

Araksan Egeuh (AE)

Interviewer: Marcelle Medford (MM)

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

Araksan Egeuh (AE): My name is Araksan. I am a Djiboutian. I'm an asylum seeker. I live in Bowdoinham, Maine, and I've been in Maine since 2016. My age- I always tell people I'm 25. Today and forever.

MM: Tell me a little bit about your relationship to Lewiston. How did you arrive or come here, or did you leave your home and why do you stay in Lewiston?

AE: It's gonna sound like I'm just making it up, but I will tell you, It doesn't matter how you feel about this story. So when I first moved from my country, I moved for seeking asylum, because of the dictatorship in my country. I do not have any right to talk about politics or anything else. For that reason, I've been abused back home because of my opinion. After a lot of pressure and health issues, I thought I can give myself, my family a better life, and the only way was like, move from my country to the United States. So I came as a visitor, and to visit a friend of my friend with a tourism visa. And after that I talked to my friend I was like, I'm not here really for that reason, I'm seeking asylum, and the only way that I could do it is getting a visa with... like a, tourism visa. That was the only way to come in. After that he said, "well, that's fine." I was in Ohio, Columbus. So he said, "well you're welcome to stay here and find your paperwork so you can be legal. Or you can move to any state you wanted but make sure that as far as you staying in the U.S., you be legal. Don't pass any border and do not try to be illegal undocumented person." I was like okay. I stayed in his house two months- not two weeks- in Columbus, Ohio.

And then I knew a friend of mine that lived in Minnesota, so I called him I said, hey listen I'm here, this is my story, how can you help me. And he said, "well, uh, you know Ohio and Minnesota, there is a huge gap between them. I don't think I can come get you, but one thing I can do for you, I will call my aunt, she lives in Columbus, Ohio, and she will come and get you and then we will try to put you on a bus like that, and then we can make your way to be a legal person in Minnesota." He talked to his aunt, his aunt came right away next day. She was like "Hi how you're doing!" He told her we are related, but we are friends. To make the process easier for his aunt. So she was like, "Okay, your cousin told me that you wanna go to Minnesota?" I said, "Yeah? My cousin? Yeah! [laughs] Yeah I am going to Minnesota." And then she said "well, my house is bigger than their house; I'll be happy to have you until I have days off that I can take you because bus will be too hard for you; you're seven months pregnant, and you don't know your way." I said "okay that's really nice of you" and they took me to their house; I stayed the whole month in their house. Eating, drinking, sleeping, no charge [laughs]; that was really nice. And then one, one day she was like, "Araksan, if you really wanna stay, I don't think Minnesota will be an option, even Ohio Columbus. None of them." I was like "Why?" they told me because until you get your work permit and your legal document, you're just stuck in the house. And that process could take from one month to six months. Are you ready for that?" I looked at her I was like, no. I've lived my life independent. Traveled young age, get married

young age, have kids at a young age, so I was like, "no, I don't wanna sit in someone's house for six months doing nothing. Eat- yes, thank you, you're feeding me and you're sheltering me, but I don't think, for me, I'll be like, a good person just sitting in your house. Yes, I used to help around but, I'm not giving back to the community and I'm not gonna benefit, directly." So I told her I'm gonna think about that.

So I realized because my body system - I came from Africa, the days and hours is seven hours behind. You guys are seven hours behind. So I used to sleep all day, be awake all night, chat with my friends and family because I have nothing else to do in the house. I help cleaning and then I just go back. And my body didn't catch up with that, like the system, the daytime. I was that kind of person, owl- sleeping all day, awake all night. And then one night, her husband- he was a nice person, he never said more than "hi how you doing, did you ate, did you have something to eat, did you watch tv, nothing, really- no conversation between us- he used to work twelve hours shifts so; we barely see him. One night, he saw me watching t.v., he came at one o'clock. And He say "hey you up?" I say "I always up in that time but I try to be up in my bed so you don't see me." And then he says, "Um, what do you think about moving to another state? I heard that you wanna be more independent." I said "I would love that." And then he told me "so the perfect state is Maine." I said, "what? Maine". I was like, Okay, lemme google and see. It's a white dominance!

Nothing in Maine, like, I was like, "umm, are you sure you wanna send me to Maine?" He was like "yes". I was like, "Do you know anyone there?" He was like, "A friend- an old friend of mine used to live there. So I'm sure he has connection." It's a town called Lewiston you can go- you walk around, you don't need transportation. In Minnesota, it's highway to highway. It's gonna be challenging for you." Well that makes sense. "So okay, when do you think you're gonna find out where are your friend?" He was like "give me a day or two, and I will talk to him." He came later and he was like, "my friend has a friend that can, help you out around, so we will take you to Lewiston next week" I was like "how long it will be- the traveling time?" "I don't know, 16 hour?" I was like "what? We're gonna be in the car for 16 hour?" He was like "don't worry, I'll drive." I was like, "what about your work?" he said "I'm gonna take the day off. So, I have two days off, and then I gotta add one day- that will be three and work will help me around and then if I couldn't make it, I just make sure that they know I've been working a lot- I haven't even needed to take any vacation time so, I'll be fine." So I was like, "okay" and then, next day I know, Araksan you're leaving. Give hug and kisses, and goodbye.

I barely knew the first family, because they were friend of my friend. And I definitely don't know the second family, because they are my cousin's family. And I do not know what I'm gonna be facing when I come to Maine. So it was a challenge. He drove me, and we never stopped. We stopped just like for gas and bathroom. And no sleeping time. So the guy was driving the whole, entire time. And sometimes I would wake- I was sleeping in the back seat- he was like "Araksan, the back seat is all yours. And I will drive safely so you not gonna fly up, fly around!" Sometimes I would wake up and I was like, "It's too dark; how do you see?" and he was like, "I just missed the exit; I need extra coffee." So, 16 hour driving and he never get to sleep. He brought me safely, 5 o'clock in the morning. Knock knock on the new family; "she's yours'. And he looked at me and said "I'll probably see you tonight before I leave." I looked at him and said, "You're leaving back?" he was like "yes. I have an airplane ticket, so I'm leaving tonight."

I went to the new family; they start asking me: what's your name, where you came from, and, back in Djibouti, we know each other by, area that you live. Like your county. "Ah well, I live in that area." "oh, my family lives in that area!" "which part for that area?" and that's how we, like, try to find out. Finally I knew the family, are related to my sister's husband. So, there is a

connection. Now I feel much safer because, yes I know them, they are very close than the other family. So the family looked at me and they said, "well, you gonna stay the night here, and tomorrow morning we're shipping you to your new location." So I was like "another state?" and they were like, "no, another house in Lewiston." They took me to a single mom with two kids. So, she had three bedroom, and she was able to give me one bedroom because the two kids was sleeping with her in one bedroom and the two other was empty. So that's how I came to Maine, and the main idea was: it's safer, it is smaller, less traffic, and you can catch up with the system easily because it is smaller than bigger states.

MM: Okay. And you talked about when you were with that first family, or, or the second family, in the house and wanting to sort of get out, wanting to be independent, wanting to do work; now that you're in Lewiston, what kind of work do you do?

AE: So, when I first, put my document myself as asylum seeker, I came through the, uh, ask my friends, was like, so how do I gonna get job? They was like, "no you can't get job right away you need to have a work permit." Back in my country, we don't know what's work permit. Everybody work, because we are all, most of us, 99% are citizens, so we didn't have that issue. And they was like, "no you have to wait." And, I was like, "okay, what are we gonna be, like, doing, in that period?" And they was like "you can Volunteer." So I said, okay, I went to the DHHS, and then they was like, "we will send you to the soup kitchen, to volunteer." So I went and volunteered there. I felt: yes I'm helping, but; I was a teacher. I'd rather work with the school system, than just being all day long, wiping tables and not giving back, anything like, fully remarkable. So I went back to the DHHS and asked them, "Can I go volunteer with the Head Start program?" "Isn't that too far from where I live?" And, I can ask them if they need a volunteer, and I used to be a teacher so I can- yes I don't know the language that well, but I can, like, help around. And they was like, "Well, if they approve you, bring the paper from them and we will let you go there for your volunteer time." I went to promise, that Maine used to be the Head Start program. And asked them I would like to volunteer. And, they was like, okay, come on in! Give her work! I remember, the lady's name was, Christine, she was like, "come on! I have some paper work for you!" I was like, "Okay, so I don't read, can you read it, because I kind of, like, understand, but I don't, I don't read." She was like, "okay, so you gonna understand me when I read it for you?" And I was like, "pretty much. And if I don't understand any word I will stop you." So she read for me the contract to be a volunteer and she showed me and I signed it here and she took the paper up to the DHHS.

And then I started volunteering; in the classroom, help them with the playground, used to do a lot of- here it's, in recess time they play individually and I was like "how do you watch all those kids individually? Let's play with them," and they was like "oh! There's no time. If you wanna play with them you can do that!" So I gather the kids because they was like, in my class and I knew them and I was like, "you guys wanna play with me a game?" and sort of, just, making group games and they all loved it. And with group game it's easy to manage because I can see all of them. You don't have to be "oh someone is hiding there." So I play, umm, then volunteer with them, and then, I used to go volunteer at the soup kitchen, the Head Start and then the community, with uh, my community. 6 month later, I had a work permit. So I, I start working from after that. After I had, my child, and after I moved to my own individual apartment. I had a lot of friends around to help me to furnish that house- that apartment, at least with the basic things, and then, I start looking for jobs. So I went to the trinity jubilee center -the soup kitchen- cause that's where I used to volunteer and I was like, "I wanna work with the school system. I wanna help them." And they was like, "okay, you can be a substitute teacher." I was like, okay, so there I was a test, I took the test. I barely I can read so, someone is reading the test for me, and I'm answering it, they put my answer down and then I went for interview one on one. I told the lady

“well, I have a reading problem but I’ll be fine- I’ll try to catch up later but, I can speak little bit and, I would like to be a substitute. “ And they was like, “you look like- how long do you been here?” And I was like “maybe six month?” and was like, “okay, I believe in you, if you can do this in six months, maybe you’ll read at seven months”. They sign me for Lewiston Middle School.

Three month assignment, and that was till the end of the school year, by that three month. And that’s how I start my first job with them. Before that, I used to, like- after that in the summer I used to work in warehouse, and just; I have to, provide my family. I have a house I have a bill, so, I used to go to warehouse and work, and teach myself through online classes. I had a lot of friends around me that, I; I try to put myself in uncomfortable zone. So not being with my Somali family and friends. I put myself with the people that, they can challenge me, but I will learn. Because we, we don’t understand each other that much, but if I stayed with the Somali community, I’m not gonna learn because, it’s, it’s my zone. So I was out of my comfort zone, I met a lot of white friends, just by chatting I start catching with the language, and know I’m talking much better, much smoother- I always tell them you can correct me if I’m wrong. And then one of them, she was like, “Araksan what about- let’s start teaching you writing and reading.” My background is out of ESL language.

But back home, my kids, they speak french. Most society in my country, they speak french. So my household, my husband, my kids, I- that, they’re all french speakers they’re not Arabic speakers. So I was used to, like, to hear, and speak, but not write and read. And then, that’s how I start now, okay, one by one, I know small phrases, I can read, small books, and then develop from there. Just by being with, friends that wanna help me and around. I did in that, adult education I think for two month only, and then my son has allergies, so, I couldn’t go back to, to that adult education, because his doctor wanted him to be stopped from the formula and just have breast milk. So it was hard for me to work and they stopped me from work and school and everything so that’s how I start learning the English- much better, in environment that help me read and write, and I just; I love to learn so I caught it up easily.

MM: And so, you already answered a question, we had a question about the role of language...

AE: Yeah, language- language is so important. My little one over here, he is six years old. He can- he used to say, when I come to pick him up from the Head Start program, and he hear like, music or radio in Somali language he used to say, “Mommy you embarrass me,” and he’s what, two, three years old? And I was like, for some time, if I’m in like, stressful situation, I don’t wanna mention that I’m stressful so I just have a lot of music and just sing and, just- calm a little bit down. And my son was saying; even before I stop the car, he’s waving, he’s like, “put it down! lock your window! Do something different, we don’t wanna hear that language!” And the kids, loved me when I come and play with them because I’m- I never had a childhood that, I was free to play. So now I’m an adult but I call myself a big kid. Cause, I’m usually running behind the kids; if I’m in the playground they think I own the playground, the one that everyone wanna play with everyone. So Mersin was like- I come to pick him up, I speak with him in Somali because I don’t want him to forget the Somali. Yes he born here, yes English is his first language, but I have other kids; if they come they not going to understand each other. He’s in Somali community; if he goes to the mosque for prayer he’s not gonna understand anyone. So I talk to him; other kids will be interested in the language, they’ll be saying “hey Mersin’s mom, what are you telling him?” I was like, “Uh, I’m telling him let’s go.”

She was like, “Can you teach me?” So, I was like, “Mersin, look. Your own language. They’re interested, why you not?” And then by just, explaining for him how, only poor people think about one language. Rich people, they try as much as they can, learn languages. People that want to

be open-minded, they look for language. I was like, "Listen, one day, they gonna pay you just because you can speak Somali, Arabic, and English, and French. You get paid for each language! Imagine that." Tell me money, my son is the first one in the line. He was like "okay okay okay, settle down. I understand." So now he can speak English, he's English speaker, but he can fluently understand Somali, and speak it. And Arabic he recites, Qu 'ran and he knows words, but he doesn't know what those words mean, so we are working on that. And French, he may just say "Bonjour! Comme ca va!". So I was like, "listen, you need to catch up with that one too!" But, because of the timing and, I'm by myself with him, I don't really have that time to teach him all this language, but it's kind of like he has, little of each language that we speak in our culture. In Lewiston, like, when I used to work with Lewiston public school, I was an Ed tech for five years with them. There is a lot of kids that speak different language, and, I will show you the power of the language. When the teacher, the really teach the class, the child doesn't behave for her, she will say "Araksan talk to that child." And I would just move him apart and speak with him in Somali.

MM: So what's, what's something that you would say? In Somali-

AE: "Mohadae, mahalmalmadu ad devesa?" What's going on, why you're giving her a hard time. Just those two. Just by, I think, there is like, mystery, there is something about the language. By just knowing that we understand each other in different language, can flip the situation upside down. So he was like, "Well, kamehelo." I don't like her. I was like "You're not gonna marry her. Don't worry. I don't like her either" [laughter]. I'll say that too, I was like "Do you think I love her? I don't like her either, but I'm stuck with her, I have to work with her! You are in the class with her, you stuck! We are all stuck in this situation! How we can make it better?" And he would look at me; he was like, "I'm leaving, I need break." I was like "Well, maybe I can call your mom." And this the part, the second part is like, it's not only I know your culture and I feel your points, no I know your family. So, that's giving them- I think, they get more, um, respect, in one way? I'm not saying- we're not disrespecting the other people, but, they feel more connected. And they feel like, oh they will call me Aunty. I'm not their Aunty. I don't know them. But, this is something like- my son calls all my white friends Aunty; He can't call them with their first name because that's the culture. And that make it more closer.

Language, culture play big roles in our society. And I was in class once and one of the officer -we have a speaker, off from the police department- he said "Lewiston is one of Maine's safest city. And we don't know why." I looked at him I said, "I have an answer." He was like "What do you think?" I said, "Well, there is different group first. There is a large black population and there is a white population. Now other towns doesn't have." Where I live now, I'm the only black person. But when you have a group vs group- this group are afraid from this group, and this group are afraid from this group, so we get all respect. And we keep the situation safe. But when we're all the same culture or the same religion, you have more crime, for that reason too.

MM: So tell me a little bit more about how you define your community, where is it, is it Somali folks, folks from Djibouti, folks from your town here? How would you define that?

AE: So, I've been here six years, and just lately, recently I started working with the Djiboutian community much closer. I feel people, we see each other no matter what. White, Black, Muslim, Non-Muslim; they feel we all belong to here. And that make it more, safe environment for us to say, "Hey, there is something in your back, if you have something wrong." But if we are, we don't feel safe we can't talk about other peoples situation because oh, he may think that I'm trying to, just protect myself or trying to, crime, do a crime or anything else. So, I think the- it comes as individual. And my personality is, I don't hurt you, even if you hurt me. Because I believe that it's

not you, you are not only your individual person, but your society, your background, and the past that you've been through. So you may be a nice person but you give me hard time because, you've been in situation in the past and I don't know your story so, I try just to swallow it for that reason. But the day that I know you well, I will say, "Hey stop it. You crossing the line." Before that, even if you cross the line, I was like, I'll give you a chance. I'll give you a chance. Because like, I feel, I don't know that person well, I don't know their background, I don't know what they are going through. We say in, Muslim culture, like, give the person seventy chances before you even judge them. The person is late; we don't- we're not gonna say, "Oh she's late." She may stuck in traffic. She may having a hard time leaving the kids, and, like dropping them and the child is crying or there is this or there is that or she's not feeling well.

So I'll give you more excuses, than you need, because I don't know what you are into until you explain yourself. And I was talking to Rachel about that, I was like, "If everybody in our society just think the way I think, we will have a great society." Cause, now, I care about you. If you drop something I will pick it up for you. I'm not picking up just to show you, that "Oh, you deserve that I picked it up for you, you different-" no, I- I pick it up for you because I wanna show you that, humanity comes first. I'll see someone walking, or- and then- have a wheelchair. And ask them, "I'm walking with you, do you mind if I push you all the way?" I know he can push himself, but, isn't it nice if I give him a break? So if we think that mentality we can make it better. And I don't see myself as Djibouti at all, as Somali, or a black.

Even my son will ask, "Mom, white people here are crazy. Why they say Black and White- we're not Black?!" He was like, "My shoes are black- I'm not black? I'm- I'm brown and they are light brown! They need to understand that!" [laughs] I was like, "Listen this is a term that they've been using" he was like, "we can't change it?" I said, "Yes we can! It will take longer time but we can. If all of us in this town refuse to identify as Black and White, the government will change something. Because nobody wanna identify themselves." And why do we identify people by color? Or race? Or religion? Why can't I identify you as who you are? As a person? Isn't it much more beautiful, that I respect you as something than respect you because you are white?" Or you are rich? Or you are a guy? Cause ladies have less systems. So I feel, it comes down to individually- you not gonna see every Muslim is doing that, you not gonna see every Christian is bad. I- I have a lot of Christian families, that, they call me up and they say "Hi sis, how you doing?" or "Come for dinner!" or- we have a great relationship; we don't see religion, we don't see color, we- our house, every Friday, we have my neighbor, we go to her for family dinner. Every Friday. And when I used to live in Lewiston she used to come to my house every Friday. She tells everyone "Oh, Friday night? No, I'm not gonna be able to pick your phone, you should call me before that because we have family night." So when you get that place, that stage, that everybody is respecting the other people and think they are human, they deserve a chance, they deserve- what do you call it, em, to be lifted? We will all be happy, nobody will be sad!

MM: You were talking about your family and your son a little bit. Can you tell us more about your family?

AE: So, um, if I say something about my family now you gonna know my age. Oh my goodness. Well I have a teenager let's put it that way. I have two teenagers, one preteen, and Mersin is six years old. So you can imagine how old I am. Alright, nevermind. When I moved, I left three kids behind, and my husband, so there are four kids. He's the big kid. And now, we have hard time to communicate because of the hours, the gap that we have. By the time I have an opportunity to talk to them they are sleeping. The time that I have opportunity to talk to them they are in school. So it's really difficult for that reason.



responsibility and not everything, okay, you have to have it because your friends have it. Or your aunty gave you last time so you wanna get the next level of that game because of that reason.

But I feel, both my family, my kids over there and over here, they are more responsible. They have their issues sometimes, because of trauma- they are traumatized about the situation and other stuff that's going on back there, but most, most of it you can see, 50%, they go school, except one. They go school, they, they try to be- the dad keep them busy, like, afterschool is, you go afterschool program, and, we- you need to pay for that because there is not free afterschool program there. So you go out of the school, you go back to learn and find someone to help you with your homework and stuff like that. Once a week we may take you somewhere if dad is around and if we have the budget up. Mersin over here, I always teach him to value the people around him.

He used to say, "Well, people- people, they don't like me." I was like, "No, everybody like a little kid. Wait until you are teenager, and then tell me about that. Take advantage of today. Everybody love you, don't worry about it." He was like, "Why people are mean to other people?" I was like, "That's why you don't wanna copy anybody doing something wrong. Just try to be positive for all the time." I always try to tell him, "You're strong, Mommy love you, and no matter what, just be yourself. Do not try to act and copy someone, that tomorrow you're gonna regret what you're copying." Especially like, for their age, they don't know the right and the wrong. So they gonna- if they copy they copy everyone. So I was like, "Just be yourself. Be honest. And if you know mom will say no for that thing please don't do it."

So there is certain things we do in our culture and religion differently, than the main society. For example like, bathroom. When they use the bathroom, the way the boys use it here, they stand up when they pee. And then, one day he was in the bathroom, and the bathroom was unlocked, so another kid came, he saw him sitting. He asked him, "are you pooping?" he was like, "no, I'm peeing." He was like, "we don't pee like that." So the other kid-the teacher is not aware of this situation- two kids in the bathroom. So the other kid came, he was like, "well I show you how we pee here." We pee HERE. So that's, make him question himself. 'What do you mean here? 'I'm from here.' So the other kid went and took his pants off and peed standing up. He said "you left it, and you target." So my child for the first time, that was when he went to the YWCA, I think he was five years old by that time. He came back home surprised. He was like, "Mom! We've been doing it wrong!" I was like "What?" He was like, "We've been peeing wrong! People stand up here!" I was like, "What do you mean here?" He was like, "That's what my friend so and so told me!" I was like, "What have he's just told you? And how that even happen? Why he was with you in the bathroom?" He was like, "I left the door open, he came in. He saw me sitting and-" blah blah blah, this what happen. And then I said, "Well, you know we don't do that. We Muslim." He doesn't understand we Muslim. He wanna like, prove.

His friend showed him, "Here, it's his proof!" I want him to go back with a better proof. So I said, "Well, Mersin first of all when they pee standing up they don't clean themself. Did he use a paper towel, toilet paper?" He said, "Nope." I said, "So what happened?" He said, "He peed, he just pulled up his pants." I said, "That's what we don't do here." And then I said to Mersin, I was like "Listen, I promise you with one thing. If he can poop standing up, and target it, I'll let you pee standing up. Because if you gonna do his peepee, you gonna do a poopee!" So he looked at me he was like, "How's that even gonna happen?" I said, "the same way that he did it, so he been doing it wrong." And then I went with him through, like medically information, like, how's it's better to sit and pee than standing up, how you can pee more longer if you sitting because you relaxing, how you, when you sit, we usually wash ourselves as a muslim, but for our kids that cannot carry, water or they don't wanna be affected I was like, "Okay, just use toilet paper but as



soon as you come home, the first thing you do, go wash yourself." So I was like, "This is what you get infection, this is what happen, this is what happens, so, please do not just copy people because they doing it here." And he was like, "Yeah, and he thought I'm from another place. I told him, I born here in Lewiston." I was like, "Some people, they don't really care. You born in Lewiston, 'No you born in Washington D.C.-' they don't really care. You black, they assume you are from another place." And, in some way if you look at him, is not bad. I came from another place, if you born here, I born in another place. I didn't even grow up where I born. I born in Ethiopia, but I grew up in, half of my life in Djibouti. That's where my parents used to be. They live there, but, I born in, what do you call it, vacation time. So for, summertime, people go to coldest place like Ethiopia. And that's how, I have, multi- nationalities.

So, things culturally and religiously, are different. But for the most, if you look at it, they are all the same. And one things, when I talk to my friends and I say, lets say the, dress code. I try to cover myself, you are wearing pants. So, I was talking to a friend of mine she say, "Araksan, my grandmothers, at that time, they used to be covered. Yes they may not have dresses like yours and hijab, but nuns used to, nun until now exist and they wear like that. So I don't understand why people, say nun its ok for her to cover her hair, but when you are Muslim it's not okay for you to cover you hair." It's not like, alien. There is someone already look like you, even if its, White, but has the same, what do you call it, dress code or, something similar. So she was telling me, "Well, way back, the real Catholic people, has the same mentality of you guys." As a Muslim, for us. We- they did a lot of things similarly. But they did- these days, every generation are losing one part. And I think, one of that is our problem.

We don't teach our kids enough. Yes they go school, they may go afterschool, they go sport, but how long you sit as a family and talk about culture, and religion, and, stuff like that. They may, when they grow up, talk about politics, but politics should be the least in your, what do you call it, plate, for a child to, to learn. If you just make him know the easy thing, like, pick up after yourself, if you see something in the floor, just, even if its not yours and its wrong, just do the right thing. And that will help the rest of us.

MM: Can you talk a little bit more about some of the traditions and customs that you follow, or that you'd like to pass on?

AE: So as a Muslim person, I try to be covered. And one things of covering my hair, and body is, I don't wanna be target for a male. And usually, male will target you with that kind of clothes rather than target me, if we are walking together. Because I'm not interesting for them. I don't show that much. But for other people that has, uh, let's say leggings, or stuff like that so all the body parts are showing, if he's sitting there "ooh, woah, beautiful!" he can, like, harass you for that. But for me, I feel more confident, because, I have nothing to worry I'm, big fat, place, you can't see anything, no shapes, nothing, up, down, is all covered. But, when I'm home I take my clothes off, and I- I wear jeans, I wear shorts. My friend was last night in my house, she came I was cooking banana bread, and she said: "Ooh you look so hot!" I was like, "Ehh, you talking to the right person you should be my husband now!" [laughs]. So I was like, yeah, in my house, I do different style, for my hair, I, try to be as comfortable as I could, but, when I'm outside I- I'm comfortable that way. People will ask me "Are you hot? You don't feel hot?" I was like, "No. You imagining is hot. Hell is much hotter than this! [laughs] "And this world."

But, I may have difficulty sometimes with my clothing, when I, when I coach. So, I'm involved with Lewiston recreation, and I volunteer for them with my time to coach. So sometime, I'll be coaching basketball. So I'll try to wear something a little bit easier than what I'm wearing in my daily things. I may wear a pants, but it have to be like, fluffy and stretch- big, like not, not

showing my body. Like sweatpants or something like that. I have to have a big, three XL shirts when I'm just L-just to not show interest. And I have to have long sleeves. So sometimes their shirts, their volunteer shirts that they gave me, is a short. But I- I wear something under it, so that makes it two, shirts- decide what you call it whatever I'm wearing. So that sometimes, gets a bit- it could be difficult especially like in summer time when you're running around and you're wearing multiple clothes. But, other than that, clothing is one part, that, if you see me you gonna say "Ey, she's Muslim" right away.

The other things is: food. I like to share food with people, because I feel food comforts everyone. And, I feel a lot of cultures has different things. So, heres- they don't have much spice in it. It just tastes like salt and pepper. But with the food that I cook or I buy from the halal store- I go to the Indian store sometimes because- I feel that there is something with the food that can bring more people together. And people will eat, they're gonna, "Oh, I've never had sambusa!" Sambusa is famous triangle, with meat and, people will say "I've never had that one!" But when they try it, "Ohh this is good! Tell me the ingredients!" Or something like that. So, I feel food is second part.

So, clothing first, food second, third, as an individual, my personality is, I like gathering and bringing people together. Now, I used to do it for political long time ago, but now is like, I left the politics behind me. I, like to talk with people and just- see their mind- see what they have to offer. And the more you talk to a person the more you get to know them. And the more I know you the more I can feel, I can help- I could help you if there is situation because, like, I know every part. Like, my close friends, they don't have to tell me "I'm sick." By talking to them I know their voice is changing, so I always say, "You're not feeling well today." I don't have to say, "Are you tired." I can say "hey your house is not the way it used to be, what's wrong?" so I think the more we talk, the more we get closer, the more we can understand each other; the more family you have, the bigger your connection can be.

So, my connection is big- I have a lot of people around me, but I'm not very close to everyone. I'm not close to everyone because in a lot of parts I feel I'm different. I'm different because I'm by myself. I'm different because I believe in different religion. I'm different because I look different when I walk with you. It doesn't stop me that much, but, at the end of the day, it reflects sometimes. Hey, that person said hi to them but not to me. It bothers me sometimes. But I try to not let the negativity come to my side. I worked hard to be who I am.

I used to be a homeless during the day. Pregnant, 7 month, 8 month, 9 months, staying in the Kennedy Park, all day. I'll do my volunteering time, I'll come back, I'll stay there, just until the sun sets, and then, at the wintertime it was much harder because, it's cold, it's freezing, there is no shelters that you can really stay unless you gonna be, what do you call it, only the nighttime. That's what I heard about shelters too, you just come the night, all the day you need to be out. So, it was hard for me and I, I can understand there is a lot of good people in Maine. I had nothing. And a nurse, that, that finds out from talking, she was like "what's your physical ad-" you know how they ask physical address and mailing address, I had only mailing address. And she was like "what's your physical address" I was like, "I don't have an address. She was like, "Oh, we should help you." They took me to Bangor. So, she contacted people in the hospital. It was really nice of her. She, in two days, she finish everything for me. She doesn't even know me. She just knew that, I'm gonna have baby soon, I don't have anywhere to stay, they was like, paid for the transportation. I left, I went Bangor. I stayed there for two weeks, I think. And I came back. I felt, no they don't feel like Lewiston. There is something about Lewiston- if I stayed longer, and lived longer, I don't think I would go anywhere else.

MM: Yeah? Why not? Tell me more about that. Like, how you've seen it change, and-

AE: So I go- I have friends in Boston, so I go visit them. And they will say, "Well Araksan you always look for new places, museum, a lot of places to go and discover. Move to Boston ,it's bigger, it's better. I was like, "If I move anywhere, I'll stay in Maine. I can move around Maine, but not out of Maine." Because I feel it's more comfortable. I feel people understand each other. They don't, they don't discriminate easily. They don't hate each other for nothing. I don't know about like, if you are a teenager and you are in the high school or middle school, you could have your own issue. But as an adult, I walk, with my heads up. Walk around, I have no problem. I used to walk, 3 o'clock in the morning for prayer, from Park Street all the way to Lisbon Street for the prayer messaging. And I was pregnant. Never got bothered by anyone. Police sometime will stop and say "Hey, where you going?" "I'm going to the prayer." "Are you safe? Are you okay?" "Yes, I am okay." So, there is something about Lewiston, that, even when I had the chance to have a shelter, a house and, they were helping me over there in Bangor to get me in apartment, and job and everything. And I- Everybody was like, "Araksan, how you feel there?" I was like "I'm just sitting in shelter, pregnant." It's- It's just four women pregnant. There's no man so that was a good part of it, like, helped me with my- to be more comfortable. I can take my hijab off because it's only ladies. And, I used to fast, and the lady used to- and when I asked her like, we break fasting with date, so I was like, "I need date." She was like "I don't understand you." I was like, I googled it up for her, I was like "this is what I want." And she was like "Let's check Hannaford have it." And then she took me to Bangor Hannaford. She got it for me, she didn't even ask me to pay for it. I was like, "They gave me from the hospital 50 dollar, can I pay for it?" She was like "No you keep it."

There is something about Maine. It's not everywhere else. Everywhere else, I think, because it's maybe busier. People don't bother to know each other for that reason. They are all running, to work, to school, like, nobody has time to stop and say, "How you doing today?" or "Hey, I've been recognizing you, you come in often. Do you live in this area?" There is no conversation. And if there is no conversation there is no connection. It doesn't matter how much you got paid, if you don't have someone to talk to them.

MM: So one thing you said is that there's something about Maine and Lewiston. In your time here, have you seen Lewiston change, in any ways that you noticed? Or is it still as comforting now as it was when you came?

AE: For me, Maine is still the same way. I saw the good part of Maine, I don't know what other people could see it. Yes, I've been through situation, but I don't call it the worst situation. One day, like, I was working, and then a lady came, she said, "tomorrow is Muslim punching day." She work with me. We are in the same, classroom, we assist in the same classroom. I said, "what's that mean?" she was like "You don't read the news?" Yeah I'm one stupid lady that never bother herself to read news. I don't read news. For one reason because I don't have a channel to watch like the news and sit, and if I in the phone, other stuff pop up quickly so, I don't really see news, what's going on in the news. If I'm on the phone I'm with my family, if not I'm working, if not I'm with my child present; I like to be present I don't like to be taken away from my time. So she was like, "It's Muslim punching day, like, people gonna be violent tomorrow." I said, "Oh, why people gonna do that? What year we are in?" And she was like, "Well, I don't know a bunch of teenager did that, and they post it in the Facebook-" do you remember that? That was, I think, 2015? Maybe 16-17? Something like that. "It was posted in social media and, they're gonna be a lot of police officer gonna be around and, I wanna take advantage of today because, if I do it tomorrow I'm gonna be in jail." And I was like, "So you know, you supposed to not touch me, that's right?" And she was like, "Yeah, but, I'm your friend uh?" And she was my- I thought she

was my friend. I'm friendly to anyone. So she will, at the beginning she just gave me update, she left, she came back, I'm standing- I was walking in the hallway, she grabbed my hijab all the way. So, I was like, "Hey! Who's that! Who's that!" I'm trying to look who's grabbing me from my hijab and then I see her and I was like, "What are you doing! Stop! What are you doing!" My friend- my neighbor now; she used to work with me in the same building, so, she was coming she saw what happened. She let me go and she was like, "I'm not really sorry, but, I think I have to say sorry." And she left. That's in my workplace, there is camera all around the hallway, it's public place. It's not like she choked me in my own house. And she felt comfortable doing it. My friend came from the other side, she was like, "Yo! Stop! What you just did to her?" She was like, "Nothing." And she walked. She came, she was like, she looked at me, and she was like, "Araksan are you okay?" I was like, "I just need a moment." She was like, "We're gonna report her." I was like, "Don't do that. Don't do that." And she was like, "She doesn't deserve to be an educator if she act like that." I looked at her as I said, "She doesn't. And I know that. And I'm surprised and I'm trying to process it.

But one thing I know? If you came and do something wrong to me, you will pay for it- you will pay it back." I'm not even gonna bother myself to hurt you, but you will get it. I don't try to go and bother people. Like go, and know I'm gonna hurt someone, emotionally or physically. I don't do that. And I believe that if you come to hurt me, even emotionally, that will come back to you. In one way or other, you gonna pay for it. So, speaking about that, it's like, I think the whole- 6 year, I may have that incident, and one other incident. 2 incidents. The first one, the lady left the job after that. She kicked herself out of the place, before we could speak up about the situation. The second one, I told them I can't be in this place, because I feel there is discrimination. And, I- I said everything that I had, seen, and heard, and left, left this situation for them because they was like, "We don't see that." I was like, "You don't see it? See you in justice day." And left. Other than that, I had a lot of good experiences in Maine. Yes, some days was hard for me, I cried a lot. I almost killed myself once, but; I think there is a lot of good people that can give you hope, can say tomorrow could be better, can think about you and call you. Or even just, mention that you exist. And the more you give, the more you get. I believe in that. If I open my heart for you and give you more, I get more. And not in specifically from you, from anybody else.

One day, I was trying to surprise my friend- she hurt herself. I picked for her a cake, the one that she loved. Get to her house, gave it to her, next day, in the same place, someone else pay for my grocery. They don't know me. And, that person I was looking at, I was like, "Is that a lady? Is that a guy?" "Is that a lady?" I'm, I'm looking at them, in my mentally like, trying to judge 'Whose that person? Is that's?' You know, some people are in between, but when you look at it, it was like, 'Oh, those people exist too.' And that person was, like, I was telling myself, after they pay for all my groceries, if they knew that I was looking for them and asking myself, they may not pay for my groceries!

So, and then I follow my dad's footstep. Yes, I see something is wrong, we should fix it, but one person cannot change anything. And then a lotta of people will say, "Well, at least you work for the government" because I was teaching in public school. "You work for the government, you should put your head down, you should not talk about politics." And I was like, "well, I believe in one." If you are unemployed, and a lot of people are, and you don't have a job, and you don't wanna show up for yourself, who should do it? If people like me, are not having good system, not paid enough, discrimination there, and, you just say, "hey I work for the government I can't talk put my head down," who gonna change it? You not changing it, I'm not changing it. Someone have to be in, in the middle changing something. So we- I was involved for that reason. It was like, I can be a model for them. She work, and she's not afraid to say no. She have a lot to lose, we have nothing to lose; it'll work. We- I was involved for a while, so, I started

with like, "Ok I will support you guys financially, I don't wanna be, like, in the front page." And then, I took another step, I was like, "Okay, now we- since we have more people, I can help with documenting." So I was a photographer - photo journalist for them. So I was like, "I'll document everything and pictures can say more." And then that's what I was had by. It was like, "okay, those pictures, where they are taken from, where they are sending from"; We have one internet company, in the whole country so they can easily access your documents, your computer and see what you are doing.

And then I was a target, I was- I was in jail for that reason. Just by taking a picture, and posting it, and I didn't even post it from my own computer. I was taking it, mailing it to them, they post it in there, in the page. And I was abused for that reason. I was physically, mentally, and emotionally abused, just for saying, "something is wrong; we should change it."

Then I had two miscarriages. They were the cause. And I said to myself, 'Enough. Araksan I'm losing- I lost my job, now I'm unemployed,' I didn't- I wasn't worried that much about it, I was like, 'Okay half of the society are like that,' but, when it came, like, to my health, and physically and mentally and emotional wellbeing, I was like, 'I have to seek better, better condition, better place, better environment. At least, for the child that,' I was pregnant at that, yeah, so 'at least for my child.' My husband was so supportive he was like, "Go, I'll just pray for you." And then a friend of mine, he was like, "Okay, we will find people for you, to help you, at least to stay a night or two until you get yourself out." So, politics brought me here. And when I came here, I was like, I can't talk now. Because each time I do something, my family get it. Get hurt. My kids get hurt. School. So it was like, I can't say anything about it, I'm just put my head down, at least for now.

But what I see here is different. People will talk about the President. "We don't like him, we do this, we do that," they do a big movement, they talk about politics. And I was like, "Okayyy?" I cannot be engaged with them, over here, the politics, because, first of all my vote, it's not gonna be counted. It doesn't matter what movement you walk with, left, right, is not counted. So, why you waste your time, if you not gonna be counted. That's, that's one part of it.

Each person- I believe each person has their own, good and bad system. And I don't believe, only president, or only the governor, can do something. It's the population, it's the people, that, in that place. And the more people think about politics, in good way, the more that they can change. I was helping a friend, a couple days ago, to put the signs for her, and then I ask her one question. I said, "Well here, I know everybody can talk about politics, but do you ever saw, one household, has have left and right, in the same house?" She says, "Good question. I never heard that you can be, like one part and your spouse can be a different party, and then be in the same household. I think they gonna fight a lot." I was like, "Ok, good, do you know anybody like that?" She was like, "I know one family, but they try to not talk about politics for that reason because they will fight." But I like that people can give their opinion, but how long- how far they are supported? That's the part that, I don't like it, like, people give up easily here. They don't push for what they need. Let's say we need better healthcare? They don't, they don't- you don't see it. Back home you see movement; they, they close the street. They fire, they are violent. Yeah, it's not good to be violent, but, at least, like, show up for your opinion. We don't like the healthcare? Let's all go out; show them. Not one day, not two day. Just like, George Floyd.

The movement, what happened is- nobody will- there is a lot of people that die before him. Nobody care. But, the day that they show up and they close, the road, the highways, they stay there, they talked about their opinion, it change, the, the political there. They change the

system, they change how they think, and see, and judge people. So, I think there is, way to go, for Maine, in politics. People will see you, and they was like, "Okay, now we have what, black person running for this, and that-" but it's not about color, it should just matter, what are you fighting for, what do you want most. And even if I'm left and you're the right, we should at least look for the country, the people that live there. Not only my own interests, and your own interests. So that's why I don't like to talk about politics right now, I was like, I have enough.

I've been out a lot, I've been, hurt a lot, for, reason that I see its value but a lot of people doesn't value it so if you are the only one you can't change anything. There is a Somali cultural thing that they say. They say, "If you go to a place, and they all have one eye, take yours out." Let's say, you came to this place and they are all wearing red, and you wearing brown. You gonna feel different, so you don't- you don't wanna feel different, so try to put red. And, a lot of people here are the same, where it's like - okay, let's just be that side, or this side. You drive around, you don't see a lot of like, signs, political- I don't think a lot of people are interested in politics. They don't even know their rights.

They don't know who's the governor, who's the representative. You ask the kids in this, they don't know. Kids, high schooler, you ask them "who's the governor," "We don't know." If- my husband was asking, "What they teach in school system?" Reading, writing and math. There is geography, but really, like, there is no interest in, the things that, now are people are, are interested in, like; Science, more science, more physical things, more culture, more religion study, more- child should, before they leave the middle school they should, know about all the things, at least in their city. Take them to visit, the State house and, let them know about their city. Take them to local museum, local farmer, local places so they can- a lot of kids they don't know places in Maine. Because, their family will take them to the jump park, so physically they can be active, but mentally where?

You go to museum for mentally, to be more, educated mentally. Go to park, see people, go new places. There's a lot of free places in Maine that you can just, be there and, bring your water and your snack and, sit down and enjoy the time. A lot of people there don't see it that way. It bothers me sometime. When I saw the museum I was like, "There's a museum down there? What?!" I told my son, he was like, "It's impossible!" I was like, "What do you mean?" He was like, "How come there is a museum in Lewiston and we didn't know? We always travel for museums. We always travel for fun, and the fun was right there in front of us, we never saw!" One of them is like, people give up easily, they don't- they don't advertise themselves, they don't advertise it in, larger than their community, they don't take their word out, they don't- and some people, they, they heard about the place but they don't have time, they don't have money, they don't, they don't have interest, to what you are offering so nobody will come see you who is, that's not interested.

MM: Yeah. So, you brought things full circle so you were actually learning about the museum. Thank you for sharing so much about your story. Is there any last thing that you wanted to share that I didn't ask you about?

AE: I will add one thing. People, people doesn't know the difference between immigrant and asylum. And a lot of people will see us, "Oh, you are just a newcomer." That's our, new word for us, newcomer. Yes we are newcomer but, there is a difference between, an asylum seeker, and a refugee. And when we come in, if you come as a refugee, that means you already has hard time, in whatever camp you been in. So, the way that you come in, is kind of like daylight for you. You start, new level. And most of the people, they start from there picking up, piece after piece, but they are citizens. They have a green card. So they are one stop in front of me: if we

are looking for housing, they go first because they are kind of citizen. What they call it, permanent citizen? So, they have, better -what do you call it- chance. For us, when we come as an asylum seeker, hey, they see us as, "You brought yourself in. You gonna start seeing the hard, now. The refugee camp, count for you now until you get your green card."

So it's, it's harder because, yes I've, I have the right to work, to move, to travel, in the United States. But I cannot, if something happens to my family I cannot, I cannot be out. If I'm out, I can't be in. That's hard part. If I wanna, if I wanna, uh, what do you call it, housing- if I'm in the list for housing, I'm the last person to have a chance. Homeless will go first, let's say, violent people will go first, people that has, uh, special needs will go first, citizens will go first, green card people, refugees, go first. You the last person that they think about you. So, we don't- I don't think we are- even if we are added value to what we are and we are tax payer, but is still there is always, a part that we cannot contribute. Because you don't hold green card. Or you not citizen.

And I feel so sad about that because, let's say where, where I live, the town that I'm paying tax for, if there is decision taken, like, not in national level but in your town, you can't change anything. And you still have to pay your tax. You can't, you cannot, add your voice but, it's still "I want you tax," you know what I mean? It's like, I feel that it would be better if they make it, you can contribute in your town, or your city, and your government. So it's that part, it's a little bit hard for me. And I know like, in a lot of places, I can't change that much because of my status. But still, people will seem as successful woman, but my- my voice cannot be heard sometimes. Because of my status. And if there is something that, state of Maine could change, and I will ask for, is at least where we live, and pay taxes for, we should be able to vote local- locally vote. If there is someone then, in your school district, we couldn't vote for the school district things. For that reason, for the same reason. So, there is certain position that you cannot stand at, because you're not citizen. And that's really like, bad on me, oh you showing me like, I'm not human. Because animals cannot vote, but humans should. We should be able to choose who we want to represent us. And in a lot of places we cannot. So that's, that's- that's one part.

MM: Alright. We're gonna wrap up there. Araksan, thank you so much.