

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

Divine Selengbe (DL): My name is Divine Langley. I was born in Congo. I've lived in Lewiston for almost 15 years. I feel like Lewiston has been more my home than like Vermont has because I moved from Vermont to Lewiston when I was 11. And then I've been here ever since.

MM: I want you to talk to me a little bit about your relationship to Lewiston. Why, if you can remember, did your family move from Vermont to Lewiston, and why have you decided to stay in Lewiston?

DL: So I moved from Vermont to Lewiston and then I stayed in Lewiston because I think it's a lot more affordable than Portland and all the other neighboring cities. And I basically grew up here because I went to elementary school here. I went to Lewiston Middle School. I went to Lewiston High School. And then I left for college. I went to Waterville, I went to Thomas. And then I came back and I got my own place in Lewiston.

MM: How many years have you been back in Lewiston since going to college?

DL: I think like two or three years ago.

MM: And was that always the choice you wanted to make—to come back here? Or did you just kind of come back to figure it out and decided to stay?

DL: I came back to figure it out and decided to stay and then I saw the pricing of apartments in other places compared to here. And I'm like, Okay, Lewiston is definitely home for a while.

MM: So you live here and your family is still here. And you also work here. So can you tell us about the work that you do?

DL: Yes. I'm a housing specialist. And specifically, I'm a certifier for Prosperity Maine. And there's an office in Portland and there's an office in Lewiston, and I commute. Three times a week I'm in Portland and then two times a week I'm in Lewiston.

MM: And is the work that you do at the moment tied specifically to Lewiston or not really at the moment?

DL: No, because I'm sort of buying information from people that live in the Cumberland County, so they might not be just tied to just Lewiston.

MM: You said you moved back here, you were trying to figure it out, decided to stay. And you've also gone through all of your schooling here. So, you know, how do you think about your community here in Lewiston.

DL: I think that a lot of friends that I have I grew up with them here. Two of my best friends, I've known them since I moved here. I probably met them like the week I moved here back when I

was 11 or 12. And then ever since then, I feel like I got to grow up with everybody. I got to experience transitions in my life. We all went our separate ways, in terms of my friends, but we always met back in Lewiston. And then my family, although my parents live in Auburn, my sister lives in Lewiston, too. So my family is all here, the people I care about are here. So I think that is also what keeps me rooted in Lewiston because it's just so close to the people that I care about.

MM: I want you to tell us a little about your family. But before that, can you talk a little bit more about your friends? Some of the friends that you've had here from when you were 11?

DL: Yes. Well, my two best friends. One is Amran and one is Yasmin. I met them both here. And I feel like we've just been friends ever since. And I think they definitely helped make my transition moving from Vermont to Lewiston better because we've all just gone through life together, middle school together, all those growing pains I guess. And now we can be adults and figure out our lives and find our ambitions but Lewiston is our foundation, because I never would have met them if I didn't move here. And they're still here.

MM: And do you all get to hang out or are there things that you do or places you go?

DL: I think you get older, you get busier. So we don't hang out as much as we should. In high school, sometimes your friends are just based on proximity, you're just going to the same classes, you're doing the same thing. But I think when you become an adult, you actually have to make time and schedule, and like all those things. So we don't hang out as much as I want to. But I always know if I call them or I can go see them and they'll always be there, which I really like.

MM: I want to tell us a bit about your family as well. You mentioned that your sister is still here and your parents are now in Auburn. Tell us a little bit about being raised in Lewiston and your family.

DL: My family has always been like a strong foundation for me. And I think being in Lewiston, our church is here, the people we know are here, my parents have developed their own friendships here. So I think it's really great that we were able to integrate well into Lewiston. Because it wasn't that crazy big of a difference. St. Albans was smaller than Lewiston, and there were less people. But this is a bigger city. And I think that has helped too, because we get to meet different people and experience different things.

MM: And St. Albans is in Vermont? Do you remember living there? Was it a Congolese community there? And is there one here?

DL: I definitely think there's a bigger Congolese community here than there was where we were because I remember growing up and being one of the only black families in my town. And moving here, I'm like, 'Oh, my gosh, there's so many different people.' I didn't know that there could be so much diversity, because St. Albans was so small. You'd see like a sprinkle here and there but it wasn't such a big change. As opposed to here, I feel like Lewiston is way more diverse. I think now, St. Albans is more diverse. But growing up. I feel like there was like three black kids total. And when I moved here, it was a lot different.

MM: Tell me a little bit about that diversity that you moved into when you moved to Lewiston.

DL: I think it was cool, because I got to see more people that looked like me and see different people. And I got to experience being in a bigger city instead of such a small town because I felt like in St. Albans you would see the same person or the same group of people everywhere – at the grocery store and church, everywhere. It felt like living in a bubble. Lewiston diversified that bubble. It's still small, but it's way bigger than where I was when I grew up.

MM: And so you mentioned coming here, you had no idea that there could be such diversity here. Where do you experience this—in your church, in schools?

DL: Everywhere, honestly. Even my church back in St. Albans, we were the only black family of that church. And then coming here and finding a Congolese church, it was so cool, because I've never been surrounded by that many Congolese people before. And that was interesting. And then even school, there was so many different people from different backgrounds, Somali people, people from Kenya, people from Sudan, like it was way more diverse than my little elementary school back in St Albans.

MM: Tell me a little bit more about your church. Is it a Congolese church or just a lot of Congolese people happen to go there?

DL: It's like a mixture. There's Angolan people, Congolese people, there's different people from different places, but I think it's majority Congolese and Angolan. I'm not that positive.

MM: This might seem like a silly question but how do you know this? Is it a language thing? Is it a cultural thing? Or you all know them personally?

DL: Sometimes it's like people that speak Portuguese, nine times out of ten, they're going to be Angolan. And then sometimes they speak Portuguese and French. Or sometimes they speak Portuguese and English. And then Congolese people most likely speak French and Lingala. And then, obviously, we all have to speak English in terms of assimilation. But I think our four languages are different.

MM: And do those get spoken at church?

DL: Yeah, the different pastors, they speak English. They don't preach in English, but they can speak English. Usually, it's Lingala and French, a mixture. And then there are interpreters that speak in English for the Portuguese people.

MM: And does the church host events outside of services? Do you engage with them?

DL: I think my pastor is trying to host more events. But there was one event where the congregation went out to tell people about God and what God can do. And then there was food, there was a barbecue. And then there was this woman that came and she sang at another primarily Congolese church, but she was inviting all the churches in Lewiston to come. And then

there was another event where all the churches came together to pray for Lewiston. For the wellness of it. Yeah. And then because there's separate pastors for different churches. So the pastors came together and wanted to do something as a group. I think Congolese pastors and Angolan. And all based in Maine. It was a Lewiston event but they invited pastors from Portland too, but there were Lewiston ones here as well.

MM: Is that religion or church a really important dynamic in your family, or just something that you all did to build community?

DL: No, it's always been an important dynamic. I always grew up in faith, my parents prayed, and everybody prayed. And I've always had that Christian upbringing. I think when you move, it's good to find a church home. And people that could share the same faith as you to uplift you or meet new people, and things along those lines. So I think that really helped coming here.

MM: Is it something that you still do or mostly it's a resource that's there if you need it?

DL: I go to church on Sundays.

MM: And so you mentioned that service in English, but there's also a range of languages spoken. Portuguese, Lingala, French. Do you speak any of those languages?

DL: I understand French and Lingala very well but speaking I try to avoid. I could if I try, but growing up I always got made fun of – not in a hurtful way but just like oh, you have that American accent when you speak so I'm not gonna do it unless I absolutely have to. Family back home calls or something along those lines and I can throw out a quick little French sentence. But regularly no.

MM: And do your parents regularly speak to you in French?

DL: Yeah, my parents speak a hybrid. It's French and English all at once.

MM: So they speak to you in that language but you only respond in English?

DL: Yes.

MM: Are there any phrases, any words that you just want to say to them like in passing in French or Lingala?

DL: No.

MM: And you and your sister, do you also communicate in English?

DL: Yeah.

MM: So switching gears a little bit, and, and thinking about politics. Tell me a little bit about how you participate in politics and what role politics plays for you.

DL: I have friends that keep me up to date, because they're very passionate. But I think I don't keep up with it much. I hear about things that are going on, especially like local Lewiston news in passing.

MM: So how does that come up? So how do your friends share this? They just tell you about what happened or ask you to come to an event with me?

DL: I hear about events or about this thing happened. It just slips in conversation, but it's not something that I actively go out searching for as much as I should.

MM: So why do you say that, as much as you should?

DL: I know, deep down, it's important to be involved and you should have a voice and all those things. But sometimes I just get caught up in my own life, realistically.

MM: So, ideally, how would you see yourself getting involved in politics?

DL: I would like to be more like local things. Like the meetings they have at City Hall. I've never been to one of those. I think that'd be so interesting just to go see what are you guys talking about? Just to have a better understanding of what happens that directly affects the city that I live in and have a better understanding of what's going on and what changes are needing to be made.

MM: Are there things that you've seen around Lewiston or experienced around Lewiston that you would want to change? Or you think needs to be addressed?

DL: I think there's not a lot of places that young people can be at. I also think there's a huge housing crisis in Lewiston, but I think there's a huge housing crisis everywhere. I think those are the biggest two I can think about.

MM: How have you seen the housing crisis unfold? Or how have you experienced it?

DL: I saw a lot of places being built, like coming here and growing up and then new places, and then I seen a lot more homeless people than I remember when I was growing up. But I don't know if there's a lot more homeless people or if I'm just more aware of it now. Because sometimes as a child, you kind of live in your own bubble or you don't really know the realities of things, but I definitely think I feel like I'm seeing more homeless people all over Lewiston.

MM: Sorry to backtrack a little bit, but where in Lewiston did you grow up?

DL: I grew up in Tall Pines. And then my parents bought a house and they live in Auburn now. And then I got my own place.

MM: Do you still know people in that Tall Pines area? Is it still familiar or has it changed a lot?

DL: All my friends are the people that I grew up with, they all moved out. They all left.

MM: You also mentioned there's not a lot of places for young people to be. Where do you hang out?

DL: I remember Tree Street being a big part of my teen years because that was my first job and then they have after school programs where they would help you find a college and they would help you apply for jobs and they would have different things that you can do. Because they watched the little kids but then after the little kids were gone, they would start doing older things like painting or just asking for advice. And you could hang out with Bates kids that would volunteer there. But I think after you outgrow that there's not really anywhere else. Yeah, unless you choose to start volunteering there too and being like a help for a kid or a teenager, essentially.

MM: And that's what you did. You ended up working there? And so that was your first job? And how long did you have it?

DL: I think three or four years? I remember working there pretty much through high school.

MM: Did your friends work there also?

DL: Yes.

MM: Did you have friends who worked in other places around Lewiston?

DL: Yeah. I had friends that worked in retail. I had friends that worked in the food industry.

MM: You mentioned you like to hang out at home. But what are some other places that you like in Lewiston?

DL: I like Forage. And I like the Lewiston Public Library.

MM: Tell me why.

DL: Growing up, I thought I wanted to be a librarian. So I always really loved books. And reading always gave me comfort and it was my safe space to just be in a library surrounded by books. I just love just how cozy a library is. And Forage is just very cute and I love cute places.

MM: Do you go back to the library now much?

DL: Yeah, sometimes. I just don't know now as an adult what I like to read but I like to go there just to relax. You know, you can just go there and just chill, you don't have to do anything.

MM: We've actually covered a good amount of things. So you've been here from the time you were 11. Now you're in your mid 20s. As a young person from Lewiston, how have you seen it change over time?

DL: I've seen stores be built. I've seen apartments be built. I've seen a lot of new people come in. I think there's even more Congolese people coming, more Angolan people coming. The community has gotten a lot bigger. And I think Lewiston for the most part has done a good job of being welcoming and just trying to help people integrate into the city. And I see a lot of resources that I've learned about over time.

MM: Are there resources that you wish you had that are available now?

DL: I think there's a lot more resources that I learned about. I'm pretty sure they were probably here when I moved back in 2008-2009. But we didn't know. There are a lot of resources for immigrants, there are a lot of resources for women, there are a lot of resources even to help pay for school and things like that. And I think it's really nice to be able to reach out to people and get the help that you need in terms of integrating into the community.

MM: You mentioned there's also a lot more Congolese people here now. Are you seeing that in your church or just by going out and bumping into folks or through your family?

DL: My dad is very friendly so he just always meets people and tells me about the people he meets in the community, grocery shopping and just being out and about, it's more noticeable.

MM: I always like to end interviews by asking people if there is anything that I haven't asked that you think it's important to share?

DL: Not that I think of, no.

MM: Just one last question: do you see yourself staying in Lewiston?

DL: I think that right now Lewiston is where I need to be. But over time, I will have to push myself out of my comfort zone and see what it's like to live elsewhere. Because when you live somewhere for a long time, you get comfortable. And you resist change because you know the people that you're around, you know how to get to places you love. You're just cozy. But sometimes, especially being in your mid 20s, that's when you have to start pushing yourself to grow and evolve. Because I know that Lewiston will always be here.

MM: Is that a good thing, that Lewiston will always be here?

DL: It is because I can always go back to what feels like home no matter how far I go.

MM: What makes Lewiston feel like home to you?

DL: My friends, my family. The places that I saw as a kid still being here. The places that I like - I don't really see the library going anywhere. You know, I don't really see Tree Street going anywhere. Just being able to drive around Lewiston and have that familiarity, because I've just been here for so long.

MM: That seems like a good place to end. Thank you.