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Interviewer: Marcelle Medford

MM: Alright. So, we're going to start off by having you just introduce yourself. Name, age, nationality, how long you've lived in Lewiston.

AM: Alright. So my name is Abdulwahab Mohamed, I'm 22 years old, and I'm Somali, Somali-American, I was born in Atlanta, moved to Lewiston in 2008, so I lived here for about, like, close to 15 - 14 - years.

MM: How old were you when you came?

AM: I was 8. Two thousand and eight. What, that's like the 3rd grade? Yeah, I feel like that was around the third grade, so I really didn't have my full self developed yet, like my identity and stuff like that. I was still, you know, learning things. I went from an urban environment and it wasn't too urban, it wasn't like I was in downtown Atlanta, more like the suburbs a little bit, so it would be me closed off from my neighborhood, you know what I mean? Stuff like that, but I would still be able to go to school, see a lot of folks of color, which was nice. That's something I remembered a lot. And then when I came here it was just different; it became cold quicker, it was a lot of different types of people, I saw a lot of people who were white but I also saw a lot of Somali people.

MM: Was that different from being in Atlanta?

AM: Yeah, it was kind of different because the only Somali people I would be seeing were if I traveled outside of my area. You know what I mean? Like my neighborhood… my neighborhood would have a couple of Somali people in it, you know what I mean? But it wasn't a whole community. I feel like that's changed, over time, but then it was like, a lot of Somali people would live in kind of impoverished areas, just like, kind of like town homes and what not.

MM: In Atlanta?

AM: Yeah. And that's why I, I don't know, I kind of see the development of folks that lived in Atlanta, and they kind of assimilate closer with [Southern] Blackness and [Southern] Black culture 'cause they live within that environment.

MM: So, you came to Lewiston, you were 8… why? Why'd they move? Why did your family move up here, and, also, why do you stay?

AM: So from my understanding, right, it's like, a couple Somali folks figured out this spot called Lewiston, Maine. And with them figuring it out, you know, just word of mouth, that "hey, this is a very good place to raise your kids, it's a small place, they've got good education", you know what I mean? We can build our own community here, right? And just like, not be influenced by,

you know, the environment that we're in, or the people that are in our environment type thing. So, I feel like it was largely due to that, and also kind of what Maine had to offer for immigrants, maybe. And resources, and systems in place for people, like, you know, coming into this country, raising a family, and what not, and making sure they stay out of trouble compared to more urban spheres. Yeah, definitely that.

MM: What did your mom tell you about that? Did she say anything about why?

AM: It was like, a bit fast, you know what I mean? You know, once you hit that stage of middle school, high school, you know, you start wanting to, like, "oh, let me go hang out with my friends", and it's like, you never know what they gon' do, what your kids gon' do, so I feel like out here, in Lewiston, it's like you can leave your back door open and be safe, you know what I mean? So, I feel like it was largely that, and it's like staying out of trouble, being safe.

Maybe it was also the areas that were being lived in. I'm not gonna lie, where I lived it was kinda nice. Like, it wasn't the best, but it was nice because we had a house. Not a lot of people had houses and stuff, and my dad got the house in the 90s, the 80s, or 90s–something like that. When it was kinda cheap. And we just had it the whole time; we still have it to this day. So we're able to live there, nice little neighborhood, and for me, like, creating my own thoughts, me as an adult now, I kinda look back at it and think, even research that I've done is kind of, like, probably our parents seen us losing who we are, like being Somali or whatnot. Not to say it's like a bad thing, but in Somalia, race doesn't exist, you know? The only identity is being Somali and being Muslim. That's who you are. So the whole idea of "I'm Black, I'm white", stuff like that, it's confusing to them because they're like "No, I'm Somali". And I feel like that holds more weight than saying something that's created by a white person. The whole concept of race.And it's difficult, you know, you can talk about the conversation on the part of African Americans in the country and whatnot, but I feel like our parents kind of see it in that lens, like, that's all they know. That's all they see. And us, it's like, we're raised into something, we don't know, we're like, why did we move to somewhere that's so small and boring? It gets cold, you know? And yeah, it sucks,but I feel like it builds some character. Who I am today and whatnot. So yeah, I think there's a lot of different components, things that my parents are hiding from me, maybe? Stuff like that.
MM: So, you came up here in third grade, finished high school, went through all your schooling here, you went to Bates College, graduated Bates, so why stay in Lewiston for college, after college?

AM: I made a mature decision. But also too, I kinda sat back after I made the decision initially, and just like, "hey, you know, it might not be too bad, because I already know the city, I'm already ten steps ahead of everybody [new to the college], they already trying to figure out, how to, you know, get to Lisbon Street and get some sambusas and that's my backyard, you know what I mean? I felt like that, and also, kind of like staying close to my mom, the fam, you know? I feel like it's a ying and a yang, it comes with its good, comes with its bad sometimes, but overall, I was thankful and grateful 'cause it was so easy. I didn't have the stresses that other people had, like, moving out during quarantine, you know what I mean? Like, I just took three

car rides back from my dorm to my house and I was done. Stuff like that. It's the little advantages like that. And my family could come visit, I could visit anytime, never really got homesick, which is kind of a good thing and a bad thing 'cause I wanna miss my family too. But yeah, I feel like that's the main deciding factor, and I'm grateful for that. Because it makes me more, or is making me more, ready to see the world on my own.

MM: And so now that you graduated, you're here working, tell me a little bit about the work that you do.

AM: So I'm a case manager, I'm a targeted case manager, working solely right now for kids, with an agency called Bright Future, Healthier You, and mainly my work consists of assisting, supporting, advocating, and linking our clients to different services, basic services ranging from education to housing needs to financial, so all types of things, basic living things to help our clients' lives be a bit more stable and then go in the direction where they can be independent on their own and not rely on our services. That's really our goal.

MM: So that's what you do for work. You talked a bit about being Somali, being Muslim; how would you define your community in Lewiston? Like, what does that mean to you?

AM: Community in Lewiston, it's a community I feel like, that's established itself… like, you know how people try to put cities on a map? I feel like we put Lewiston on a map. 'Cause we're strong, we were very, like, tight knit. I feel like Lewiston, in a way, is enhanced by our diversity in it, and not just the Somali people too, there's all types of people that are coming now, ranging from Iraq all the way to central Africa, different countries there, so it's growing, but initially I feel like the Somali people kind of created the foundation in Lewiston, overcoming the different obstacles and adversities thrown at them, from white supremacy groups coming to Lewiston, trying to tell us to get out, the mayor telling us to get out, but we stood here staying strong. And kind of building… we built the community, and kind of redefined it, shifted the paradigm. They stood on being mainly a white country, a white city, and a white town, but with them bickering back and forth between the French Canadians and, what was the other group? The Irish, or Francoamericans? I don't even know. All that, you know? And yeah, so I feel like we just kind of inserted ourselves into the conversation, and let ourselves be known, just like pushing the city in the direction that it maybe didn't even see itself in. 'Cause I do remember, we did come at a time where the economic levels, or the economic status of where Lewiston was, it was kind of low. Employment was really low, stuff of that nature because the mills were down. Nobody wanted to work in no more. So a lot of people came to kind of revamp the economic scene, kind of give it a bit more light, businesses are opening up, a lot of local businesses, and that's always good. But I feel like a lot of the cons that come with Lewiston is the social. And I feel like things are getting better, and better, kind of like the issues that we have, but I feel like it's getting better and better from what you see on the surface, compared to, like, what's actually happening. Like a lot of things are becoming sugarcoated, like a lot of things aren't in your face no more, it's more like, you gotta find it, you know what I'm saying?

It's imbedded in legislation, imbedded within the decisions the city's making, you know, the way they talk to you, they way they influence you into doing something that may not be good for you, and this could be from police officers to city officials, and even like educators in high schools. Telling you, "hey, you should do this decision instead of doing this", but at the end of the day, doing this may excel your life way more than holding yourself back. I've seen that a lot. That's what Sankofa was about.

MM: Ah, so say a little bit more about Sankofa.

AM: Yeah, so 2020 we did a meeting, my boy Losseni, we did a play called "The Invisible Woman" for Sankofa, and it focused on… the main character's identity was a Black Muslim woman, in an area like Lewiston, and she goes through these different adversities based on intersectionality, right? And it kind of overarched, throughout the play, it showed different stories of women of color, you know? And the different issues they get into. One main part that was based off a true story from one of our interviews and even my own personal experience too, is going through the college process. And them kind of suggesting to go to a community college, instead of going to a school that was more prestigious, and their ability of, limiting their ability to do certain things in academia, and we kind of made that scene like, we kind of gave voice to the main character fighting back, and being like, "no, this is what I want to do", stuff like that, persevere, and kind of sending that message to people in the audience that, you know, nobody can dictate, if you want to do what you want to do, you go and do it. And also understanding some people may not always want the best for you. But you gotta keep your head on your shoulders for that, because you also don't want to block your blessings, too, from other people when they put you onto game, stuff like that. I feel like that's really important. But yeah, that was one main part of Sankofa that stuck with me a lot, even in my own life. Shit, I wouldn't be at Bates College if I hadn't stuck up for myself.

MM: So what would have happened… you said that part of Sankofa was a reflection of your own story, was someone suggesting you go to a community college?

AM: Yeah, it was my guidance counselor, in a conversation between student and guidance counselors. Like, "you're applying to a lot of reach schools and you don't have a lot of safeties." Like I'm taking college classes at Bates, what are you talking about? I know I'm gonna get in. Stuff like that, in that nature and whatnot. I've always been the one to challenge myself and stuff like that. So, I felt like it was kind of discouraging a bit, like "take a couple schools off." And certain ones, you know you're gonna get in. But I keep myself at a high standard and I feel like when I talked to any student, even the ones younger than me, I keep them at a high standard too, like, you can go to Harvard if you want, Yale, you know? You can go to all these big, good schools. You can do it. I feel like she was kind of limiting me, kind of saying, "oh, I know you think you can do it, but you gotta snap back into reality". I was like "nah". I have that. And a lot of the inspiration I get is from my sister, she went to Tufts, you know, another NESCAC.

MM: So you talked about your sister, and how she showed you some things, like talk a little bit more about your family, and your family's experiences in Lewiston, and your relationship with them…

AH: Yeah. My family's relationship with Lewiston is good, like, fairly good, you know what I mean. A lot to do with, like, my mom, and she has a reputation with them, the Somali community, cause she's a business owner and she owns a local store, Almadina Variety Store. Sells different things from clothes to produce and whatnot, and she likes it–that's kind of, like, her passion. And also the Somali community is all tight knit, and everybody knows each other. but I'm the only one that went to a four-year institution [liberal arts college] in Maine. Like that, all four years. So it probably made my mom happy. She was happy, she was like "Yeah, Bates, that's good. That's good."

MM: She was happy you were staying nearby?

AM: Staying nearby, she knew Bates was a good school, a lot of people, they hear Bates and it's like, you hit the lottery, you know what I mean? That's kinda how they see it. Like me, I'd see it as a place of education, I really don't try to hype it up as much. Because there's the difference of looking at it and actually going to the school. So, yeah, they like it a lot, they kind of see it as the best one. When you hear Harvard and stuff, it's like, they think of it like that.

MM: Wow! I mean, they came through for a graduation. How many people were there for you, for graduation?

AM: Yeah, yeah, so I'm just like, "damn". Oh yeah, for sure. For sure. Oh my god, they pulled up everybody, you know what I mean? I don't even know, I just remember turning around and being like, "hey, you know, wassup, wassup, wassup, like congratulations," and I was like, "oh, thank you,". Yeah, that was nice. It was a good time.

MM: So, you stayed close to home for college, being part of a tight knit-community, tight knit family, are there certain traditions and customs that you practice?

AM: Yeah. I'm Muslim, being Somali, like 99% of Somali people are Muslim. Think about it, if you look at our country, like, a lot of our values and stuff are rooted in Islam. I feel like that's a very important thing, like, come to places, you meet a Somali person. That's why if you ask them what the most important thing is to you, they'll probably say their religion. Yeah, and then probably family.'Cause, it's kind of like, how our, everything's based off of–the way we greet each other, we say "Asalam Alaykum", you know? And that, right there, reminds us of the religion, you know? So, the most important custom/tradition is our religion, and I feel like that makes us who we are. And I feel like that kind of gives us kind of like a certain image to people in society, you know what I mean? 'Cause everybody already has their minds made up. There's racism in the world, there's also Islamophobia, so, it's becoming a double-edged sword, and especially when we came here around the time of 9/11 too. And I was alive, but I know nothing about the shit that was going on. But looking back and doing the research, it kind of made

sense. Like, oh yeah, everybody think we're terrorists, we're the Taliban, we've got a bomb, shit like that, you know what I'm hearing? It's kind of worrisome, you know what I mean? That people think like that. At the same time, it's like, I feel like that's what [religion] gives us our perseverance. It's like, at the end of the day, shoot, that's how I got through college. I was depressed and stuff at times, you know what I mean? But towards the end of my college years, that's when I started to get closer to God, you know? Closer to religion, learning about the religion, and it helped me. It got rid of my anxieties, and my worries; I had faith in the light. And just making prayers and whatnot. And I kind of treat my prayers like therapy sessions, breaks from the world. We pray five times a day, and that's like Fajr which is in the morning, like sunrise, Dhuhr which is around 1, and then Asr which is at 4:30, Maghrib at sunset, Isha is at night at 9:00. So it's 5 breaks in a day; that's kind of how I thought about it. It helps me get all the prayers and also help me stop doing the habits and different stuff I was doing in my life, and I feel like that's what a lot of Somali people in our community do. Whenever we're in the rough, whenever there's a passing, we always remember our **Allah**. We say "Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un" when somebody passes. So that means "to Him that we come from and to Him we return". So it's kind of a reminder that one thing that every human being is gonna experience in life is death, regardless. Nobody lives forever. So kind of a reminder of that.

But the way we comfort each other is we remember about the deen, the religion, 'cause if you get too comfortable in this life, you're gonna get too comfortable in the life that's not really real. 'Cause as Muslims, we live for the Akhirah, which is the afterlife. 'Cause we're like a transit. I got really deep into the religion these past couple of years. But it's like a transit, and our final destination is the afterlife. We live this transit life in order to dictate where we're gonna end up in our afterlife. So constantly learning about it, and I feel like that's one thing about us Somali folk, that we stay really close with our hearts. And it's like, shoot, it's kind of hard to find someone who will not acknowledge that, being in the fold of Islam. And that's what I love about it so much, is you can connect with each other every which way, and I feel like that's a part of another tradition of Somali people, you're gonna meet a Somali person wherever you go. Everywhere in the world.

You go to Cancun, you're gonna see a Somali person. You go to Alaska, you're gonna meet a Somali person for sure. Denmark–Somali. So it's like regardless of where you go, we have the connection of Somali. It's like, "are you Somali" and it's like "Somali da da da" and then you start talking. It's like "You live here? How long have you lived here?". Stuff like that. So it's like we already know each other, but it's like we don't know each other. But we're comfortable with each other because Somali people got that hospitality. One thing I kind of noticed, too… One thing that's an interesting fact, it's become a moral okay for Somali people to go into marriages or have kids with people outside of their nationalities. That's cool, but shit. Before? You would have never seen that. Somali lineage is strong. Everybody–grandpa, grandma, all of them Somali, and there was no mixing. I feel like that's what makes it so strong. And a lot of the time it's the fear of our parents, like that we're going to lose our culture, going to lose our language, just because they came to America. And shit, that is true. I'm still working on my Somali to this day. But keeping that culture is important, because, shit, that's all they had back then, a whole

different culture, and now they call it the melting pot. I understand that, and that's why I try to keep my culture important to me too.

MM: You mentioned that you're only now seeing Somali folks marry people who are not Somali and before that wasn't the case.

AM: Yeah. That was one thing I just realized. And Somali parents frowned upon it too. 'Cause at the end of the day of being a Muslim, the only important thing is a partner who is Muslim too, and who believes in the same ideals and principals as you do, you know? But it has nothing to do with who you are or where you're from, stuff like that. You can marry whoever you want. I feel like that's where it comes in culturally. Like, you keep it. It's strong.

MM: So is it about being Somali? Or what about marrying someone who's Muslim but not Somali? That was also frowned upon?

AM: Yeah, that's what's frowned upon. Like, shit, you go to any Somali parent… Let's say you're a child of a Somali parent, and you go to them, and you're like, "I'm gonna marry an Asian dude". Someone from Taiwan, or even Hispanic, from Mexico, or Nigerian. They're like, "What? Hell no!". They're like, "Don't bring them to my house." It's not a hate thing, like, "Oh, we hate them". It's not like that. It's more like, "What are you talking about? You're marrying a Somali person. I can be able to talk to them." I feel like that's mainly what it is. The way, communication, kind of understanding, building something. Because they know that if they never came to America, shit would have never been like that. They don't want them to lose the culture. That's the most important thing. Losing the culture. And I feel like that's why you barely see it that often. You see it happen, but it's not popular. I see tons of West African stuff like that–dating white girls, stuff like that.

MM: I'm sure there are plenty. So, you talk a lot about religion and culture in your life, so what about politics? Do politics play a role in your life?

AM: I took a step back from all that. I have my own views, and my own social views. Political views… I don't know. The way I see it, I'd rather hone in and focus more on local rather than anything else.

MM: So, like, local politics?

AM: Yeah. I know people who are running for stuff like city council, stuff like that. People are already in position like Safiya Khalid, the things she's doing for her community and for the community. So I see that and it kind of forms what I support. A lot of my viewpoints are influenced by my own principles and the way I live my life. The most important way is Islam. So different things, if it violates my principles of Islam, I probably won't support it. But when it comes to social and stuff like that, it doesn't really play a role. It plays a big role in my mom's life. But it's not the type of politics you're thinking about. It's the Somali politics. Somali politics, that shit is corrupt. That shit's so corrupt. But I have this theory, though. Because recently they

found oil in Hargeisa. They were making a well, and they pumped out the well thinking water was gonna come out, but oil came out. That raises some questions, like “Oil? The country could be rich!”. It’s making me think of a lot of the things that I was saying to you: that things are hidden, things aren’t open to the public, they’re saying one thing but they’re doing another. I feel like a lot of big playing countries, the countries that have a seat at the table, like the United States, they’re using third world countries and countries that are corrupted, like Somalia, in order to extort them. I feel like this entire Qabil thing, the tribe thing, you know how a lot of tribalism is going on in Somalia? I feel like all of that was created by the U.S. I ain’t gonna lie. Somali was amazing in the ‘80s, and once Black Hawk Down happened, why’d everything turn to shit? Because one president was doing this and that, and then the third, like it’s fucked up, you know? But I feel like the entire concept is kind of similar to what’s happening in America now. Race wars and stuff like that. Like, this is happening, this is happening, we’re not being heard. They’re like “we’re doing the best that we can, we’re gonna create these organizations, these programs”. It’s temporary. It’s like the glass ceiling. That’s my thought, I feel like a lot of it is perpetrated. Something sneaky’s happening behind–that’s a conspiracy theory. That’s what I think’s going on.

MM: So, you speak Somali, you say that you’re working on it, who do you speak Somali with? How often? [1245]

AM: All the time. Somali’s in my back pocket. When I’m with my Somali folks, we don’t want nobody to know what we’re saying. We speak Somali to each other. Because it’s like that edge on people sometimes, it’s our language. We own it. Nobody can really appropriate it. It’s not being taught in schools. I know a lot of people who know Spanish who are white, so it’s kind of our language. It depends on who I talk to– to my mom, siblings, parents, my friends–that’s who I practice on the most, my friends. It’s just that we talk Somali. It’s actually when we’re in a situation–let’s say we’re right here, we got some people around us, and we just wanna chit chat to each other, we talk Somali.

MM: And have you always spoken Somali or is that something you speak more of as you’ve gotten older?

AM: As I’ve gotten older, for sure. Some people, they’ve known Somali their whole life, from when they were kids, and they were born in America. For me, it’s like, I didn’t pick it up too much when I was a kid, because at the program where my mom would work, I was really raised by my cousins. They knew Somali, but they wouldn’t talk to me in Somali. They were trying to figure out English too! They just came to America! So I was teaching them, if anything. But now I’m learning, it’s coming a long way.

MM: And, so, there’s a couple of questions I want to ask about being here. You said you’d been here since third grade, just graduated from Bates in the spring, are there ways you’ve seen Lewiston change over your time growing up here?

AM: Yeah. I feel like Lewiston's changed. In my perspective, there's two different perspectives. The way you see it in the city versus the way you see it as a Somali person. The way the city is, it's growing, we're creating a name for ourselves, establishing ourselves, which is a good thing. Putting us in the right direction. We're giving opportunities to each other, of all different types of races and backgrounds, giving Lewiston a good representation, really putting Lewiston on the map. As a Somali person myself, the way I see it is that Lewiston has changed. I feel like a lot of us, like me, are in a transition-type thing. We can't stay here too long. A lot of the people who were here 10 years ago aren't here, and the people who were here 10 years before that weren't here. And that's how it is. I can't say, "oh, I wish everybody stayed here, hold it down,", because I understand there's so many more opportunities outside of here. And if you want to think about it, this is our city, but is it really? So that's why I feel like a lot of people leave. Kind of create opportunities for themselves. But I feel like Lewiston is the catalyst that helps people be who they are. Have the drive, be focused, not get into bullshit, you know? Crime, gangs, violence. Even though it still exists everywhere–it's everywhere, but it's not in your face out here in Lewiston. You have an opportunity to get an education, it's whether you want to get it. So I feel like that's what's changed. I feel the youth is changing a bit. You know how I say that Islam is a very important role? You're starting to see fewer people in the mosques that are younger. It used to be different, 10 years ago. We was there deep.

MM: Young people?

AM: Yeah, elementary school, middle school, high school. We was in there deep. I feel like now it's becoming different. Kids are assimilating a lot more, probably distancing themselves from being Somali. You know, the coach out here. That's what I see, but I feel like there's pros and cons to everything. I feel like we give a lot to Lewiston, and we take out a lot too. I remember at high school, everytime, they'd be like, "Abdul, make sure you stay, make sure you stay!". I'm like, yeah, imma stay, I'm going to school here.

MM: Who would tell you that?

AM: Teachers, stuff like that. They're like, "you have a lot to offer", like my program director, she'd be like "stay, make sure you stay around in the community, you have a lot to change, you got a lot of things to do, you know?" I'm like, "You're right, but do I want to do it? No." I'm doing it now, but it's still not my angle. But I'm grateful for Lewiston, that's why I feel like the older you get, the more you understand how it creates you, but at the same time, you can't just be getting comfortable in a bubble. There's a whole world outside.

MM: I think this is a perfect place to start wrapping up, but I always like to ask people, is there something I haven't asked you that you think is important to share?

AM: Lewiston's a great place. I feel like Lewiston is different from what Lewiston was 22 years ago. Completely different. I feel like Lewiston is its people, Lewiston is a representation of its people. I feel like Lewiston has come a long way, but I also feel like Lewiston has a lot more work to do. So that's where I want to leave it off.