

Marcelle Medford (MM): All right, so we're going to get started. Can you introduce yourself? Tell me your name, age, nationality and how long you lived or worked in Lewiston?

Melissa Hue (MH): Hi, my name is Tinan Melissa Hue. I am 31 years old. I am originally from the Ivory Coast, raised in North Carolina, and I've worked in Lewiston for about a year and a half.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit more about your relationship to Lewiston? How and why did you come and what's that been like?

MH: So I came to Lewiston by a job. I used to work at Maine Health. At that time, Maine Health got its first DEI director. And he was great. And then my director at the time, saw the job, sent it over and I was just like, why not? It was the first of its kind in the state of Maine on the municipal level. And I always wondered how diversity, equity and inclusion would play out in government and local politics, because you're not dealing with only health you're dealing with social issues and politics at the same time. So I interviewed in Lewiston and they decided to take a chance on me and then I got the opportunity to learn the community intentionally, learn the local organizations, learn why there was such a huge racial ethnic issue, and understanding the plight of immigration to Lewiston.

MM: So you mentioned about learning the community intentionally. What did you know about Lewiston before going there for work?

MH: I went to school at University of New England, and I did my undergrad and grad so I was there for about eight years. I had never actually went to Lewiston until that point, and it was coined as the Dirty Lew. And there were issues there. And one reason why I wanted to stay away is a haunting story that people tell all the time where a group of anti Somali people went and rolled a pig's head into the mosque and that signaled to me, not only do we not do different religions, we don't do Black people. So no need to go.

MM: So tell me a little bit more about the work that you do. So you do DEI work, but specifically in Lewiston. So can you tell me about the work that you do? Like in the context of that?

MH: So the job description itself is to reevaluate policies, reassess them, create new ones, give out trainings to employees and do a lot of external community engagement work. So it's like half and half. And that, as I'm describing, it needs a team of people to do. The way it manifested in Lewiston, per se, because you never going to go into a community and not learn the community before you decide to create anything for the community was that Lewiston has a lot of nonprofit organizations that are Black led, the biggest differential is that these nonprofits seem to have a limited barrier. So what was wrong with that system there. And then I wanted to learn a little bit more about the community. And understanding that, I understood that there was a siloed effect taking place. And I always go back to history to understand what's happening right now. And what it looked like was something that we've seen time and time again, if you're familiar, is that you create competition inside communities that you want to dominate. And this is probably totally unintentional, there's no malice intent in doing it. But when we are talking about nonprofits searching for funds, it automatically creates that competition. And people are fighting for \$1,000 when there's \$100,000 there that they don't know about due to lack of

education, due to lack of awareness. And they end up competing against each other and fighting with each other instead of working together. Now, to this point, Lewiston and other bigger nonprofits and philanthropy organizations have done a good job of creating collaborative efforts to shift that narrative. But that was one of the key things that I saw in Lewiston that needed to be resolved.

MM: That I think is really interesting on a lot of levels. I've noticed you using the word of community. How do you define community?

MH: I think community is what you make of it. But fundamentally, I define community as family. So you don't necessarily have to like all your family members, but you deal with them and you have their back no matter what. They don't necessarily have to look like you. But you understand that they're kin to you. So that's what community looks like to me. And that's what I think community should look like in Lewiston, and it kind of does. Lewiston is probably one of the most or is the most diverse city in Maine - Portland, I'm sorry. If you're saying that 47 to 50% of its youth are BIPOC community members, then that means 25% of the people living there probably would have to be of color. And with that comes just a whole array of beauty, and color that comes to it and texture.

And I think that's the great part about Lewiston, and trying to figure out a way where everybody uses that texture and that difference as a part of their family is the hardest part to do. Before previous to the Somali culture coming in, and previous to Angolans and everybody coming in, there was immigration, there was the KKK, there was all of that, but it was towards the Catholics and towards the Irish and towards people with the same complexion. And you have to talk to them to understand their differences. So now there was this new age phenomenon where Okay, now we visually see the differences. How do we accept that and move forward?

MM: You talked about coming from an immigrant background, you're from the Ivory Coast. How do you think you've been received in Lewiston, among some of the communities that you work with?

MH: I think I've been received well. I think coming from an immigrant background being raised down South, you kind of don't fit in anywhere. So I think just growing up in a dynamic where you have to assimilate to all cultures has helped me a lot. Once you understand culture, you know how to be a part of it. So that has been one of the fundamental foundations of my job, how I moved technically.

MM: Do you have any other family members here? Or is it just you in Maine and learning different Maine communities?

MH: It is just me, and I go home for a mental break, to reset, I go home to get me out of this bubble. And you learn a lot here, you learn a lot going down South because it's the same battle just looks very, very different. And I always say Maine can be the shifting narrative of how we assimilate correctly, just because the population is so small when it comes to its BIPOC population that you don't have to repeat the stories.

MM: Coming to Maine, as you said, the dominant narrative is typically a Somali narrative. But there's lots of other folks from all over like Africa and the Caribbean. Have you found other folks with your similar ethnic or national background in Maine?

MH: Ivory Coast is a dime a dozen, we hang out down South and in New York. I've been here years, there's only been one person from the Ivory Coast that I've met. And I don't think they lasted too long. So my nationality personally, no, I haven't met. If you know anybody, let me know. But other nationalities are just coming in by the dozen. And we talk about people coming in from Haiti and Africa. And we have probably one of the strongest Latin populations coming in. And they are just a hidden society in Maine, but they are thriving and surviving. We have a Filipino population. It's just all the cultures seem to be migrating to vacation land.

MM: In your experience with being here, have you participated in any of the traditions or customs or religious practices as you've learned any of the communities that you work with?

MH: Participated, not necessary. I'm Catholic. My best friend is Muslim, she's Sudanese. So growing up, I've been to the mosque. So it's just one of those things that it will come naturally if it comes.

MM: For yourself personally, have you found a cultural community or religious community if those things are important to you that align with your own interest or histories?

MH: I found a community because I went to school here. So college friends, and they're still here. And they came from everywhere. And we were a small pool of people that grew up together in the whitest state ever. And we stuck together. I think my college had maybe 27 Black people out of 2,000. We all knew each other. And we all hung out. And we still all know each other today. So I have them to lean on. And I understand Maine well. Adult culture, you just grow up with what you know. And you make more friends as you go. So that's my community.

MM: And this sort of a little bit of a shift. You started off talking a little bit about politics. But can you tell me a little bit about how you participate in politics or how politics plays a role in your life, either formally or informally?

MH: I have a love hate relationship with politics. I hate to love it. I love to hate it. The job by design is not meant to be political. But it is. You think about equity, why would this have anything to do with politics, you're just trying to give everybody access to opportunities, not access to free things. But it does, and I think DEI, especially when looking at the history of it, has been around for 65 - 70 years.

The first DEI technically would have been the ending of segregation and the allowing for Black people to work alongside white people. That's the first workplace hostile work environment that was ever created. And then after that, we've had the snowball effect into what it is today. And even then it was political. It's the idea of creating or allowing access to those that you do not think have certain values that align with you. Or you see them as being a part of your tribe is the issue. So then it becomes political because you have people on the left, you have people on the right, and somewhere along the

middle is the moderate truth. Anybody from a diverse background seems to be a casualty when it comes to these choices. And I see it time and time again.

MM: And then in Lewiston, have you seen either in the election cycle or the race leading up to it, the impact of politics in the communities that you work with at all?

MH: Politics is very tricky. I look at it from the lens of how are you impacting your most vulnerable community. Which at the end of the day would be your Black, immigrant, can't speak English, fresh off the boat community. How are they thriving with a disability? How is that low hanging fruit being impacted by the decisions from either party. And, again, somewhere in the middle lies the truth. So if you're saying, Well, you know, we have a history of immigrants coming in who were able to make something of themselves and pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and all of these great things, and I'm just like, okay, that doesn't make any sense. You don't even give them boots to pull themselves up with, that's never gonna happen. And then you're just like, well, here is free access to everything. And I'm like, that doesn't make any sense because you work in America, you thrive in America. If you're teaching people that they have to ask for a handout, you're not teaching them anything, you're not teaching a man how to fish, you're not teaching them about the struggle. So that's where I stand with the politics.

Being here for 10 years and working in healthcare, I see how detrimental that is on both ends. When you provide too much free access without education to people you're creating something that you can control. And when you provide zero access, then you're just starving people of opportunity.

In health care, I remember when I first started, we had a majority of US citizens on our caseload. And then after about a year and a half, it was immigrants. You see the system change, and you're just like, Whoa, how has it shifted so big? And where is the disconnect? But then you look at everything that's been added in between, and you're just like, okay, all of these little pockets of opportunities that have been created. Do people have access to this education to move in an upward trajectory? And that's when I took the job, I was just like, oh, it's our job to educate people, education has to be the foundation of everything. You can't do anything without educating the community. I don't care where you come from, you have to know the American system, your resources and your community, whether you like it or not.

MM: Can you speak a little bit more about what that looks like to educate the community?

MH: It's tough to educate people who know their culture better than you do. It's like educating your parents - who are you to tell me? I raised you and I'm like, Mom, you still don't know how to use an iPhone. Like let me help you.

So when you have cultures who understand themselves better than you do, you never want to take that away. I think the issue is to create an environment where you're not taking away from the culture. And there's value in understanding the community and the history that you're a part of, there's value in understanding the Black experience, there's value in understanding the immigrant experience, and there's value in you teaching your experience.

And so I think the biggest way we have chosen to educate communities is by having these great focus groups where people get to air out their dirty laundry, and we facilitate that. I want all the criticism, I want to know how bad it is, I want to know who you can't get in contact with. And then the community at the table, wherever you're from, gets to work together to create a solution and feel like they are part of that solution.

MM: And how have those sessions gone?

The theme that I hear most in the focus group is, I have a dream. How do I accomplish it? And that's it. And once you figure out a pathway to that success, all the angst is gone, you helped me. Or I had a dream and these are the barriers that didn't help me accomplish it. How are you going to do different by me? And then you people that are just here to figure out what to do, where to go, what to maneuver.

Since that's the biggest theme, I realized we're not doing a very good job in Lewiston at creating a clear pathway to opportunities that we have. Knowledge isn't being disseminated in ways that it should be. People have been here for 25 years and still can't speak the English language. Where's the disconnect? And if we know that language is access to everything, and we're not creating quick, easy ways to make that happen. And other countries have figured out a way to teach English or their languages in higher rates than in America, then it's a disservice, and why is it happening?

MM: That leads me to the next question I had about the role of language, in your work or in your life? It seems like it comes up. Trying to navigate communication with communities, are there other ways that it comes up for you?

MH: I think language is tough because Lewiston has a history of taking away language, and it saw the side effects of doing that. It took away the French language. Why? And people were absolutely angry. It was a way to control people, right? And be in the know. Now, it seems to be on the flip side, we're not doing a very good job of teaching the English language. We keep swinging this pendulum wherever we are, from one side to the other. And we have to figure out a way to teach the English language quickly. And there are ways to do it. We just need to invest more time. Because, again, it's the old adage of teach a man how to fish. I can't (actually I can because my mother immigrated here too) but I can't imagine being dropped on a bus from Texas to a shelter with a card that says this is where I'm supposed to be with four kids on my back not knowing what to do. The first thing you told me to do is go to Adult Ed. And then they'll teach me some basic English skills to at least have me be able to order something from the grocery store. It's not enough.

There's no communication. And when there's no communication, you make up your own stories about people. And when you make up your own stories about people, you make decisions based off of that knowledge. You can walk past somebody, they don't know how to say hi to you, and they will look down and you will say, okay, these people hate us, they won't even make eye contact, not realizing that they don't even know the English language to say hi. And I think that's the crux of it. If people started with that basis, they'll be able to educate themselves better, or they'll have more access to resources that they didn't even know about. Or even better, they'll be able to advocate for themselves alone.

MM: That's really insightful. I've heard that specific example a lot. Like they won't say hi to me when I'm walking down the street. You know, we can also learn to speak another language as well.

MH: I always say a smile is free. You know this person is probably coming from a different country, or is just not from Maine knowing the demographic, and you see them and you hope that they look at you and say, Hi. It gives me nothing to smile and wave, everybody knows that international language of a wave.

MM: So you've been in Maine for 10 years, working in Lewiston for about a year and a half. So over that time, hearing stories about Lewiston and then going to work there, have you seen Lewiston change over either a year and a half or hearing about it over the 10 years?

MH: 100%. I think at the time when I moved here, nobody wanted to go to Lewiston. Or no person of color wanted to go. And then there were a couple of markers throughout Lewiston's time. I remember when the high school soccer team won that huge event. You know, sports brings everybody together. That was a marker, that was an opening. And they're developing quicker. And it might be a byproduct of just everybody moving and people needing housing, but at the same time people are taking a stronger focus towards Lewiston. And I think organizations in Lewiston have more so than not decided to embrace differences in ways that they haven't before. And that's great to see, whether it's in the healthcare that they're providing, the jobs that they're providing, the stories that you see pop up, and different communities or cultures coming in. I think it'll grow more over time. I just am hoping for thoughtful gentrification. Because it's going to happen regardless. And the culture doesn't get taken away because I think that's the most beautiful part of Lewiston. It's a melting pot right now.

MM: I always end interviews by asking people, is there anything that you think needs to be said, or anything that I haven't asked that you think is important to add to the conversation?

MH: I think when it comes to Lewiston, based on when I got here to where it is now, people need to give the city more credit. You know, there's this old lens that they keep adding to the city, that it's just not there. And it's just not true. There are so many viable resources. The city is very prideful. And it does a good job of protecting its traditions and its values in ways other cities do not. And I think with time, with growth, again, time heals a lot. But the way it's moving, it's going to have a competing edge over a lot of cities. It's taking the idea of culture and music and color, and it's bringing it there. I think Lewiston is sitting on the precipice of something really, really great and people should dive in and lean into the city.

MM: Thank you. That's the perfect note to end on.