

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

Adilah Muhammad (AM): So my name is Adilah Muhammad and I am originally from Decatur, Georgia, and have been living in the State of Maine since 2001. I have lived in Lewiston since I believe it's 2003 and identify as African American or a descendant of the enslaved from the Americas.

MM: Tell me about why you came to Lewiston?

AM: So when I moved to Maine, I was living in Old Orchard Beach. And I was one of very few people of color living in Old Orchard Beach or beyond Portland, south of Portland. First, we purchased property in Lewiston. And we were going back and forth. And we got to know folks from the Muslim community here. And so we made friendships. And our friends convinced us to come to Lewiston to be a part of a community, which we didn't have in Old Orchard. I liked it because you go to the post office, you see people every day, it felt like a really small town. And I never really lived in a small town before. So it felt, I wouldn't say Mayberry like, but it felt like what I used to think of when you can walk down the street and know your neighbors or run into people in the supermarket. So that was the initial appeal.

MM: And you said that you've been here since 2003? So why have you stayed?

AM: Well, I didn't always want to stay. So I stayed because I'm just one of those people who like to build things and like to see things grow over time and progress over time. And there was an influx of people of color in Lewiston following the large influx of Somali people, but there were other people of color that were from Egypt and Palestine who were professionals that came into the area. And so we made friends with them fairly quickly. And for a period of years, we had a really good solid community of professional people of color. And then after they started leaving the area, because a lot of them were on contracts, or were here I think through some immigrant program, like if you come and work in a rural city, rural area, you can I think get your visa fast tracked or something like that. So then after those periods were over, they would move on to other cities. So our network of folks had just collapsed.

MM: I've heard you use the word community - how do you define that? What does that mean to you?

AM: Just people you know and people who are involved in other things that you're involved with. I consider folks who go to the mosque as part of my community, because at that point I frequented the mosque more often. Folks who have the same vision for progress for the community, I guess. And I think during that period, the community was kind of based around people that I wanted to see my kids grow up with, and what they needed, like, what did they need in order to feel like they're part of the city, a part of this place?

MM: Tell me a little bit more about your family. What are the things they need in communities?

AM: So I'm very conscious that we live in a predominantly white city, and I wanted to make sure that they grew up around kids of color so that they could have strong friendships that they could turn to so

they didn't feel alone. For a while I homeschooled my kids. And that was very important because in the homeschool community, it was even fewer students of color. But I also wanted them to have that connection to the community as well.

MM: So a homeschool community means that you teach your kids at home, but then they also meet up with other kids who are homeschooled?

AM: So my kids, they were taught at home or they were taught in the community, most of the time we spent like going to museums or going to events or what have you. But we managed our own curriculum and developed our own curriculum. And there was a school Co-Op that the kids would attend. But there was little to no diversity in that Co-Op. So the only access to diversity they would have is through their sports because they participated in school sports, and they participated in other clubs and stuff. And I would be pretty adamant about taking them to community events where there were other people of color.

MM: Are there some that stand out for you?

AM: No, not really. Most of the community events were not like things that are public events. But if there were large Eid gatherings or going to other community members' houses where there were parties or something. That type of thing.

MM: So would it be accurate to say that there were traditions and customs that you practice that you made sure that they were a part of? So you mentioned Eid as being one of them. Are there other traditions and customs that your family practices?

AM: I'm pretty sure there are. They're probably so normal I don't even think about them as being like that. We don't do it so much anymore but we always had, I guess as a child of the South, Sunday dinner. So Sunday dinner was always a bigger spread than every other day of the week. And it's kind of bizarre. My mom converted to Islam when she was 14 or so when my grandmother converted, but they still kept the tradition of Sunday dinner. And so still to this day, my mom will ask me, What are you cooking for Sunday dinner? And I feel really bad because I feel like that tradition has kind of subsided. I'm just like, we might be having tacos. So that was a tradition. We still keep a very southern Thanksgiving when we do have it and host it. I think most of the traditions are very Southern. Our style of cooking. I cook a diversity of foods, but they know when mom's cooking southern food. I can't think of any things that stand out to me as traditions. There might be more, it might just be so ingrained in what I do.

MM: Right or just like the normal part of life, this is just what we do. So you mentioned celebrating Eid and going to the mosque, and your mother and grandmother converting to Islam. Can you talk a little bit more about the role that religion plays in your life?

AM: I would say that my mom thinks that I'm probably the most religious person in my immediate family. I didn't start practicing Islam, for my own self, until I was probably a junior in college. I worked at the Islamic Society of North America as an intern and when I went to the school in Indiana at DePauw

University, I didn't know it was 45 minutes from the Islamic Society of North America. So when I started practicing more, I would frequently go to the headquarters because they had a national library, they would have national speakers and they organized the big annual 35,000 conference so I got involved in that. They became my community because at any one time there was only five Muslim students on campus. Not only did they become my community, they were teaching me a lot about things that I hadn't learned growing up because my parents weren't so adamant about pushing me towards religion. There were a lot of things about Islam, I just didn't know. So I would take advantage of some of the Sheiks that would come in from different places, or just the workshops that they hosted. It was such a diverse community because when I went to the Atlanta Masjid of Al Islam, it was about 95% African American and the Islamic Society of North America was probably the most diverse mosque that I'd attended on a consistent basis. The Indian and Pakistani community was the largest segment, but there was so much diversity that I didn't feel out of place. Then they had a fellowship program, so there were other college students that were there and we would always hang out. It was just a community that I never experienced before and a way of practicing Islam that I had never experienced before. So it just felt natural to me. Today, I practice my Islam with more of a relaxed approach, not saying a non-religious approach, but when I think of Islam I think of justice, so the work that I do in the community is part of my practice of being a Muslim. Whereas I think, sometimes we tend to think of things as rituals. We still keep up with the daily prayers.

MM: Are you a part of a mosque here?

AM: Yeah. I think Muslims don't like to necessarily say they're part of a mosque, because everywhere you go, is a mosque. And so we don't have memberships per se in mosques, in the same way that churches have. So I don't go to the local mosque. I think that there are certain cultures and traditions that, you know, still carry on things that I don't necessarily agree with, that are more so cultural than religious. So I primarily practice my faith independently, or I'll visit the mosque in Portland, or I'll go to Boston. So yeah, I haven't really found a good home community in Maine that I go to consistently.

MM: And your children? Are you also raising them in the Islamic tradition?

AM: I think I'm taking an approach that my parents took with me, but giving them a little bit more knowledge. Like my parents never made us pray, they would pray, but they would never make us pray. And they would, pretty much say, you know, you find your path. But with the kids, I will give them more exposure to Islam without trying to guide them too much. Most of the things that I teach them about Islam are universals and not the particulars.

MM: What's an example?

AM: So, like kindness, or to get really dogmatic some Muslims will say, you have to pray a certain way, your foot has to be in a certain position, because this is the way the Prophet did it, this is the way XYZ, so like, those types of things, they're just a no go in this household for me. But like things around food, which I think is important just because of general health, and well being, those are the types of things I teach them about. What proper things to put in your body, things to keep away from your body and those types of things. Giving to the poor, or those types of things that are just universal in all faiths

because that's what it's ultimately about. If they want to get into the particulars of things that don't really matter, that's up to them when they get older.

MM: So you shared a little bit about your family and community. Can you talk to me a little bit about the work that you do?

AM: For many years, I was a strategic planning and research consultant, or organizational consultant. And I recently started a nonprofit organization called The Third Place, which we're going through a strategic planning process, so this mission may change. But in a nutshell, it's an organizational collaborative that supports professionals, community builders, and entrepreneurs of African descent. And I started this organization, because when I came to Maine, 20 plus years ago, I thought that there would be an organization by now, serving those communities in a way that was very systems driven, but it wasn't. So I've been Executive Director since January, and have been working to build those communities within the state and make sure that they're connected in a way that's sustainable long term. But also, in addition to that, I am a real estate investor, and have been doing that for just as long, 20 years because when I left Hannaford Brothers company, I realized that I never wanted to really work for someone again. And I felt that there was a need to build Black wealth in a way that wasn't necessarily something that was prevalent in the community.

MM: And so you've been doing both of those things for about 20 plus years?

AM: Yeah. Consulting and investing.

MM: In building community around The Third Place, does that community overlap with real estate and investing or not necessarily?

AM: Yeah, it doesn't overlap so much. But one thing I do with all of my volunteer activities or my work, is that they're connected in some way. So when I first got involved in real estate, when I purchased my first property in Lewiston, that was around a time when there was a large influx of Somalis that were coming to Lewiston. And that was when the housing was really bad. And housing was really cheap. So when we purchased the property, there were other folks in the community who were asking if we had other properties, and it was like, No, we just have that one. And then we thought, why not? Why not purchase another property, because it's helping folks get clean, affordable, safe housing. And they're also people from our religious community. And so that helped them but it's also helping the neighborhood, which was not in the upward cyclical position that it is now. So, yeah, so that's connected. And then as I started to get more involved in housing issues in downtown, I wanted to really understand why there is such a concentration of poverty in the downtown. Why are there these issues that keep cycling through the same neighborhood? And I just wanted to understand it a little bit more and understand what my role as a real estate investor was in a community like downtown Lewiston. And so that was the point where I went back to school for public policy to get my Master's. And through that, I started connecting with other community groups as well. And so that gave me a really good context and background of like, what are some of the gaps in the community, and particularly the gaps that exist for people of color.

MM: And you did your degree in public policy here in Maine?

AM: Yeah. At USM Muskie School.

MM: And so you made some connections through there also?

AM: Yeah, I made some really good long-term connections through my work there. And I think the first few organizations I worked with was - it wasn't called LA Metro Chamber at the time- the Androscoggin County Chamber, and I started working with the young professionals of Lewiston-Auburn area. I mean, once again, I think I was the only woman of color, at least, in that organization. And then they were rebranding, I think the LA slogan used to be 'it's happening here.' And we did some work around how to rebrand Lewiston. And I was chairing the betterment committee at that time. Yeah, so that was kind of like my first entree into the wider Lewiston community because then I got connected with business leaders and professionals who weren't people of color.

MM: Can you speak a little bit about, if you participate in politics, what role politics plays in your life? Because it sounds like some of these organizations are also political organizations and there are policy issues and a little crossover.

AM: So I think all of those, particularly with the Chambers of Commerce have a very heavy policy focus. But when I'm a part of those organizations, I think of "how does this impact people's lives?" and I just try to influence the organizations to understand what's needed at the household level. And I guess they can take that information and do with it what they will. I did chair the Downtown Neighborhood Action Committee in the downtown neighborhood task force, through the City of Lewiston, which those initiatives were primarily focused on improving a very specific section of downtown Lewiston. And it's politics and policy whenever you participate with stuff like that with the City. So that gave me a good understanding of what it takes to really create good policy, and the level of connection you need to have with community in order to do that. So yeah, I've been actually encouraged to run for public office several times, and it's just not my thing. I think I'm better suited working on the periphery. I'm way too sensitive to take on that work.

MM: What are some things on the periphery that you like to do?

AM: Right now I'm involved with the working community challenge with the City of Lewiston, which comes out of the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston. Our particular group is looking at youth in the workforce and making sure that we build mechanisms that create youth pipelines. I was initially involved in the Portland group who's looking at childcare, but they didn't get the implementation grant. So they were looking at childcare issues and how to really create public and nonprofit partnerships around childcare, and build a narrative around why it's important to create Black owned businesses around supporting the need in the childcare community. So kind of create a structure where if you're filling a need and also building businesses for people.

The housing stuff with the task force was related to both my business and my desire to see a more sustainable downtown community. Everything I do is kind of connected. So The Third Place is

connected to my desire to see more cohesion, and a more sustainable ecosystem between business owners and professionals and civic leaders. It goes back to the more traditional view of Black liberation and making sure that we have a connected ecosystem within the Black community or communities of color first, or in tandem, before we really think or believe that we have to have that outside of the community or have to create wealth outside of the community. I think, to a certain extent in Maine, you have to do that anyhow. But I think it's important for us to also talk about building and supporting each other within the community and what that looks like for wealth creation.

MM: I feel like I should have asked you a question about economic development. That was really insightful and interesting. You talk a lot about the relationship between policy and people's everyday life and all of these types of dynamics, it's really important. One of the things that we've been asking everyone, thinking about culture and customs and practices and also language; is there a particular role that language plays in your life?

AM: Language? No? Can you ask that a different way? English is my first language, so.

MM: In your household are any other languages spoken or, your life in Lewiston: is it impacted by English being your primary language? I don't know if it's your only language or if you have any other languages that you speak or use.

AM: I speak French, and I'm losing a lot of it because we don't speak that in our household. Beyond the kids' individual interests in languages, there's not much of an impact in that area.

MM: Alright, and so there's a couple more questions to ask you. The main one is, as your 20 plus years in Lewiston, how have you seen it change?

AM: I was just talking about that. I was just talking to someone about that this morning. So when I first came to Lewiston, I remember the first time I visited Lewiston, I went straight downtown. And I was absolutely shocked, because I'd never seen white poverty up close. I saw storefronts with nothing in it. And I was just really wondering, what causes this? You know, like, why does this exist? Why is there a storefront that is empty when you can create something? I come from that tradition where you can create anything, you can sell anything, you can do something.

So we came here to look at properties and we were in people's homes. And I just remember going into a multi-unit property and seeing tons of people in this one particular apartment, and it being so absolutely filthy, and I'd never seen that in my life. I've been in what's considered little Vietnam. That was actually across the street from my childhood Mosque in Atlanta, it has since been torn down. But that was considered one of the most unsafe places in Atlanta, with poverty, but it was just a different type of poverty. There's a certain way black people carry themselves differently and at a certain level of...I don't know...[Even if] you're poor, but it was just something that always held up, a bit of esteem about you. So transitioning from that, over the years, I see that changing.

I think it changed a lot with the influx of the Somali immigrants here, who became an example of living in dignity within an area that was so depressed socially and economically. Of course, there was a lot of

vibrancy that we can't see with our own eyes. But I think it just really helped reshape community, again. Downtown became a place to hang out in a different way. One of the things I like to see in the summertime is Kennedy Park, which had been known for drug dealing and prostitution and everything else. Any summer, June, July day it's filled with families, just sitting on blankets eating, enjoying. You don't see that a lot anywhere, unless it's a festival or something. But it's like you can't find a spot on the grass which is delightful. Also, as a real estate investor, investments remained flat for years, and there was such a high vacancy rate and disproportionate amount of housing that if you didn't get paid, people just upped and left. We would have sometimes 20 vacancies and trying to fill them and screening people, showing apartments 13 different times. Now it's coming to a point where we're starting to see the investments make really good returns. But it's also a little bit troublesome that the rents are starting to go high. We recognize what that means for people who are seeking rental housing. But it also helps us improve the housing. And it also helps us to be able to provide tenants more stability and better amenities. Socially, things have gotten better, from my own perspective, between the white community and the communities of color, because we had that [incident], when the National Guard was deployed here.

MM: You were here for that?

AM: I wasn't actually living here at that point. I moved here afterwards. There were times when it was routine for people to shout stuff at me. And I remember not doing gardening in front of the house because I just didn't want people shouting stuff at me as I was planting flowers or whatever. And a lot of that has changed - it's not with as much frequency. People aren't asking me, "why do I drive the car? How did I get my car?" It used to be routine, "where did you get that car from?" It was just more intense then. There was a lot of tension.

And I think the schools really helped with that. Because, when people's kids start to become friends with people of different races, the kids bring that experience back to their homes. And they help influence their parents. So I think the work that was done with the Civil Rights teams in the schools was really helpful.

And I remember one of the things that was really fueling a lot of the hate and rhetoric was the Sun Journal. I just remember, Rex Rhodes was the editor at the Sun Journal at the time. And the headlines that were coming out were very problematic. So I remember the community getting together and going down to the Sun Journal and talking to the editorial board about the way you're headlining these stories and stuff is really problematic, because people see that, and they don't read it, or they might read something that's terribly skewed. But it worked, because they recognized what they were doing. They recognized their role in it. And so there was an editorial shift. It also changed the way the Sun Journal managed the comments in the comment section, because a lot of the comments were hate filled. And I remember that they made a change there as well. So it wasn't a community where they were cultivating the hate. And so once that shifted, and the schools, and more community events that brought people together. That was really helpful.

MM: And so now walking through the streets of Lewiston, it feels very different for you than it did?

AM: Yeah, it feels very different. The thing is that I didn't really walk through the streets then. And now, it feels like any other city. I mean, you might get comments like any other city, but I'm not bracing for someone to shout something at me.

MM: It's interesting that you decided to stay even though you felt like you had to brace yourself for people saying things to you, or even being afraid to be in front of your own house to do things. Why stay?

AM: So, because I wear hijab, people always mistake me as an immigrant or refugee, and they'd mistake me as Somali. And, I come from a tradition of people who don't get driven out very easily. And I think that the more you try to suppress us, the tougher we become. And I always thought, there's a reason why I came here. And I used to always find that, okay, well, why did I come here? And I would think about people leaving and I would think about, okay- if I leave, everyone left, nothing will change. So I kind of see it as my calling to be here. And maybe it's not, but that's how I stay.

MM: That's beautiful. Do you feel like you've seen the fruits of your labor?

AM: I think I've seen it and I'm seeing it. It always touches me when people say,, "I don't know if I would have like stayed here, past XYZ, if I didn't meet someone at a networking event at The Third Place," or like, "if it wasn't for The Third Place, I wouldn't have met them," and now I go over their house and our families get together. So it's not just networking. It's facilitating people's actual lives and their connections. So for me, I start bawling every time someone says something to me about that.

MM: I'm really grateful for you sharing that. I see how much it means to you, to do that work.

AM: It's tough when you feel like you're alone and you don't have someone to call to eat potato chips on the couch. You know?

MM: One last question. Do you feel as though your kids have that now?

AM: My kids didn't have that. My oldest son said something to me when he was upset with me. And he said, "It was your fault that you all raised me here," because he feels like he didn't have a community. He felt like he didn't feel connected to the degree that he wanted to be connected. My second oldest is connected; kids connect differently, people connect differently. He feels connected to community here.

But I'm more cognizant of what I need to do for my younger kids, bringing them around Black men, because I have four boys. That's something that the two older kids totally missed, like a community of Black men to engage with. To understand like, interactions, the nuances of cultural differences and those sorts of things and be able to ask questions. Yeah, I felt like I didn't give my kids that. And that's my biggest regret with my oldest kids. But I think my two youngest kids still have a very different experience.

MM: You've seen it change over time. And also just sort of marking that a little bit with your kids' experiences here; that the older ones had very different experiences than the younger ones engaging



in the community. Which, when I think about this sort of oral history project that we're doing, that's one of the reasons to think about it. A lot of people said they've gone to the museum, that their school took them, but they don't see anyone that looks like them in that museum. So I think this is one of the goals of this project is to start to change some of that. So in some of these major institutions that our kids are seeing themselves so it doesn't take so much work from their parents to have to do it all because that's an impossible task, to try and do it all. So I'm grateful for you sharing your story so you can be a part of that change that you're talking about, that your kids can experience and hopefully their kids too. When I do interviews, I always end by asking, is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is really important to say? Or that I missed or just want to make sure gets through?

AM: I don't think you missed anything. But I think that it takes a lot to build community but its also so little [simple]. Bringing people together is the simplest thing to do but it doesn't happen with as much frequency as it should, especially in this day and age. There's just a lot of lack of connection amongst all communities. And I think that we need to figure out when we use that word [community], whether that's at the municipal level or amongst ourselves, what does that really mean? What's the missing additive? Because that's what life is about. I always try to reach out to people when they're in their yards or whatever. That's the missing aspect of community life in America. Yeah. And I wonder why [think] about that a whole lot.

MM: Ending it on a question is a good place for now. Thank you so much for doing this.