

Marcelle Medford (MM): Today is January 4, 2023. I am going to have you start by introducing yourself. Tell me your name, age, nationality, and how long you've lived in Lewiston?

Tonya Bailey-Curry (TBC): My name is Tonya Bailey-Curry. I'm going to be 50 this year. So I'm 49. I have lived in Lewiston, I lived in Auburn for a very brief time in my life, but I [mostly] lived in Lewiston my whole life. So born and raised here, and I raised my own family here as well. [Although I am bi-racial, I consider myself Black. It was clear that growing up in a predominately white state, that I was not white.]

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about your family background? And their relationship to Lewiston? And also, why have you stayed in Lewiston?

TBC: Yeah, that's a great question. Both of my parents have passed now. My mom's family moved here from Brighton, Massachusetts and identified as Scottish, but really lived their life as typical white folks. White, hard working, worked in mills, you know, really just believed in rugged individualism. You work hard, you do what you need to do, and you enjoy whatever success that brings. And my dad couldn't have been more opposite. My dad's family is from Maryland. Dad identified as Black, and his family all the way through so had a much different ideology, very, very different. My dad was a working musician.

So my mom owned a bar on Lisbon Street when we were younger, that hosted different musicians and acts. And that's how she met my dad, he came here to play one gig, he was in a band called the Soul Brothers, which ironically, was the first Black band to ever play in Maine. So they came here from the southern part of our country to play one gig, and they all ended up sticking around.

So my dad met my mom, and then came my sister and I, and [we were] kind of thrust into this space where there weren't a lot of people that looked like us. We were brown enough to not be white, but not brown enough to be Black. So we found ourselves in this really weird space of who are we? Why do we look different? Why do we feel different? But our mom did a really good job of doing her best, I think, to let us develop into the people that we were naturally, and then feeding us a little bit about what culture meant, and letting us decide where we best kind of nestled into. So music, I would say, was kind of foundational for both of us to find our own sense of self. I know, for me, particularly. I felt a connection to music, because I knew that people singing that music looked more like me than most of the people that surrounded me. So I have this almost kinship and connection. Like, I don't know what it is. But I feel comfortable. When I hear this music, I feel comfortable with the lyrics, I understand what these people are trying to say. And I don't know why that applies to my life. But I know that it does. We grew up not really knowing when people would say like, Oh, where are you from? We didn't really know what to say, even though we were from here. Because there was always this assumption that we were always from away. There still is. I now have a large family myself, and they now get those same questions with them and their kids like, Oh, where are you from? It's like, I've been here my whole life. I've gone through all of these schools. My kids are in these schools. And they still still get that same question because of that assumption that we're not from here. Or we don't speak English. Or lots of things. Yeah.

MM: So you're born here, raised here, living here, your kids have been born here, been raised here. Tell me a little bit about why you stayed?

TBC: I've asked myself that quite a bit. Because in school, I always had this thought that as soon as I graduate, I'm going to move away. And I became a mom really young in life. And part of that too, was because I didn't have a sense of strong community. So I literally built my own. And I say that, because I can now reflect and know why that was so hard. At 20, I had four kids. But I felt this sense of, this is what was supposed to happen for me. And I've stayed because there's a sense of safety that I have here, that I don't know if I would have any other place. Although there are discomforts of being a person of color in this state. Many discomforts, many that I don't even think I recognized until I became more self aware when I became an adult, a real adult. But I think I stay because I know the ignorance that's here. I'm familiar with it. And I also know how to navigate it.

I spent a very short amount of time in Philadelphia and I was not prepared at how fast paced life moved. I was used to not locking my door. And there were things I just did not do and still don't. I just was not used to that. And it became problematic and unsafe for me in a very heavily populated urban area. And I felt bad about that. I felt bad about that because I was so comfortable. Seeing people that looked like me, hearing languages that I didn't understand, having my very young children go to school for a very short period of time with so many other kids that looked like them, and just not feeling ostracized, that felt comfortable, but I wasn't prepared how to live safely in a city. I just was not prepared. So there's this sense of safety that I have living in Maine, because of some of the things that I've grown accustomed to. And I've wanted my kids to be able to have that experience. They struggled in school because of that very fast pace. In fact, they weren't ready for it either. We weren't ready for it. So I came back very quickly, I spent less than a year away from Maine. And I came back to what I knew, but then came back with more of a focus and more of a purpose to advocate for the change that I think that my kids are now benefiting from. Some of them very slight, but just providing voice, I think to like, why is it that certain schools that are predominantly more populated with kids from different cultures and different backgrounds and more Black and brown kids, why are those schools struggling more so than other schools? And why is it so hard for people of color to get really decent jobs here and get paid a living wage? Why is that a thing? So I came back with the ability to step into more of an advocacy role. And I think that my job here isn't done yet. So that's what makes me stay.

MM: You touched on this a little bit when you said that you had to make your own community. Can you talk a bit about what that means? Or how do you define your community?

TBC: My sister and I are only a little over a year apart. And so many people thought we were very similar. And we're not. We were very different. I always desired to be around people from various backgrounds, but I was raised in a family, my parents separated when we were younger. And so my mom remarried and married a white man. So it was my sister and I, and our white brothers and sisters and our two white parents and the one household and I didn't feel connected. We lived in Auburn during that time. And my sister and I and two other students were the only students of color from elementary school up until high school. And I always felt like I'm not supposed to be here.

So I became friends with some students that I had met in Lewiston, through the Vocational Center, at Lewiston High School. And I was like, Why do I feel so much more comfortable across the bridge? It felt like a different state to me, it felt totally different. And there was a hesitancy, my mom had a hesitancy to let us be over here. And the more that she tried to keep us from here, I knew that I needed to be here. Because I felt for the first time this sense of belonging. Not only is there room for me here, but there are things that speak to who I am as a person. We tried different foods, we listened to different music. I heard stories from their parents that were much different than the everyday life and stories that I was hearing from my mom's side of the family, things that I resonated with. I heard about injustice for the first time when I was probably 13 or 14. And I remember connecting to that feeling like, I feel like what you're talking about, I feel like some of the things have happened to me, but I didn't have language for them. So I found that sense of community and then fought for it. I went to court and emancipated myself to become a legal adult. So I could live on my own so I could move to Lewiston and I did. My mom was definitely hurt by the action. But it was really to free us both. First to free her from being responsible for any of the decisions that maybe I would make that would fall back on her. But it also gave me the ability to feel like I need to make my own decisions, because I'm not comfortable in the life that you're trying to give me. Because it doesn't suit me. So my decision from there I was living an adult life, per se, you know, living on my own. I was only 16. But then came a relationship. And then came a family. So while it certainly wasn't ideal, and I would not suggest that anyone else take that path. For me it was what I needed to do. It was what gave me a sense of purpose and place.

MM: So you've fought to be a part of the Lewiston Community? That's very interesting. As a follow up question, is it pockets or particular parts of Lewiston or is it Lewiston more collectively?

TBC: Not collectively. It's interesting because my husband brings that up often. We bought a house within the last year, and it was the first house for both of us because we were trying to decide, do we live here? You know, I'm almost 50 and he's almost 60. So we're probably going to stay wherever we buy this home. Is this where we really want to settle down? And he said it feels different being in this area than being more close to downtown Lewiston. We lived there when our kids were really little. We lived in downtown Lewiston and it was great. We were surrounded literally because such tight quarters, but everyone knew one another. I felt like we took care of each other. And you know, if this person had to work and had childcare issues, then we all chipped in, and so we missed and still do kind of miss that camaraderie of having real neighbors. Now it's a little bit more spread out and you do your thing and we do our thing. And that's something that we're both just not accustomed to and still trying to figure out. So I think that the further that we get from certain areas in Lewiston, the more white it feels to be perfectly honest and straightforward. You know, we feel like we're being introduced to somebody else's neighborhood. And then [starting] all over again, making room for ourselves.

MM: So you're still learning, still getting adjusted. You've talked about your family quite a bit already, but yeah, I just want to ask if there's anything about your family that you'd like to share?

TBC: One of the things that I really appreciate about the way that I was raised by my mom, my biological dad, and my stepdad is, we had a really strong respect for public education and service. So that is part of who I am as a person in this community, and I pass that on to my kids as well.

So the example that I think of first when I think about my kids, and seeing that emulated would be my son, Ronnie, worked as a sixth grade teacher at Connors Elementary School. And I remember my boys being so excited that there was a Black male teacher that their friends would have. And it was a really powerful experience to watch him connect with his students, but also watch him be the person that he wished he could have had. And to him, that was a calling that needed to happen to set the stage for that to continue to happen, but also to show his younger brothers. I have two different litters, right. I have older adult children and I have two young ones. And so they're watching really closely. And their experience growing up here is much different than their siblings, because there's a lot more people that look like them here now. That experience of being a Black teacher when you've never had one, I've never had one, and I'm almost 50. I've never had one. I don't want that for my young ones. And so to watch their brother be that was huge.

My daughter is a property manager for a company that has a lot of public housing units spread all through the state, and to watch how empathetic she is in her role, to me really speaks volumes. And she knows both sides of that because we lived in public housing when she was little. So she understands the assumption that goes with it, well, the type of tenants that live here look like this, or they are this. And the respect and dignity that she shows her tenants is, I think, a testament to her own lived experience of being on the other side of that and I think it's important because it changes the way that people feel, and how they move through that process.

MM: Thank you for sharing that. One thing I want to sort of circle back to as you're ending with the work that your children do, and this commitment to public service and public education. I know you through Bates, but can you talk a little bit about the work that you do?

TBC: Sure. Well, first and foremost, I'm a therapist. So I have my own private practice, which is called Mindfully Melanated. And purposefully called that. I thought it was important to create a therapeutic space for people of color in this state because we don't have a lot of therapists that are non-white. Cultural congruency and racial congruency in a therapeutic relationship is a big gap in our state. So that's part of what I do and fuels a lot of the other work that I do. So that's how I came into my work with Bates was through therapy. And what quickly happened is, I became, for lack of a better word, I became overwhelmed with a lot of students really, really fast. And started to look at what's the impact that I'm having with the students that I can't reach? Because there's one of me, and I can't see everyone. So it made me want to lean into more of the administrative work a little bit more heavy. And that's where I find myself now. So I've transitioned out of a therapeutic role and really are looking at our policies, practices and procedures as a college and saying, how does privilege and power impact those things? And so, I'm hoping that [through] my voice and my engagement in certain areas of the college that I wasn't able to reach before will have more of a profound impact on both students of color and non students of color. Yeah, yeah.

MM: So it's an evolving journey.

TBC: It is. And I think it's important to recognize that I'm always connected to this community in everything that I do. So I always try to extend and connect and find those even if they're not likely

connections. For example, one of my littles plays on a travel basketball team. And so I've said, I've connected with the basketball coach here and said, Hey, can we do sort of a mentorship program with some of the kids that played at that level when they were youth to maybe connect some of the local kids here, and, it has been very well received in many ways, throughout the college and ways to connect on a deeper level in a more meaningful way, in a way that's going to be sustainable too. So our kids locally, can see Bates and says, 'oh, okay, that's an option for me too' as opposed to looking around Bates.

MM: That's really important when we're talking about the relationship between the institution and the community. Being a broker professionally and personally. Are there traditions or customs or religion, that play in your family?

TBC: I grew up Christian, my stepfather was a minister. So it was kind of not a choice. And I pushed against that when I was out on my own, and leaned more into, what practices I like, that's part of Christianity, and what doesn't fit my own understanding of who I want to be and how I want to raise my kids. We talk about this often, when people will say, What religion are you? I'm more spiritual than religious. I've raised my own family and I've come to the belief that if you're kind to other people, and accept them for who they are, and meet people where they are, then I hope that's good enough. I've really pushed against any ideology that 'this person can't love this person' or 'these folks because of these decisions', or 'can't be a part of this'. That doesn't gel for me. So for us the way that we approach what we believe is, 'does that person mean well and does that person care for others?' And if the answer is yes, then we're good.

Our customs in our family always centered around food. Everything we do, and my colleagues would attest to that. Because whenever we plan something, I'm the person that's like, well, what are we offering when folks come? That's how we show that we care about them is that there's a sense of nourishment. And nourishment just isn't about just the food that you digest, it's about the love that goes into the preparation of that food and supporting our local folks that make that and how that's nourishing to them and nourishing to our community as a whole too. Whatever customs we have, and we are the gathering spot, we always have been, our family is always the place where everybody goes.

MM: Is there a holiday or something where you're making this dish, every time, every year?

TBC: Sure. We definitely start off our year very 'southern' 'traditional'. So we are a black eyed peas and corn bread and collard greens and smoked turkey or whatever smoked meat we're putting in there. The idea of prosperity and wealth and bringing in the new year with good intention. When we gather at Thanksgiving, we acknowledge the historical problematic reference of Thanksgiving, as it applies to folks that identify as native but we choose to gather and love one another while still honoring that there's a problematic history there. We are the ones who are reaching out saying, who doesn't have family here right now? Who's displaced or who needs us? How can we bring more people to the table, and literally, we bust out at the seams. So usually it's between 35 and 45 people at our house. And we just make room, we make room. So there's lots of spices happening. There's never a bland offering. And everyone contributes, you know, even the littles, they find ways to get their hands in there.

Learning how to prepare for others is something that has been paramount in my family. And it's been as far back as I can remember. It's about feeding and nourishing those around you. Yeah.

MM: In thinking about politics, what role does politics play in your life, either formally or even informally?

TBC: It's always an area that I was afraid of, particularly here, because there weren't folks like me represented in politics. But that's also starting to change. I think about politics in a way where I didn't pay attention closely enough when I was younger, and starting my family, to local politics as much as I wish I would have. And so now I'm much more interested in knowing who's running. What are they about? Who are their people? What does history tell us about that person? And do I trust that person to be the spokesman for me and my family? Because the idea that we aren't familiar with local politics is frightening, because that's the everyday impact in your community. So I've been more keen to be on committees. So I've been on a couple of mayoral committees, not with this current mayor, but with the former mayor, looking at housing, looking at education, looking at things that I find need more voices at the table. But then now I'm compelled to be like, Okay, well why not me? Why not now? So while I would not consider myself a political person, I would consider myself responsible to have input when it's necessary. When I think about Augusta and the State House, I think about Rachel Talbot Ross, and I trust that person. Because I know that person. I trust her to be able to represent in a way that is more than just the status quo. I think there are more voices that are being elevated now. And we're seeing that in certain moves that she's made. And I'm excited to see what will come of that.

MM: A couple more questions for you. You mentioned that your mom was Scottish? Did she speak another language other than English? Or does language have a role in your life?

TBC: No, not at all. It [language] does more so for my daughter and my younger sons. When we moved to Philadelphia, we moved to a Spanish speaking neighborhood. And my daughter was really young. And so it was amazing, because I was like, What did you just say? Like, I don't understand you, but [you know] how quickly she adapted to that language. And now her partner is Spanish, and they have four kids, almost five, she has another baby due in May. And they all speak this Spanglish. And I envy that. Why wasn't I immersed into any of that? My littles go to school with kids that speak all different kinds of languages. So they know terminology that I have no idea what they're saying, but it's not foreign to them to hear other languages spoken very fluently around them. And to me, that's a great sign. That's a great sign of what's to come. And what we will see throughout our school systems and hopefully, our workforce, as well.

MM: And that leads me into my second to last question which is, how have you seen Lewiston change over time?

TBC: I think when we look at neighborhoods, I think what folks feared demographically, downtown Lewiston went from being white and poor, or impoverished, to non-white and impoverished. But not everywhere. There's an assumption very much like the Tree Street idea, like, as those are all folks from other countries, and that don't speak English and all of the stereotypes that go with that, and there is a

melting pot, there are folks with all different socio-economic backgrounds, there are folks that own the home that they live in. And folks don't realize that.

Lisbon Street is a prime example of how we've changed. There are businesses on Lisbon street that are robust, and have deep cultural roots that aren't born and bred from Lewiston. And that is something to celebrate. That is something I waited 50 years to see, like, wow, there's color, literally, color and people and color in storefronts, and there's so many different variations of opportunity, and I just think representation on Lisbon Street as a whole. And I think if we embrace that more, I think we're seeing some gentrification start to happen, which is unfortunate. I think there's some great people pushing against what that looks like. With diversity comes that push too, like, oh we also can do this, and we'll build this, but we're gonna save this for these types of people. But I think that we have an opportunity in Lewiston to really be a city that is truly diverse, and welcoming of diversity to continue, if the right people stay at the table. And that's threatened all the time. It's threatened all the time. But I think that we are seeing the bleed of that, we are seeing homeownership by people of color in ways that we didn't see before. I know the year that I bought a house, my daughter bought a house, my son bought a house, and many of our friends. And we had this moment where we were all like, we're all people of color, we all bought houses, this is a big deal. And I'm here for all of that. I'm here for all of that, because I think it's important for young people of color, particularly to see that I can make a home here if I so choose. And I'm not going to have to fight harder to make that happen. And I think that there's some people here to make sure that that is the case. And I hope that those people stick around.

MM: So I always like to end every interview by asking, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to share?

TBC: Not that I can think of. As hard as I thought I was going to have to fight to leave here, I'm happy that I stayed to fight alongside of the people to see what this can become. And I think the work that you're doing, and that the museum is doing is going to show a different side of what it's like to be somebody that was looked at as different. And I'm just glad that these stories are being told and heard. Because I think that we've been this voice that has been quietly and patiently waiting for somebody to ask what has your experience been like? Because I'm not a New Mainer. I'm not a New Mainer right and neither were my kids. And our experience is not the same. So I appreciate the opportunity to share what that's been like.