

Marcelle Medford (MM): All right, here we go. So can you start by introducing yourself? Tell me your name, age, nationality, and how long you lived in Lewiston.

Deqa Dhalac (DD): My name is Deqa Dhalac. I am originally from Somalia, East Africa. I came to Maine in 2005 and I lived in Lewiston at that time. I've been in Maine since then, but I moved out of Lewiston in 2008. So I lived in Lewiston for almost three years.

MM: Tell me a little bit about your relationship to being in Lewiston. How and why did you come there? Why did you leave?

DD: It's a funny story. So I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, that's where I moved from. Atlanta is a busy, busy town. You will get out of your house, six o'clock in the morning, trying to go to work, and traffic and all of that commotion and busyness of the town or the city, you end up coming home at 9 or 10 o'clock at night. And I did not like, you know, what I have been doing all of those years, because I am a person who wanted to have more education for myself, because I'm coming from a background of my father who is a very well educated man, and who always tells us to have education, because that's the only thing that nobody can take away from you. So I always have that at the back of my mind. But then again, seeing this life that I was living in Atlanta, it was not allowing me to have more education.

So my uncle who lived in Atlanta with us moved to Maine, to Lewiston actually, and I always talked to him complaining about not going back to school and this and that. He said that you need to come to Maine if you want to do that, I'm like, man, okay, where? Lewiston. I was like, okay. I never thought of going to Maine ever. I didn't even know where Maine was to be honest. And I went and visited them in 2004— him and his wife. And I was really, really shocked to see the city. It looked like a dead town to be honest. Coming from Atlanta, you know, a vibrant, big city, big lights, living 24/7 and coming to Lewiston, which was really dark and not a lot of life going on, if you will. And I was like, What is happening here? Where is everybody? They were like, Yeah, everybody is in by 7pm. Nobody goes out.

But I really loved the couple of days that I was there, I met a lot of people who were my friends who moved from Atlanta, at that time who lived there. And they were like, oh my God, my life changed, it's really nice, it's no commotion, there are no crimes, there is no traffic. That's one of the bigger things, there's no traffic. So a couple of people that I really respected and had a good relationship with that I know, two nice women really said you have to move, especially if you want the kids to go to good schools. And you yourself, you always talk about that, you want to go back to school. So do that. So I thought about it. We thought about it, talk to everybody. And we moved in 2005.

And it was really, really eye opening for me. I saw a lot of community members who could use a lot of support when it comes to language barriers, cultural barriers. So I started working for Catholic Charities as an interpreter. And then I got a job at the City of Portland. And then the commute was really kind of tough for me because of the snow and I was getting used to driving in the snow. That was one thing that I was like, Oh my God, this place is really awesome. But this snow showing up every time. But other than that, it was really nice, nice, a good space to live in. [There were] A lot of people that I know - in my neighbor[hood], and you know, that community setting. And also my kids, who did not have any Somali American kids in Atlanta, it was a cultural shock for them. My oldest son was telling me 'Where are all the Black people?' And I was like, 'Look at them. Somalia is everywhere.' And he's like, 'No, I want the African American' because those are the people that he gets used to see. So it was kind of a cultural education for him as well, [teaching them] that mom and dad and grandma are from Somalia. So you

have this culture, and that culture. So it was a really good decision for me to move to Maine and we started in Lewiston, where you know, a lot of people that I knew were also there.

MM: Two follow up questions - 1) your uncle, how long had he been living up here and why did he come up here, if you know?

DD: Yeah, I think his wife decided to move there. And he said okay, let's do it because they used to live in Atlanta as well. So his wife had family here. And as immigrants especially in Somalia, we just rely on word of mouth. So somebody says, hey this is a great place, come down. So that's what happened. A large influx of Somalis came to Lewiston in 2000. That's why the mayor wrote that letter, saying, tell your people not to come here. But look at where Lewiston is now, because of these immigrants, especially Somalis moving into Lewiston, that changed the economy and also the character, if you will, of the city.

MM: We're going to talk more about seeing those changes that you saw over time. So we're going to come back to that. For now, I want you to tell me a little bit more about leaving. So one of the things that you said was the commuting. You got a job in Portland and the commuting back and forth was not fun. Were there other reasons that you were ready to leave? What were some of the ups and downs?

DD: No, it was really good. I loved Lewiston. It was low key. It was nice. It was a lot of people that I knew lived there. I could walk to the Halal store, literally walk to it. My doctor was downstairs from my building. So I just don't even have to drive or do anything. I can walk to different places. And I even can walk to my kids' school. So it was really, very convenient. But the only thing was, you know, getting that job, which was a full time job for the City of Portland, which really provided a good income for me and my family and the going back and forth in the snow. So that's the only reason, other than that I would not move out of Lewiston to be honest.

MM: Tell me about the work that you've done. You had a job initially working for the City? And you said Catholic Charities? Then the City of Portland?

DD: So I started working for the City of Portland as a case manager for Refugee and Immigrant Services that the city had at the time. And it was basically teaching immigrant communities coming to the States, how to be safe when they are in their apartments. So my job was basically life skills aid kind of person. Because you have all these refugees coming from refugee camps that did not have apartments like we have here in the United States. So these are people who are coming from the camps. So once they come here they have to learn how to turn on the stove; they have to learn how to be safe cleaning in the kitchen; making sure they know how to lock cleaning supplies so that the children cannot have access to that; making sure to cover the stove and don't leave the stove on. Helping them with those life skills and making sure they get to their doctor's appointments and things of that sort. So it was a really rewarding thing because you literally have grown people coming here and becoming like a child, somebody has to hold their arm just to show them around. And although they have access to benefits, such as WIC, the WIC program, but they don't know what to buy for the WIC because there are certain items in the grocery store that you can buy from your WIC vouchers, but they don't know. So it's always about teaching them how to do this. So it's really, really rewarding job that I did for them.

And after that job, then I got another job within the city doing public health. So whatever the Public Health Division Minority Health Program, which was totally different from the life skills side of the job, but now it's like prevention when it comes to health. Teaching people about STDs, breast cancer and how to do your checkups, how to make sure your children are not doing drugs or not smoking and how

to navigate that system of healthcare, which is really hard for anybody to navigate it and let alone someone who does not speak the language. So I have been doing all of that for, for a big chunk of my time. But also I was doing something on the side as well, making sure that people are registered to vote when they become a U.S. citizen. So that's another thing that I was doing in my spare time because folks do not necessarily register to vote when they become a U.S. citizen, they just get their passport or their citizenship and just leave it there.

MM: Doesn't that come as part of their packet? Voter registration?

DD: No, not before. There were a lot of initiatives that happened in the past 10 years that people would go to those ceremonies and say, 'Hey, you are becoming a U.S. citizen now.' I've been through that. I became a U.S. citizen back in 1998. There was nobody there. I went with people who became a U.S. citizen. But there were no tables saying you can register to vote. But this initiative started not long ago.

MM: We're going to come back to this discussion about politics and the role it plays in your life, because you've been doing it, you did your work, but then also, on the side political engagement as well. And so you talked about working with refugees who were coming into Portland and needed to learn how to adjust in these new spaces and helping them with those skills. So, living in Lewiston, being in Portland, you know, how do you or how have you defined community?

DD: Community is everything to me. And I always have that African proverb, Ubuntu, in my head all the time. I am because we all are. And coming from Somalia, if something happens to you, it is happening to me as well. It's affecting me as well. So that is what community is all about. And I really built a great community of relationships in the Lewiston-Auburn area folks, as well as Portland, because I was working in Portland. So wherever I go, I do know people. And with that, it allowed me to become a member of the Somali Community Center of Maine. So that also is all the Somalis in the state of Maine come in one place, and we always have that one voice. So community has always been big to me.

But I, I spread it out a little bit because I work with all immigrants and all refugees and all asylum seekers. And that was part of my job. So once you do something for one person, I can forget that because I can think that's my job. But that person that I did that for, whatever that was that I did for them, never forgets it and always they see me and they thank me. I sometimes forget what did I do? I don't even remember. So that is what community means because you have to do what you can while you are living in the world. That's another proverb that Somalis have. Community is just life, community is humanity, community is love. I breathe for community.

MM: Thinking back to when you first moved to Lewiston and you're talking about everything being walkable. How did you think about your community when you first moved here and were learning how to move around?

DD: So when I lived in Atlanta that kind of opened my eyes because when I first came to Atlanta, I spoke English very well. But I don't know if you've been in the South, but they speak something different. So my husband was my interpreter all the time. I spoke English but I had no idea what a person was saying. So I learned a lot through that. And in the South is totally different than the North.

But when I came here, there was already a community here for me that I knew already. And when you speak the language it helps. It's hard when you do not speak the language and I always keep that in the forefront to help people when it comes to language barriers and making it easier for them. And if

somebody wants to go for an immigration interview, I will volunteer my time interpreting and I never charged people. I took a training to become an ethical interpreter for six months. So after that, I was still, you know, interpreting for people for free. But I stopped working for the city. I think it was 2010. That's when I started my own business doing interpreting in Portland. So it was really good. And I was busy, busy, doing all of this. But the city called me in again and said, 'Hey, we have a big position opening. Can you please apply? We want a Somali speaker.' So I went there. And again, I love serving people. So I just stopped my business. And I started working for the City of Portland again, to work with communities everywhere.

MM: So we have a question about the role of language in your life. So, what languages do you speak and who do you interpret for?

DD: I'm fluent in Somali and at the time the large community that was in Maine was the Somali community. Next to Somali were the Southern Sudanese community but they do speak different languages. But the Somalis we speak that one language although we do have other languages, but the big one I do speak is Somali. You know, I can understand, I don't know maybe 30% of Italian. Arabic, some Hindi that I learned watching Hindi movies. But my fluency is in Somali language.

MM: And so you were doing work translating Somali into English?

DD: Yes. Translation, writing, I am interpreting by mouth, especially for medical interpreters, which is really very unique. I'm also a certified cultural broker as well. So cultural broker, usually our healthcare language does not have some of those labels, for example - autism. We don't have that in the Somali language. And there is no way to translate that unless you just say, 'Okay, let me put on my cultural broker hat so that I can explain what this means.' So I do have that as well. Which is a really, really cool thing.

MM: So how would you translate something like that?

DD: Yeah. So you tell the service provider 'let me just explain that.' As to the client, we just explained to the client that this is something that a child goes through, and they may not be able to speak at certain ages, they might have certain irritations, loud things might bother them, they might look different than your other children. So that's what it means when we are talking about autism. But I can tell you a story that happened to me at Maine Med. I was interpreting for a woman who was completely covered [burka]. She had her OBGYN doctor, and the doctor was just focusing on her computer, typing things and asking the questions to the patient. And the question the doctor asked was, 'Do you have sex with multiple partners, men, women?' And I hesitated, I didn't say anything. The doctor felt that pause and looked at me like, 'What are you doing, lady, translate what I just said.' And she was so bothered. So I told the question to the girl just like it was. And she got angry. And she dropped the F bomb to the doctor. And the doctor was like, 'what just happened?' I'm like, okay, that's where I'm going to put on my cultural broker hat for you right now. You could have started by saying, 'I ask this question to all my patients, whether they are religious - Christian, Buddhists, Muslim- whatever they are. It's in my system. And I have to ask everybody, with respect.' If you ask, if you would have started that way, we wouldn't have this response that we had. And she learned that day. That woman was furious. And I told her 'the doctor is just following her questions that are in her system. And she didn't mean to ask you this question just because of you.' She asks this question of everybody. So those are the good things about cultural broker hats that you can take off that ethical interpreting hat, which is that you have to say exactly what comes out of the service providers' mouth, to the client.

MM: And I think that that's interesting, because sometimes when we ask this question about the role of language or interpreting, we assume that it's one way and not also that doctors need to learn interpreting for them and what is a culturally appropriate way.

DD: They have come a long way to change those practices, and had a lot of workshops with community leaders. And figure out best practices that we can reach out to communities and ask questions. So that was good.

MM: You spoke a little bit about your family. Your uncle and his wife being up here, you coming up here, your father being very educated and wanting you to also pursue your education. Tell me a little bit more about your family.

DD: I got married in 1991. And I was in Canada at the time. So I came to the United States right after that, maybe 1992 because of the process of the green card and all of that, and moved to Atlanta where my husband was. My oldest son was born in 1993 in Atlanta. So the funny thing is that he was born on January 1, but all the refugees that you see in Lewiston, in Portland, and all over the country, they were given January 1 date of birth from the refugee camps. So any given person that you know, that is here, was born on January 1. And when we moved here after the holidays, the teacher asked, 'who was born on January 1.' And he's like, 'Mom, you cannot believe what happened. All of the Somali people in my class were born on January 1.' And he was the only person who was born on January 1 in his classroom in Atlanta. So he was always that [only] January 1 baby. And so I had to explain to him that all of these people, they did not have, you know, actual date of births. So the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had to make up a date of birth for them, and they would put down, whether you are 70 or whether you are two years old, [that] you were born on January 1. Crazy, just the year is different. Yeah. So now there is a cousin of mine that puts every year on January 1 in Facebook, 'to all my Somali people: Happy Birthday!'

So he was born January 1, 1993. And my second son was born in 1999. And then my daughter was born in December 2000. And she was the child that came when we were thinking everything was going to shut down [Y2K]. They are here with me, and my husband is still in Atlanta. He's just worried about this snow, which I do not understand. We love it here, we are not going anywhere. And I did have a chance to go back to school, that was my focus and what I wanted to do. So in 2013, I did my Master's in Development, Policy and Practice at the University of New Hampshire. And at that time, I was thinking about creating a nonprofit. But at the same time, I was working in social work at the City of Portland refugee services. So I see all of these people that I am really good at helping. One of the interns that we had was like, 'you're just so natural when it comes to social services and social work. You've been doing this for a while. Have you ever thought about doing your masters in social work?' No, I just did my master's. But it made me think. UNE did not have a lot of people of color in their programs in social work. And they were saying they would give you half off if you want come to our schools. So me and Regina was like, Oh, that's a great idea. So we signed up both of us and our Masters of Social Work at UNE in Portland. So we went together. And Regina did her doctorate at Tulane. She was like you have to do that too, and I'm like nope, I have too much on my plate right now.

MM: And the kids are all still here?

DD: Yes. My daughter is a senior at Emmanuel College in Boston, but she is home, she's doing it remote because it's more expensive going there. So that's what she's trying to do just to save some money. My

oldest son graduated. But my my 23 year old he stopped going to school during the pandemic. Because they were paying kids like \$25 an hour for making the kits. He got greedy and he wants to work and have money and pay for his car and all of that good stuff. We were just talking last night and I told him that he needs to start going back to school. So now he works for the Boys and Girls Club, which he is enjoying amazingly because there are so many kids that look like him that have never seen anybody like that, like him, or like them working with them. He said they're all over me, mom. I said because they have never seen anybody work with them who looks like you. They don't have that in school. They don't have that after school. So you have to think that you have a very, very important job right now.

MM: So your kids are here. Do you have any other family here?

DD: My uncle moved to Seattle. Us Somalis, we are nomads, so we just keep on moving. I can't do that – from Maine to Seattle, what are you doing? I have the community, the bigger community here that I've built over the years and those people are like family.

MM: Can you tell me about any traditions and customs in your life? And what role religion might play?

DD: We have Ramadan every year and we fast together and we eat from different family and friends' houses. We do Iftar here and I'm trying to bring it back [to Gateway] next year. And we have the Eid celebration where we go to the mosque and pray. This year we prayed at Fitzgerald Stadium. Sometimes we pray at the Expo because the mosque doesn't hold that number of people. It was beautiful this year. After that we just go and hang out with family and friends and do all kinds of cooking. Friends go to Fort Williams. Traditions, traditions. And I love that it didn't stop and it kept on going. And the traditions and cultures going down to the younger generations is wonderful to see.

MM: For things like Eid that are larger celebrations, they are big events where everyone comes to one place. For other prayers and events, are those more local? Do you do those things?

DD: Usually men go to the mosque every Friday because Friday is a holy day for Muslims to go and pray at the mosque. Usually women don't do that a lot, but men do that a lot. And then people come home and have sweets and eat together and that's every Friday. For me, I'm too busy for that, I don't do it. But if I get invited somewhere, I make sure I go because I don't want to be missing out so I try to show up at places like that.

MM: You mentioned being very busy and before we started talking about politics in your life. Including the obvious, but tell us how you participate in politics and what role politics plays in your life?

DD: Politics has been playing a role in my life since I was a kid because I grew up in a household where my father was always against the government we had in Somalia at the time. My father was part of a coup that happened in 1960 and he has been on the radar, under the microscope of the Somali government ever since then. And he would go to jail because he said something and in Somalia you're not supposed to say anything against the government. And that was always something that was discussed in my household. And not only what was happening in Somalia but also around the world.

So coming to this country, I really listened more about what was happening with politics not just in the United States but all over the world. And in Atlanta, it's a busy town so you don't have the opportunity to meet your city councilors or your school board members or your governor, you don't have that opportunity because it's a big city and a huge state. So when I came to Maine, although we are a big

state, we are really very small when it comes to the humans living in the state – 1.3 million in the whole state. So you get to know who your city councilors are, you get to know who your school boards are, you get to know who your governor is. So I had that opportunity to build relationships with state representatives, state senators, school board members, and figure out the kinds of things they are navigating and what they are doing and the policies they are making and at the same time trying to educate our community because they have a stake in this. Their children are going to these schools so therefore they need to know what is happening because they are taxpayers and really doing that education with people.

It took us a very long time for people to understand the politics in this country. Folks in the immigrant community only used to vote in the presidential election, that's it. Never local. So it took us a long time to teach them that local is really where it's at. That their vote can count. Because they have that stake.

So I have always been involved in it [politics] and people were telling me that I needed to run for office. But as women, Black or White, we don't usually step up fast. Especially when you have this color, that is even more of a no. And especially when you are Muslim, and especially when you have an accent, it's even bigger and too many layers. So I have always been mindful of that and this was not a system for me. And then a lot of good people I know said 'no, the system is for everyone and if we do not challenge it, other people will think the same thing as you.' So then I said, okay what should I do so that I can feel confident that I can run? A good friend of mine told me about EMERGE Maine, it's a non-profit organization that trains Democratic women to run for office so I said okay, that's good so I took that course. It really opened my eyes about how easy it is to run for office. People who are really making policies for us may not even have any education whatsoever and they are just sitting there making policies for us because they can run and win races. And I am doubting myself, knowing all of these things. So I said, ok cool. By that time there was no space for me to run because my city council was already there, state representatives were already there so I was like, the only thing I can do is just support those who have the same values like myself. So that's what I've been doing, helping those people behind the scenes.

But in 2018, my city councilor in my district stepped down from his post. He was elected for three years but then he only served one and then he said 'nope, that's it I'm done' and he resigned. So the city put out a special election. I had an opponent, an older person who was a 5th generation South Portlander, business owner. What really happened for me was all those relationships that I had been building throughout the years really came through for me in a big way – like, we will do your website, we will take care of your Facebook, we will take care of your social media, we will take care of your fundraising. We just want you to knock on doors and talk to people. I didn't have any other job other than to talk to constituents. It was amazing. People were doing videos for me. People were taking pictures. All pro bono, people I had gotten to know throughout the years. So I always talk about how important community is and how important relationship building is and how to not stay in these little bubbles but to burst out and to really welcome everybody else and make that bigger community. I am a testament to that and it came out and we won, double the number for that election and that made me think, ok this can really be done. And at the time it was only Pious Ali who was the only immigrant in the city council for the greater Portland area who looked like us. And then we had Miki Bondo on the school board, and then we had Claude Rwaganje, who ran for city council, Yusuf Yusuf, Marwa Hassanien in Bangor who is Egyptian American, Dina Yacoubagha who is a Syrian American in Bangor, and Tania [Jean-Jaques] who is from Haiti, and then we have Flavia [DeBrito] who is from Cape Verde. It just blew up after that.

We went to this New American Leaders. Pious used to go to that by himself. And then one time six or seven of us went together and people were like, what happened? Are you all from Maine? And we said, yes we are all elected officials in Maine. They were just blown away to see that. We can change the narrative. But it's not easy for us to do that. And I was talking about this young senator in Minneapolis who said we hear this notion of breaking the glass ceiling, but for us it's breaking a cement wall. Because this system was not built for us. And I loved how he said that. He's only 30 years old, born in Virginia, Somali American and he's just amazing. And I said "I want to be like you when I grow up!" and he said "I want to be like you when I grow up!" So it's so important for us to do this so that the next generation can say "I can do this".

MM: I love that. It leads into this next question perfectly. You moved from Lewiston but you still have a relationship with the city. How have you seen it change over time?

DD: The change. I remember people talking about when that Mayor wrote that letter. I was not there but I remember people talking about it. And the change that happened since then. All the stores on Lisbon Street, buildings that were empty that are now occupied by people. And the soccer team that is making a difference and giving us a name in Maine and in the national spotlight. And the businesses and the people. And also bringing young people because we are an aging state, and Lewiston was that as well. But bringing all of these young people in, opening businesses, going to school, it changed a lot. It changed the perspective of Lewiston.

Mayor Carl Sheline invited me last month and we were walking all over the place. And I had the chance to go to Museum L-A and that's how I met with the Director and all of those colorful shoes!

MM: I always end every interview by asking if there is anything that I haven't asked you that it is important to share?

DD: Highlighting the diversity that we have in Maine. We always talk about how Maine is the whitest state in the country, but people do not know we have so much diversity, we have so many cultures that are represented in Maine so it's good always to highlight that. And hopefully we can do that. We really have such talented brown and black men and women doing incredible work behind the scenes and nobody sees them. I want people to see them.