to be quiet anymore. We can speak about our problems or what we need from the community. We're not outsiders, I feel like we're more included in everything. When I was doing the political canvassing, the amount of Somali people that were coming in that needed me to translate for them. It was good to see that. People are coming out more to vote and they want to be involved. This is their home, they're not going anywhere. So they want to have a voice.

I wish I knew what it was called. My brother is working for a Somali lady now. And its an office job, and it's a nice setting. I love his job. I wish they would hire me. Eventually, maybe, you know, but he's like a program director or something for this lady named Fatuma. And they help people with rental

assistance. They help displaced people find homes. Or any type of government grant. So for me to see that I'm like, well, they're getting bank. Yeah, they're making good money. And they're helping people out. And that's just nice to see. I just think it's important to help people. Everyone deserves a roof over their head. And that's not the case, obviously, in this world. And there's a big homeless community in Lewiston. It's huge. So it's a blessing to have a place to stay. I know my brother loves his job because he helps place people in homes, helps people get rental assistance, and that takes a big burden off. Not having to worry about where you're going to sleep. So the fact that he works for a Somali woman, and he's getting very good pay. I don't think that it would have been like that 10 years ago. So that's like the type of changes I see.

She's the one I worked for, to do the translating that day. So had funding. That's why I wanted Janet Mills to win. Because most of the funding comes from her. Everyone deserves heating assistance too. You don't want to be cold, outside is cold. We live in Maine. So even the relief checks. I know when people have kids and especially when you're providing for others. You need help sometimes. So that's the biggest change I see. I think the Somali community, we're going out and voting more. They're starting to be a lot more business owners, we're here in a Somali store, eating good food. They're doing it and I'm proud of them because they're paving the way for us who grew up here, who aren't new to all this. Now, it should be easier for us because we're now second generation. We've been here our whole lives, there's no excuse.

MM: I always like to end interviews by asking people, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think it's important to share?

FA: No, this has been great. I feel very comfortable. I just don't talk more than I have to. I'm shy. But I'm trying to get out of my comfort zone more. And this is something that I probably wouldn't have done a few years ago. But now just being involved with Amran, she told me I should definitely come and do this interview. And I'm like, Yeah, I will. Everyone's different but this was great. I feel good. Not shaking my feet. [or nervous] You know. So, we hit all the points, I think. I hope I did okay.

MM: You did wonderful. Thank you for sharing your insight. I learned a lot.