

Marcelle Medford (MM): Can you just start by introducing yourself, tell me your name, your age, your nationality, and how long you have lived in Lewiston.

Amran Osman (AO): My name is Amran Osman. I'm 24 years old. I've lived in Lewiston since I was 3 and I'm Somali.

MM: Tell me a little bit about your relationship to Lewiston. I know you were three when you moved there. But can you tell me why you came, if you remember or if that was something that came up at all? And what it was like to grow up there.

AO: I was born in Kenya. My mom left Somalia, and came to Kenya. And then we were first brought to Tennessee. And then I think we only stayed there for a year, and then we came to Lewiston. And I remember it was a time when a lot of Somalis were coming. And then my mom was telling me how there was this riot with the KKK members. And then she had to hide in the closet with me because she was so scared. So that was like her opening to Lewiston. But she moved here because there were so many Somali people and she wanted to be around her people. We lived there with my cousins and a few of her friends in Tennessee and they all picked up and came to Lewiston together. And they would all walk together to like Walmart. We just created like a community amongst each other before like the Somali community was big.

MM: Wow. So there's so many things there. Tell me a bit about how you define community.

AO: So for community, it's just the people that I grew up with around me. There are people that are not related to me that I call aunts and uncles, because they've literally just helped raise me and I grew up with. If I see a Somali person, I'm always like, Oh, Hi, Auntie, Hi, uncle. Like, some people I don't even know their actual names. But I just grew up with the community helping raise me, because my mom came here as a single mother until she married my dad. So it was basically her and her friends. She would always be holding my hand. People now when they see me, they're like, Wow, you grew up. I remember when your mom was dragging you around. So the community helped raise me. And basically, that's how I define community, the people around you who come forward and help you in your time of need, and help you when you're going through things.

MM: That's beautiful. So you talk about family and community a little bit interchangeably. Can you tell me about your families? You talked about, you know, your mom bringing you here and that there were also other aunts and uncles who might have been actually related or friends. So tell me about your family and your family life.

AO: So originally, it was just me and my mom. And then she married my dad. And they had my siblings. So I have seven younger siblings. One is turning 18 and one just turned 18 last year, they've grown up so fast. But basically, I've been just the bigger sister. I remember when my first sister Amiira was born. I would scribble her name on my papers, because I was so excited to have a sibling. And then I was just excited for all of them. Because I think for me, I grew up as a nurturer. And always just looking after them. So it's been something where I've always just been watching them, like right now I'll be texting them, like, what are you doing? Are you out of school? Where are you? So I just grew up in a very tight

knit family, where all my siblings were all very close even though the age gap is big. But we all grew up very close.

MM: And so you're the oldest of the siblings. And were all your siblings born in Lewiston?

AO: Yeah.

MM: Wow. And are they all still there in Lewiston?

AO: Yeah, they're all still there.

MM: And so you came to Lewiston when you were three. Have you lived there the whole time?

AO: I lived in Gorham for three years on campus because I really wanted to leave Maine for school. Because I think just growing up in Maine, and wanting to see the world that was something that I wanted to do. But my mom was like, You're not going anywhere. And then so I went to USM and then I transferred, I didn't even tell her I was transferring. I just said, By the way, I'm leaving. I'm living on campus, and she couldn't say no. So I just moved up and just moved to campus. But then I would get homesick, which just then imagine if I went further. I couldn't just drive back. I think it just made me love Lewiston more being away for those three years, because I just realized how much of a community there is. There's been a lot that has happened in those three years, where I can go home and be like, Oh, I'm surrounded by people that love me and care for me.

MM: Oh, that's wonderful. So you did leave for three years. You got homesick, you missed the community? What were some things that drew you back to Lewiston?

AO: I think there were a lot of losses of community members. And then I remember my cousin passed. And then me and my friend, my cousin, she's one of my best friends, we've been friends since we were little, came back. And I realized, how tight knit the community was. And people would always be there helping us. Her mom was in Canada, so it was just her and her sisters, but the community was there to come and talk to them, come in, help them the funeral day, covered it and stuff. And I was like, whoa. And then just seeing how quick people were withcoming and just helping out. I was like, if I was in another state, I wouldn't have those people to help me if anything happened. So just seeing that and just seeing if anything does go bad. I'm able to call up my dad and say, Hey, can you please come here? Like I've had many flat tires. I'm just like, I need you to come help me. And so just being able to do that, and now that my sisters drive, being able to just call them and say, Hi, can you please just come pick me up? Just having the fallback plan and having somebody to just lean on when things go bad.

MM: So you talked about that community and people coming together around loss, around support or things. Are there other traditions, customs, things that you practice?

AO: Eid is something that's big, where the whole community is together, all of Lewiston, and we all go pray it used to be at the Armory, and then it was outside. Its right behind the skating place, behind the high school. It was outside there. And then it was back again at the Colisee. And then it was back at the Armory. But just seeing everybody, there's people that you won't see for the whole year, but you'll see them at Eid, and you'll be like, Oh my god, Hi, how are you? And then my dad has all his friends come to our house. And they eat. And my mom will cook really nice food. There's food that she doesn't cook until it's Eid. And I'm just waiting for this. So it's really nice to just see everybody and just be surrounded by people.

MM: Is there something that she cooks around the time that you really like?

AO: It's this meat, I don't even know what kind of meat it is. But it's so good. And she makes halwa and she just makes so much food. Sometimes I don't even look at it, I'll just eat it.

MM: So talking about customs, Eid is obviously a religious holiday. Are there other ways that religion plays a role in your life?

AO: I think my religion has guided me a lot. Just being able to go to the mosque and pray. Growing up, a lot of the friends that I made were at Dugsi, which is like Sunday school, but it's Saturday, Sunday Friday, and it was hard because we have to memorize the Quran. But a lot of the people that I grew up with, I grew up with them through there. So I met people from like Auburn, and I went to Montello so they would be going to different schools in Lewiston so we wouldn't see each other, but we met during Dugsi and got to know each other.

MM: That's cool. What about language. Does language play a role in your life?

AO: Yeah. Sometimes I'll see somebody in the street. And if I speak Somali, they'll be much more willing to talk to me. Even though my Somali is kind of broken. My mom understands me. So that's all that matters. But they'll just be familiar because I can speak with them in their own language. Like, I realized that people are more welcoming when you can speak their language.

MM: And so you speak Somali, do you speak any other languages?

AO: No, I wish.

MM: And who do you speak to? You said your mom understands you, so do you speak Somali regularly with your mom?

AO: My mom, my dad, my siblings. Sometimes I'll speak in English and she'll answer me in Somali. Sometimes I won't even realize that I'm speaking Somali or she's speaking Somali. It'll just be like a back and forth thing. And then someone's like, your children don't know Somali? And I'm like, Yes, I do. It's just easier sometimes in English.

MM: I also want to talk to you about politics and work. Let's start with politics. Does politics play a role in your life? And if so, how do you participate?

AO: I think politics plays a role in everybody's life, especially being a Black woman, there's so many policies that affect us. But also so many people running for office that if they do get into office, that's definitely gonna affect me. So I think I wasn't into politics until Trump was running. And I was like, Hold on, wait.

I originally was a nursing major. And I thought I wanted to go into nursing, but I don't do blood. So I studied political science. And I realized that it was something that I genuinely liked. And then just understanding politics, going phone banking, doing letters to the editor. Just doing all that in college just made me more inclined to go into politics. I thought of running sometime. But I think just the environment is kind of not the best. So I don't think it's something that I want to do at the moment. But maybe one day.

MM: So you said when Trump got elected, that's the thing that made you stop and pay attention. What did you do? Was it a conversation? Was it an event?

AO: I started talking to my peers, just having conversations with my peers, and just talking about what he was doing, things that were happening in the climate then, because there was so much that he was saying. And I'm like, There's no way he can get elected. But then that's when I learned about the electoral college. So I was just like, okay, me not knowing about that. There's so much that I don't know about and if I don't know about these things, then it's more likely that I can get taken advantage of or, there's things that can happen in the community that I won't know. So I wanted to educate myself and then learn more. So when I transferred to USM, I decided I wanted to study political science. So I started learning more, doing more of my research out of the classroom, and just having more discussions. I joined Senate at USM and just got more involved and hands on, because I just was like, Okay, the one thing that people can't take away from me is my voice, so I'm going to use it.

MM: And so once you graduated USM and went to Lewiston, did you take this political urgency with you?

AO: Somewhat. Around that time, I lost one of my brothers. And then I was working at Gateway. We were doing civic engagement, but I also wanted to work more on substance use, but there were politics that went into that too, so I wanted to work on that. So that's why I started my organization just to build upon getting the BIPOC and immigrant communities resources, because I realized that the community wasn't talking about it. But also, there wasn't a lot of discussion when it came to the higher ups because there's so many people of color who are incarcerated for weed charges. But now weed is legal. So what's happening now? So it's that conversation. And then there's people who don't know that if you're not a citizen, and now that weed is legal, you can still get deported for it. So there's so much politics when it comes to that, too. So I'm just learning so much, and learning the nitty gritty things was just very interesting.

MM: So it sounds like a lot of your personal life and political interests really came together to form this organization. And that's really powerful. I've learned about Generational Noor over the years, and it's really amazing. Say a bit more about that.

AO: I grew up in Lewiston. And I realized that a lot of my peers were going through substance use disorder, but nobody was talking about it. And these conversations, it would always just be like, they're a bad kid, don't talk to them, or that's a bad person, don't talk to them. But nobody was ever talking about the underlying issues, the trauma that led them to use or what was happening, like if somebody wanted to come back into the community and get help, there weren't that many resources for people of color to get help. But also the resources that were here in Maine, they were all white centered and white led. So how are you supposed to ask someone for help who's never walked in your shoes or doesn't understand what you're going through? So that's something I wanted to do. I wanted to make an impact. First and foremost with the youth. A lot of the youth, going back to community support, the youth were the ones that stood by me and wanted to help, a lot of them from Lewiston. And a lot of the parents actually, were very willing to have the conversation, because I think they realized that so many people were being lost, that they wanted to make a difference and start the discussion.

MM: How was it bringing your parents into these conversations? Is it very different from talking to your peers?

AO: It was scary. When I came up with the idea, I had to sit both my parents down and explain this is what I'm doing. I know you might be uncomfortable but it's something that I'm passionate about. And I really want to make a difference. So I just need you guys to stand by me and support me. And they've always been supportive of me my whole life. They've been my number one cheerleader, so they were willing to stand by me. And most of the events and stuff, they were the ones that were telling people Oh, my daughter's having an event, please come, especially with the launch party, my mom was telling all her friends, like she's just please come and support her. So it was very hard to start the conversation. But having both my parents by my side made me more comfortable. Because if I get any blowback or anything I still have my family support. And that's the only people I need at the end of the day. I can go home to them, and just have them just support me.

MM: Are there other elders in the community who are having these conversations and broader political conversations and things that you mentioned, are those part of the conversation too?

AO: Yeah, a lot of people have been very open about it and willing to come. During our first community conversation, we had a few moms who came and were very open and wanted to have the conversation and were saying this is what's happening in the community. How are you going to get help? How are we going to start these conversations? I went to the mosque and the head of the mosque said that he tried to have the conversation before but it didn't go anywhere, so if you're willing to do it, we'll stand by you. So I was like, Okay, I'm gonna try and he's like, good luck. So, they've been very supportive with it. So just seeing where it goes now, and just seeing what happens. Hopefully, we'll be able to make an impact.

MM: Are you seeing the impact of the organization?

AO: Somewhat. Before, the conversation wasn't something that was being had in the open, nobody was talking about it out in the open, it was very hush hush. So just being able to sit at a table with a few other people and just have this conversation that within itself is impactful, and just destigmatizing it overall. Because I think so many youth are struggling, not just youth, older people are struggling with substance use disorder, and just mental health. So I'm just getting them to start just talking.

MM: So having the discussions out in the open, what does that mean? Just outside of the home and family?

AO: Just even in front of someone else. Because I think a lot of the parents would always be like, my child wouldn't do this so why am I going to talk about it? Why am I going to have this conversation? So just having them in the room while we're having these conversations is one step forward.

MM: So parents are in the room while youth are discussing?

AO: Yeah. It's been interesting, but a good first step.

MM: That's big. Congratulations, and thanks for doing that. It seems like it has a really big future and is very important. And so you mentioned, as you were thinking about starting Generational Noor, how did you choose the name?

AO: All my siblings their last name is Noor. And it also means light. I think it's going to be a generational effort. And hopefully this organization will be the light.

MM: Oh, that's beautiful. You said that you were working at Gateway before you started it. And you're working at Gateway now. Can you tell me a little bit about that work?

AO: I'm the Community Resource Coordinator. So I'm overseeing the mentor program. So it's people who've been here for less than five years, who are between the ages of 13 to 25. And I'm connecting them with a mentor who helps them with their housing needs, on getting school help, because they're not able to get financial aid. So applying for scholarships, and maybe they need the right to work, or even applying for work, so just anything that they need, connecting them with the right resources.

MM: And how long have you been doing that?

AO: Over a year now.

MM: And this a program that was already in place before you came...

AO: Yeah, I was a part of their COVID youth coalition while I was in college. While I was in college, when COVID first hit, I wanted to make a difference. And I realized that they were doing this program,

so I joined it. And I was one of the first people who are part of that program. And then once I graduated, there was an opening. So I applied and thankfully got it.

MM: Congratulations. And so you were part of the COVID Youth Program. And what did you do?

AO: So during COVID, we connected with the BIPOC community, and people who didn't normally get resources and connected them with resources within the community. And then told them once the vaccine came out, explaining the vaccine to them, and explaining what was happening within that community, getting them food if they did have COVID. So just connecting them with anything that they needed.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about a mentoring program? Is it folks in the Somali community that get the services?

AO: Anybody who is an asylum seeker or has been here less than five years in any and every community.

MM: And you focus on it in Lewiston?

AO: Lewiston, Portland, Biddeford, Westbrook, all around Maine.

MM: And are you actually driving to all those places?

AO: Yeah, sometimes when I'm connecting with the mentee and bringing them their iPad. Because they get iPads because some people might not have phones and communication was an issue. So we got iPads to communicate. So once we're intaking them in the program, sometimes people will want you to go to their home. So going to their homes and connect with them, or connecting with them wherever they're at. And then once I connect them with their mentor, it's usually then their mentor is a middleman and then they connect with me to connect with their mentee.

MM: How do you find the mentors for the program?

AO: They're youth in the community who apply. So they all just usually apply.

MM: Do you have relationships with people already who are the mentors? You know some of these folks from growing up in the area?

AO: Yeah.

MM: How have you seen Lewiston change over time?

AO: I think it's gotten a lot more diverse than when I was younger. Because I remember sometimes when I was in preschool or kindergarten I was the only Somali girl in the room. And then as time grew, I had more people that look like me. So it got a little more diverse, but also, I think, more youth led.

Maybe because I'm just in a lot of spaces that are youth led, but I think it has the potential to be more youth and BIPOC led. I think it has a lot of potential. It just needs a lot of work.

Also, going back to community, my first job was at the Italian bakery. And it was run by a family. It was Lisa and her daughter. And I think they showed me part of that community because she would always drive me home. Or I would get doughnuts, because I remember I got the job because I was always at the Italian bakery. I would always walk from the high school to the Italian bakery to home. So like, it was my stop. And she'd see me. I said I was looking for a job and she's like, do you want to work here? And that was my first job. And it showed me about connections because they were willing to hire me because I was always there and they got to know me.

MM: Yeah. And are they Italian?

AO: I think so. Yeah. They don't own it anymore. Unfortunately, they sold it. But it was given to her, it was her father's.

MM: Oh, wow. So it's still there. I'll have to check it out. What do you get from there? You said doughnuts.

AO: I don't like donuts anymore because I think I like over indulged in donuts. But their breakfast pizza is really, really good. They have a really nice breakfast pizza. You should try it.

MM: Okay, I'm going to put that on my list.. That's really cool as a way to think about about your community, folks that took care of you. You needed a job and they showed you kindness.

AO: They came to my launch party for Generational Noor.

MM: You said you've seen Lewiston change over time and become more youth led. What does that mean, more youth led?

AO: I think there are a lot of programs that are run by youth, and there are more organizations that are willing to take youth. Also there's have been a lot of nonprofits that are run by people of color because I think a lot of people of color said, Okay, you guys are not going to help me, I will help my community myself. There's Fatuma, there's Fowsia, so there's just a lot of people of color led organizations that are willing to make the move because nobody was helping them. And they're hiring youth. So I think they realized that youth is the future

MM: That's a beautiful note to end on. I always end interviews by asking if there's anything that I haven't asked that you think it's important to share.

AO: No, that's it.

MM: Thank you.