

## We Have Responded Valiantly

“February 2001!” exclaimed Sue Charron, the director of Lewiston’s General Assistance (GA) office, when I asked in 2010 if she could clearly remember back to the early days of Somali immigration to Lewiston. “It’s *really* clear. We didn’t have time to even think about what was happening. We just handled it. At the same time we were doing this we were also educating everyone else. We were educating DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services], who were denying people [benefits] because they didn’t know they were eligible for assistance!” Like other city officials reminiscing about the shock of Somali immigration, Sue emphasized how unprepared they were to support refugees arriving with no place to stay, no jobs, and no English skills: “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine we’d be doing this kind of work.”

Refugees from Banta arrived in Lewiston right in the middle of roiling debates about the city’s responsibilities and obligations toward uninvited refugee immigrants precipitated by the unexpected arrival in 2001 of the first thousand Somalis.<sup>1</sup> This chapter begins with recollections about the impact of that first wave by city administrators whose job descriptions placed them in key positions of engagement (staff in the GA and mayor’s office, schools, and hospitals). The city’s experience demonstrates how a neoliberal definition of refuge—such as the offer of refuge, but with scant economic, educational, or employment support—leaves local host communities responsible for supporting refugees

whether or not they invited them. Lewiston's city officials promote Lewiston's first decade of Somali immigration as a success story, not because refugees attained "economic self-sufficiency" and "integration," but because violence was averted and federal mandates for accommodating diversity met. Accommodation to the law, however, can come with its own limitations.

### **"What Is Supposed to Happen if the City Is Unprepared to Work with Refugees?"**

One of the shocks for the city of Lewiston was that the sole VOLAG in Maine initially refused to provide any assistance to the new arrivals because they did not have a government contract to help secondary migrants (refugees, like Lewiston's Somali immigrants, who voluntarily leave their first resettlement site to relocate to another town within three years of their arrival), and the agency feared a hostile backlash from Lewiston's citizens. After resettling in the United States, refugees are free to move wherever they wish, just like anyone else, although VOLAGs retain no enduring commitment to those they resettle, and the funds they receive to assist newly arriving refugees remain with the VOLAG in the place of initial resettlement and do not follow the refugees if they move. Funds allocated to local VOLAGs to help resettle Somali refugees thus did not follow the refugees when they moved to Lewiston, where the local VOLAG did not offer assistance because they lacked a federal contract to work with the new arrivals.

Unexpectedly, city staff had to become *de facto* resettlement workers even though the city had little institutional infrastructure in place for providing assistance to newly arriving refugees. Although Lewiston was not an officially designated refugee resettlement site for Somali refugees, the city of Portland, a few dozen miles to the south, was. In the 1990s some Somali families unhappy with their first resettlement site came to Portland to visit their relatives and decided to stay. Word circulated about Maine's quiet lifestyle, low cost of living, low crime rate, and the availability of immediate short-term assistance through GA funds, and Somali refugee families began moving to Maine as secondary migrants whose original VOLAGs were no longer responsible for assisting them.<sup>2</sup> By early 2001, public housing in Portland was full and city staff drove a few Somali families further north to Lewiston to be housed with assistance by Lewiston's GA office. Deciding Lewiston was a fine place to live, those families invited their relatives from across the country to join them, and within a few months several hundred more arrived, shocking the local schools when their doors opened in September and scores of new students unable to speak English showed up. Within a year the Somali population had grown to about a thousand.

Because many of the immigrants arrived with few resources, Lewiston's GA office became their primary point of entry. In the absence of an involved VOLAG, the GA staff helped new Somali arrivals locate housing and provided vouchers for food, diapers, utilities, and other goods for their first weeks in Maine. The year 2001 was particularly challenging because the arrival of a thousand Somalis coincided with a 50 percent reduction in the GA budget, a cut made before the city realized it would be extending support to so many new residents.

Sue Charron recalled the sense of bewilderment about how to help the newly arriving refugees in a context of no preparation or assistance from the state's sole VOLAG or any state agencies: "It was a brand new experience for us. It was incredible. You learn everything you can on the fly. There was no one willing to help us." Shaking her head, Sue said, "We had no idea what an I-94 [the official arrival-departure record used by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services] was. We had no idea what an EAD [Employment Authorization Document] was. We knew nothing! And it wasn't fun. We felt like we were an island. We didn't know what we were doing and yet we had to tell everyone else what to do." Another staff member who worked with new arrivals during this period recalled, "It took two years before Catholic Charities [the local VOLAG] was willing to provide some assistance, but even then only in carefully constrained ways, and even then their assistance was offered without Catholic support. Churches, the Catholic community, was not at all supportive of working with black Muslims in Maine. Not at all. [A close family relative] who works with priests refused when I asked him to get Catholic networks to help. And when they are the only VOLAG, and faith-based, accountable to their own leadership [as opposed to the host community], there are no other options." In addition to the lack of VOLAG support, the office of the state refugee coordinator was vacant during the early years of Somali immigration, which meant that the key position in the state that should have been able to offer assistance was also absent. The person quoted above echoes the sentiments I heard from many city administrators that Sue Charron, as the first stop for secondary migrants arriving in Lewiston, "was absolutely amazing."

Sue and her small staff had to learn on the job about how to help the refugees who were arriving daily get settled into housing and referred to school, job training, English courses, and DHHS to see if they qualified for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and food stamps. One staff member remembered, "We'd show up to work on Monday morning wondering how many people would be sitting in the waiting room needing help." Sometimes several families would arrive each day. Processing each family for GA took hours, as did the constant stream of phone calls to potential landlords, hospitals,

schools, DHHS, Adult Education, the local office of the state CareerCenter, and the Portland-based nonprofit Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project for questions about legal status and eligibility for assistance. In 2001, half the GA budget went to helping new refugee arrivals.

Echoing Sue's description of the impact on her office of the massive and unexpected arrival of so many Somalis seeking assistance, the coordinator of the city's adult English Language Learner (ELL) program told me, "Those were the worst years of my life," because of the scramble to provide English language and literacy classes on a constrained budget with no funding for child care or transport and a very small staff. Her funding had been cut just as the first Somali immigrants began to arrive, and her program had no models in place for teaching English to people illiterate in their own language. Managing on a razor-thin budget, the courses were soon swamped by new students.

In the absence of VOLAG support, at the end of 2001 Lewiston and Portland collaborated on a \$1.2 million "Unanticipated Arrivals" grant from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement to support additional staff for case management, cultural orientation programs, and community outreach for the two cities from 2001 to 2005. Their grant was the first to cities rather than a nonprofit or VOLAG, a fact many administrators note with pride. Lewiston-Auburn native Cheryl Hamilton, a recent college graduate, returned to her hometown to join the staff funded by the grant, excited to be part of the process of changing and diversifying her native city. Working with Sue and other staff hired through the grant, Cheryl coordinated cultural orientation classes for new arrivals and community outreach efforts to engage Lewiston's other residents in positive educational programs about their new neighbors. It was not an easy undertaking. Cheryl recalled how few models she could find for community outreach programs because such initiatives were not typically part of a VOLAG's contractual responsibilities, which focused on providing specific services to refugees and not general services, like community outreach, to host communities.

Some of Cheryl's efforts in the early years, such as panel presentations and community conversations, were aimed at confronting the mistrust and hostility from Lewiston's residents who were worried about the impact on their home city of so many Somalis. Sue recalled fielding constant phone calls and comments from citizens upset and concerned that in a context of shrinking financial resources and widespread poverty the refugees would take away resources from needy Maine citizens: "We had phone calls every day—ya ya ya. People complaining. Everybody thinks it's just a free ride. I explain, 'They have to do exactly the same things everyone else had to do [to get city support]'. The ignorance has been the hardest thing for me, other than almost

dying from the workload.” While Cheryl, like Sue, remains proud of the community-building efforts she initiated, her memories also are clouded by the strain of constantly fighting against antagonistic community members. One public forum at the local Armory in 2002 brought hundreds of citizens who lined up at the microphone, one after another, to denounce the Somali presence. Cheryl recalls, “The worst thing we did was the public forum at the Armory with our ‘who’s who’ panel. It was terrible. Lots of angry people came. . . . People stood at the microphone and said terrible things. My music teacher said terrible things. I sat there watching my town break my heart.”

She acknowledges they made mistakes in managing some of the open forums that went awry with overwhelming hostility and complaints, but echoes Sue’s recollection that everyone who was working to help resettle the new arrivals and facilitate public education programs had no blueprint for action and worked under the stress of constant community antagonism. “To be a local during that time was awful,” Cheryl remembers. “You were never not defending Somalis wherever you went. You were never able to turn off your job.” Family gatherings, local bars, friends’ houses for dinner became contexts for demands that she explain and defend the presence of Somalis. Sue admits to becoming fed up with constantly having to educate her friends, sometimes just shutting down rather than engaging: “It’s the weekend. Someone makes a stupid ignorant remark, pushes me about the burden of the refugees, and sometimes I just say”—she heaves a heavy sigh—“It’s the weekend. Leave me alone on that.”

Cheryl explained her growing frustration with the entire refugee resettlement system, which in her view relies on VOLAGs that are not accountable to the host communities and provide no support or assistance to host communities who may be unprepared to welcome new refugee arrivals. While refugee success is defined as self-sufficiency and integration, there is no way to hold refugee resettlement agencies accountable. The only way that VOLAGs account for their work is statistical, by recording how many refugees attended their programs or received caseworker assistance. Broad community-oriented programs like community outreach and integration initiatives are not part of a VOLAG’s responsibilities, which is why she attempted to pioneer such programs through her job with the city. “But what does accountability mean?” she asks. “If we were held accountable for refugee integration ‘success,’ we’d have failed most days. If we were to be held accountable for no homelessness, then we won most days.” And if no VOLAG is active in the city (as was the case in the initial years of Somali immigration to Lewiston), she continues, “What is supposed to happen if the city is unprepared to work with refugees? What about preparing cities and employers so they are willing to hire refugees? There is no allowance for things like fear, racism, discrimination, and insecurity.

Local education is left up to local VOLAGs, but what if they're not active or not capable due to limited resources?"<sup>3</sup>

In interviews and publications, Phil Nadeau, Lewiston's acting city administrator in 2000–2002, shared the frustrated view of other city officials that community, religious, and civic organizations avoided any initial engagement with the growing Somali community and any confrontation with the swirling rumors about how the Somali influx would harm Lewiston, leaving beleaguered city staff on their own to manage the influx and negative rumors.<sup>4</sup> Even the director of the downtown community organization that had received a \$1 million grant from the federal Empowerment Zone program for highly distressed urban and rural communities called him to complain about potential problems from all the new Somali arrivals. The grant targeted the very neighborhood that was filling up with Somali immigrants, and the director wanted to know what the city was going to do about it. Phil recalled telling him, "What are *you* doing to help? You've got this big federal grant to do community work [in the neighborhood where the Somalis were living] and you're not doing anything!" Phil also maligned the state for its lack of support, which he attributed to Maine's lack of historical engagement with diversity, a sentiment he expressed more diplomatically in one of his published articles: "The state took a minimalist approach to services beyond Portland's borders. The state was certainly aware of immigrant populations in other parts of Maine, but its lack of any tangible assistance for Lewiston's Somalis in 2001 came as one of many surprises to Lewiston officials."<sup>5</sup>

The local hospitals and schools initially responded to the new arrivals with a determined attitude of business as usual: the refugees would just have to fit in and should not take away resources from Lewiston's other citizens. Treating the extension of services to Somali immigrants as additions to core programs already in place meant balancing the legal responsibility of providing welfare, health care, and education to Somali immigrants against the desire to ensure that such programs for Lewiston's other residents would not be compromised. Confusion about available federal assistance for supporting diversity meant hostility to offering things like translation services at the hospitals or additional ELL classes at the schools. Laughing in hindsight about the disastrous public meeting at the Armory, Sue Charron recalled, "Medical providers. Oh my God! 'We can't offer this! We can't offer that! We can't pay for interpreters!' 'Wait! MaineCare pays for interpreters!' 'What!?' That [was the] huge meeting at the Armory where doctors were yelling about costs [without realizing that the costs of translation would be borne by the state and federal government]." Just as the hospitals lacked a plan for providing adequate translation services, the school system had no plan for how to develop a comprehensive

English language program for such a large number of new students, allowing non-English-speaking students to languish in poorly structured, marginalized classes for years.

### **Neo-Nazis Come to Town**

Facing an onslaught of complaints by city residents about city assistance to the new arrivals, by 2002 city staff felt administratively, economically, and socially overwhelmed by the continuing influx of Somalis despite the city's lack of preparation, financial support from the state, and support programs from the local VOLAG and other nonprofits. In a politically clumsy move, Mayor Raymond attempted to address the matter by writing an open letter in October 2002 to the Somali community asking them to stop moving to Lewiston, suggesting they had emptied the city's coffers and taxed the city to a breaking point:

For some number of months, I have observed the continued movement of a substantial number of Somalis into the downtown area of our Community. I have applauded the efforts of our City staff in making available the existing services and the local citizenry for accepting and dealing with the influx.

I assumed that it would become obvious to the new arrivals the effect the large numbers of new residents has had upon the existing Staff and City finances and that this would bring about a voluntary reduction of the number of new arrivals—it being evident that the burden has been, for the most part, cheerfully accepted, and every effort has been made to accommodate it.

Our Department of Human Services has recently reported that the number of Somali families arriving into the City during the month of September is below the approximate monthly average that we have seen over the last year or so. It may be premature to assume that this may serve as a signal for future relocation activity, but the decline is welcome relief given increasing demands on city and school services.

I feel that recent relocation activity over the summer has necessitated that I communicate directly with the Somali elders and leaders regarding our newest residents. If recent declining arrival numbers are the result of your outreach efforts to discourage relocation into the City, I applaud those efforts. If they are the product of other unrelated random events, I would ask that the Somali leadership make every effort to communicate my concerns on city and school service impacts with other friends and extended family who are considering a move to this community.

To date, we have found the funds to accommodate the situation. A continued increased demand will tax the City's finances.

This large number of new arrivals cannot continue without negative results for all. The Somali community must exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and our generosity. I am well aware of the legal right of a U.S. resident to move anywhere he/she pleases, but it is time for the Somali community to exercise this discipline in view of the effort that has been made on its behalf.

We will continue to accommodate the present residents as best as we can, but we need self-discipline and cooperation from everyone.

Only with your help will we be successful in the future—please pass the word: We have been overwhelmed and have responded valiantly. Now we need breathing room. Our city is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally.

I look forward to your cooperation.

Laurier T. Raymond, Jr.

Mayor, City of Lewiston, Maine<sup>6</sup>

The major news media, already fascinated by the apparent incongruity of so many Africans in Lewiston, contributed to the controversy through stories about the Letter by ABC News, *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> While many of Lewiston's residents applauded the mayor for finally speaking "the truth," Somali community members asked why the mayor had never asked to meet with them directly before making such a public statement against their community, and some appalled members of Lewiston's city staff rejected the implication that the city had run out of funds because of overuse by Somalis.<sup>8</sup>

National media coverage of the Letter caught the attention of the World Church of the Creator, a Midwestern neo-Nazi white supremacist group, whose members descended on Lewiston to rally in defense of the city's right to bar the door against black Muslim refugees. Their arrival shocked and upset many Lewistonians, who perceived the mayor's letter not as racist but rather as driven by budgetary concerns. Embarrassed activist and church groups in Lewiston responded by organizing a prodiversity Many and One Rally at Bates College, which drew about 4,000 people from throughout the state to show their support for diversity, including both of Maine's senators and the governor, but not the mayor, who had fled town on vacation. Several Somali friends told me that when news of the Letter and the white supremacist rally reached the international arena, their concerned relatives began phoning from Dadaab refugee camp to ask if they were safe and to suggest they should move elsewhere or return to Kenya. Other than some leading activists in the



Somali community, many Somalis chose to stay home during the rally, fearful of what the day might bring.

Then-acting city administrator Phil Nadeau believed the media coverage and neo-Nazi show of solidarity for the Letter “changed everything” because it provoked a greater engagement with refugee support from civic and community organizations that had been previously reluctant to become involved. He told me, “As difficult a situation as it was for the community to get through that [the fallout from the Letter], we’re fortunate that if we had to pick the thing to galvanize the community it was a letter [and not a violent act]. The Letter got people talking to each other, talking about the issues.”<sup>9</sup> He noted as evidence that despite its initial reluctance, Catholic Charities finally joined the city in providing case management services (after the city had been awarded the Unanticipated Arrivals grant), local agencies began to educate themselves about language access policies, and the local school system and hospitals finally expanded and professionalized their programs for non-English speakers. “We all had to play catch-up,” he acknowledged. “Hell, we’re the poster child for Sudden Ethnic Diversification!”<sup>10</sup>

### **Somali Bantus Come to Town**

When Somali Bantu families began arriving in Lewiston in 2005, the city had weathered the neo-Nazi rally and the counter-rally show of support for diversity. The Unanticipated Arrivals grant brought Catholic Charities on board to offer case management services to secondary migrants by newly hired Somali-speaking caseworkers; the city’s GA office had a functioning model for settling new arrivals into housing and signing them up for job training and/or English classes; and DHHS had begun to figure out the complicated benefits eligibility for resettled refugees. But whereas some Somali immigrants in 2001–4 were literate English speakers with professional skills, the Somali Bantus presented a brand new challenge because of their nearly universal background as illiterate non-English-speaking farmers completely dependent on the intervention of interpreters and cultural brokers to navigate life in the United States.

When I first met formally with Somali Bantu elders following the slide show in February 2006, their community in Lewiston had grown to around 500 people, and the elders had a list of priorities for which they were seeking my assistance. Jammed into a small apartment for a meeting that lasted for hours, the elders articulated their top goals: to learn English and become literate; to obtain jobs, because only four Somali Bantus had thus far obtained employment; to develop extended day or after-school programs for their children because they were so far behind their American peers; to advocate for better public transport, because everyone was trying to share cars to get

to shopping centers, adult ed classes, DHHS, and the distant CareerCenter; to rent an office for community meetings; and to ensure that Somali Bantus could use their own translators in meetings with city institutions, hospitals, and schools rather than relying on Somali translators. They explained that their community of 500 people included nine adult English speakers whom they wished to use as translators, which I later learned was a dramatic exaggeration because many of the nine had only modest English skills. No one had a college degree, and only a few had a high school degree from the refugee camps. Driving home from our meeting, I pulled off the highway in tears, feeling almost undone as I considered the reality of 500 people depending on five English speakers and four people with paid jobs.

Many of Lewiston's authorities felt the same way. As the size of the Somali Bantu community doubled and then doubled again over the next two years, officials and social services providers uniformly remarked on how much help the Somali Bantus required because of the nearly universal lack of English language, literacy, and education among the adults and the high number of large families headed by illiterate single mothers, which constituted about a third of the population.<sup>11</sup> Everyone with whom I spoke, from staff at the hospitals to schools, remarked on the additional set of major challenges their arrival brought to public institutions struggling to accommodate the newcomers.

### **Learning to Swim with Sharks**

Phil Nadeau is right that many city institutions had to play catch-up. Local hospitals, schools, and other organizations have long experience with Lewiston's history of English-French bilingualism and a clear understanding of the cultural and economic challenges faced by preceding generations of minority Franco-Americans, and many of those organizations are now staffed with people whose parents and grandparents were French-speaking immigrants. But the new arrivals—black Muslim war refugees who spoke Somali and Maay Maay—offered a novel and utterly foreign presence that challenged the ability of local institutions to accommodate new forms of difference. Initially only a few organizations in addition to the GA office and Adult Education wholly opened their doors to the new arrivals. The public library began offering after-school homework help sessions, as did Trinity Jubilee, a downtown day shelter that provides a daily free lunch, a weekly food pantry, and case-worker support for anyone who needs help. When the Somali Bantus began moving into the downtown neighborhood served by Trinity, the director hired Somali- and Maay Maay-speaking staff to help them with everything from reading mail to intervening with landlords, paying bills, supporting parents in school interactions, connecting refugees with services, and more,

making Trinity the primary location for refugee assistance in the city after the GA office. Their after-school homework help program for elementary school children grew to accommodate up to a hundred, mostly Somali Bantu, students each day. Trinity received a trickle of grant funding from the city and from other nonprofits, but primarily relied on donations, volunteers, and its tiny but energetic staff to run its programs.<sup>12</sup>

But other city institutions took a slower approach to including Somalis and Somali Bantus in their programs or developing ways to engage with the refugee population. Despite the confusion about refugees' entitlements to benefits and the repeated intervention of the nonprofit Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project to educate about refugees' rights, the local DHHS office only assigned a supervisor to pay particular attention to refugees' entitlement to benefits in 2008 (although the agency had hired three Somali speakers earlier in the decade, who comprised about 2 percent of the staff). The downtown development project supported by a million-dollar federal grant (whose first director had complained to Phil Nadeau about the new downtown residents) initially denied all the grant applications by Somali Bantu community groups until complaints by activists forced them to reconsider. (Under the leadership of a new director, they did, first meeting in 2009 with the rejected applicants to review their grant applications before funding several and offering workshops to Somali Bantu community groups on grant writing and project design.) Under pressure from a couple of activist physicians, the local hospitals agreed to open an International Clinic one day a week in the downtown community clinic specifically for the new arrivals, but unfortunately the doctors' hopes were undermined by a staff unhappy about having to work with refugees and resentful of the "special treatment" provided to refugees in the weekly clinic. The physicians felt that the staff bullied the Somali cultural brokers and translators, denied them access to the computers, failed to include them in office birthday celebrations, and revolted when the physicians tried to reorient the annual Christmas party into a holiday party. Attitudes toward Somali staff and clients became so hostile that the doctors feared a breach in medical protocol. After battling with the hospital administration for a contract that affirmed the existence of the International Clinic and for better staffing and training, both doctors resigned in frustration, and the hospital closed the clinic in 2009 after only a few years in existence. A friend who attended the decisive meeting reported that one hospital administrator told another, "Now we can get back to serving the people we're supposed to be serving." Reflecting on this experience, one of the physicians told me, "Now I know what institutional racism means, but I don't know what to do about it. How do you make someone less racist?"

The public schools faced a special challenge, because their ELL offerings in 2001 were minimal and the school system did not expand the ELL program quickly or comprehensively enough to accommodate the large number of new non-English speakers in a manner that met federal and state requirements. From 2001 to 2007, the number of children enrolled in ELL classes grew from around 20 to 702.<sup>13</sup> As had happened in other cities, a complaint filed in 2006 against the school department for its failure to develop an appropriate ELL program brought in the U.S. Department of Justice to mandate its creation, which began with the hiring of a local former school principal to build a program that would comply with state and federal requirements.<sup>14</sup> While the school system was expanding its ELL programs, school leaders faced an onslaught of complaints from parents and community members about adding anything that looked like special programming or privileges for refugees, making the administration extremely sensitive to public scrutiny.

In an interview, the school superintendent recalled the first years of Somali settlement as “chaotic” since, as he explained, the schools “had no one to prewarn them, help them, or provide them with background information about the new arrivals.” “When you have a teaching staff and suddenly demographics change overnight, it’s a trauma for them!” he explained to me.<sup>15</sup> Shaking his head dismissively when I asked if he sought help from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, the state refugee coordinator, or other refugee support organizations or information clearinghouses, he emphasized that the priority was networking within local institutions, like the hospitals to assess public health risks, the local Department of Labor to help with adult education, the Portland-based Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence to help with in-school fighting, and leaders in the Lewiston community. Like many of the city administrators with whom I spoke, he stressed how the challenge to accommodate Somali immigrants forced local institutions to transcend territoriality and their historic silo pattern of management. Public schools are a particular site of community struggles over identity and values, and it was clear in our conversation that the superintendent felt that every action he took was under a microscope, including scrutiny by people and anti-immigrant activist groups beyond Lewiston who read blogs and news reports “ready to dive in whenever they read or hear something they don’t like.”

A refusal to bend the rules or loosen the standards to accommodate Somali newcomers emerged as a regular theme in my conversations with the superintendent and school leaders, who uniformly explained that “unlike other schools,” Lewiston holds non- and limited English speakers to high standards of achievement, does not grant credit toward graduation for ELL classes except

as electives after students have reached a certain level, and strictly monitors student progress with frequent testing to ensure students only pass to the next grade once they have demonstrated competency.<sup>16</sup> They want to make sure to confront possible perceptions that Somali newcomers are passed through the system for the sake of school statistics or because of a soft spot for diversity. One school principal, while expressing pride about their high standards, nevertheless acknowledged that the system is stacked against Somali Bantu children, telling me, “They come to us having never been in schools before, with no socialization and no understanding of school, and they don’t have the skills to be in school. Now we live in a society with a razor blade at the throat of education and these kids—the new arrivals—are walking into a combat zone.” It was a war that most Somali Bantu students lost during their first decade because so few managed to graduate from high school.

While maintaining standards, the superintendent also felt pressure to ensure that schools were not perceived as offering extras or special treatment to Somalis, refusing requests from Somali parents for a prayer room, the removal of pork from the school cafeteria, or an early departure on Friday for prayers. Remarking on a public flap about a student who claimed she was not allowed to pray in school, he noted that he “could easily get about twenty-five, thirty e-mails, phone calls a day, from all over the country from watchdog bloggers contacting me to say, we’re with you! Stand firm!” Reporters with TV cameras arrived to cover the story about the prayer room request for Muslim students, followed by letters of outraged support from Christian groups in the South. He even received a call from someone who told him, “If you’re going to [allow Muslims to have a prayer room,] then I want a prayer room for Satan!” Shaking his head about the vigilance of national anti-immigrant activists, he said, “It’s out there. I’m sitting on a keg. I’ve got to learn to swim with the sharks.”<sup>17</sup> (Remarking on the fear of Muslim prayer in schools, an ELL teacher dryly observed, “but we’ve long had a Christian Bible study group.”) The schools overcame initial protests against head scarves while adhering to a school-wide rule against headwear that might be construed as gang related by defining head scarves as religious, like the yarmulkes that Jewish students would be allowed to wear. Although the schools refused to provide dedicated rooms for prayer, they allowed students to pray during the day, and the cafeterias began clearly labeling pork products. (Because U.S. government subsidies make pork products cheap, pork is a ubiquitous menu item in school cafeterias in poor communities.)

But such indications of tolerance and accommodation did not extend to anything that might be regarded as special or extra programming for Somali

students. School administrators would not support new programs that targeted only refugee children. Noting the poverty indicators for children in the school district (e.g., the very high enrollments in the free lunch program), school authorities emphasized their commitment to providing programs that would benefit all students, not just the refugees, such as free summer school, free sports participation for everyone (rather than a pay-to-play model), and a free after-school homework help program. But using designated funding for underachieving students to pay for free summer school for everyone came at the expense of one-on-one tutoring with ELL students (an alternative option fundable through the earmarked grant); the free sports program did not include the majority of ELL students, who are prohibited by school policy from joining sports teams because most of their ELL courses do not count toward graduation; and the free after-school homework help program was a generalized program that did not offer targeted ELL help. The insistence on prioritizing programs for everyone meant a reluctance or refusal to pursue funding for programs that would specifically target non-English speakers or refugees, to the disappointment of some (including many of the refugee parents), who believed that since the refugee children arrived in the United States so poorly prepared, they needed and deserved extra assistance.

Writing about the significance of racial difference in a different context, education scholar Mica Pollock argues that using the language of “everyone” (she uses the term “all”) allows a diversion away from identifying those students who struggle the most, but whose particular needs are not distinguished or identified in ways that would enable more specific targeting and intervention. The discourse of “everyone” becomes a way to avoid having to engage the thorny issue of how and why race matters in student achievement, because the talk of “everyone” papers over racial differences in performance. Ignoring the salience of race and refusing to orient interventions specifically toward those students who are most often struggling and most often racially marked thus has an implicitly racist outcome.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see in detail in chapter 6, in Lewiston the insistence that any new programming had to be developed for all students meant that school authorities consistently rejected appeals or proposals from Somali and Somali Bantu parents and ELL teachers to develop programs specifically for the (racially and linguistically marked) ELL students (such as special tutoring sessions, extended-day ELL programs, special parent-teacher committees for ELL students, culturally competent mental health and counseling services, and networking with other nonprofit agencies to apply for grants to target Somali-speaking children). Part III details the consequences.

## Managing Diversity

Recognizing that Somali-speaking children faced particular and acute challenges that the school system would not fully address as it worked to expand and systemize its ELL program, a group of social services providers formed a collaborative to brainstorm and network about how to support the “New Mainers,” particularly in the area of cultural competency for mental health and social services. The fluid group met monthly to report news and share suggestions for action. From 2008 to 2010, many monthly discussions focused on the experiences of Somali-speaking students in local schools.

Several ELL teachers, social workers, and immigrant caseworkers in the collaborative suggested the creation of a subcommittee specifically to deal with parent-school interactions, hoping, for example, to encourage the school system to create an ELL parent-teacher or parent advisory group. Defining its role as that of cultural broker and mediator, the subcommittee began by holding open meetings during 2009 with refugee parents to learn about their concerns. The meetings with parents were well attended, vibrant but calm, and generated widespread agreement about a few issues of significant concern (e.g., concerns about how long their children stayed in ELL before being moved into mainstream classes, their children’s boredom in ELL classes with material that was too simple, the forced departure of a favorite teacher whom the parents and children trusted, the high rate of suspension for Somali and Somali Bantu children that left them further behind their peers, and the fact that not a single Somali Bantu student had graduated from high school in their five years in the city). Recognizing that many parents were frustrated that they had been expressing the same concerns for years but were seeing no progress, the group understood that the meetings would have to produce concrete results. The plan was to follow the initial small meetings with a larger open meeting where immigrant parents of ELL students could meet with school administrators to discuss their concerns and ask questions.

The open meeting between Somali and Somali Bantu parents and school administrators went badly off script, however. A few parents became increasingly upset as they felt their concerns were deflected by school officials, who refused to discuss personnel policies and talked about the ELL structure in highly technical language that parents found difficult to understand. When a couple of immigrant parents started shouting, the school officials became defensive and shut down discussion about the parents’ allegations and questions. Chaos erupted as some school administrators began packing up to walk out while some parents continued yelling, other parents tried to calm the agitators, interpreters tried to intervene, and the meeting organizers conferred

about what to do. One brave teacher tried to quell the growing commotion with a forceful intervention, telling the parents that the ELL teachers cared deeply about their children and parental concerns, but her words of solidarity got lost in the parents' frustrations with the lack of a satisfactory response from her supervisors. As some of the school administrators announced that the meeting was over, one of the interpreters protested in vain, "It's not our culture to limit discussion! You can say 5 to 7, but we stay until we're done. You can't just stop the discussion at 7 PM!"

Immediately following the meeting (which resulted in negative coverage of the parents' behavior in the local newspaper), the school authorities asked that all the participating teachers resign from the collaborative subcommittee. The social services staff member who chaired the subcommittee was also asked to resign, out of concern that her involvement in a committee that generated criticism of the school district would reflect negatively on her service organization. Other subcommittee members were told by school authorities never to participate in such an event again, not an idle threat for those service providers who depended on city funding for their programs. This experience clarified to everyone in the collaborative the scant opportunity for public and social services employees to engage in advocacy or critique and how threatened the school felt by angry Somali-speaking parents. One social services provider wryly observed that everyone would have supported the parents' right to yell and scream if the issue was a fired popular ice hockey coach. But because the meeting was about the concerns of ELL kids, refugee parents were supposed to be grateful, take what was offered, and not complain. Refugee parents yelling about school policy were unacceptable.

In the wake of their public loss of control over parents, school officials determined to avoid such forums in the future, steadfastly blocking the efforts of ELL teachers to build solidarity with parents through teacher-parent support groups or parent advisory committees. Administrative staff cited fears about unpredictable outcomes and demanding parents, and that such bodies could become sites of Somali tribal conflict. Uncertainty about how to contain unruly refugee parents gave pause as well to local social services agencies considering how to extend their programs to include the new immigrants. By 2010, only a few local organizations other than Trinity, the public library, a farming project that enabled refugees to access farming land, and Adult Education had begun to cautiously extend themselves to the refugee community by developing small, targeted programs for Somali speakers mediated by a Somali cultural broker or translator. An agency dedicated to supporting children assigned a staff member to work one-on-one with twelve toddlers in large Somali families to prepare them for attending school, while another organi-



zation created a nurturing program for five Somali mothers with infants. Another nonprofit hired a part-time family advocate to work as a home-school intermediary for three Somali families with children in the local school system. At the end of the decade, the school district allowed a staff member from a social services agency to invite ten boys who had lost a loved one in the refugee camp to participate in an after-school program oriented toward emotional development that met for one hour a week for ten weeks. Many local organizations offered no specific outreach to the refugee community at all, although refugee friends believe that most grant-seeking organizations in the city habitually mentioned the large refugee population in their grant proposals to ensure that their description of the context in which they worked sounded dire and challenging. Refugees are good for raising money, says one activist friend, even if the grants are not used to extend programming to them.

### **Accommodation Is about Containment**

While the predominant narrative from Lewiston city officials rightfully emphasizes their hard work and dedication to accommodate the Somali immigrants and their success at averting the potential for violence, voices of dissent argue that accommodation can also include resistance to change, take the form of “othering,” and feel profoundly undemocratic to those being accommodated. Those of this opinion ask, for example, why Lewiston’s institutions, like schools and hospitals, initially seemed so unwilling to develop programs specifically for Somali speakers and to hire Somalis for jobs other than as cultural brokers and translators. They note the resistance of school officials to support ELL parent outreach or advisory groups or to develop additional programs directed at ELL children, that the hospital failed to support the fledgling International Clinic, and that city and nonprofit agencies who received funding for programs targeting refugees failed to train and promote Somali cultural brokers and translators. They point out that although Somalis are nearly 20 percent of the school body, there are no Somali teachers or administrators. One frustrated Somali activist asks, “Why are Somalis not receiving higher-level jobs, supervisors, managers, administrators? No refugees, after ten years, are in a position of authority! Why not?” Indeed, I was astonished to discover in 2010 that the web page for the Lewiston public school system did not even include the names of any of the district’s Somali employees who worked as translators, tutors, and parent outreach coordinators, supporting the ELL program and the 1,000 Somali-speaking students in the district (an oversight that has since been corrected). The activist is angry that the official story of Lewiston’s success ignores the role of Somalis themselves in making their lives in Lewiston, and that many of the local institutions that emphasize their

success at accommodating Somalis have failed to hire Somalis into positions of authority or to engage in internal transformations beyond hiring translators and cultural brokers. Translators and brokers are mediators who are employed to manage outreach to the Somali population, but they are not treated as integral to the internal functioning, decision making, or priorities of the organizations that employ them. These critics lament the silencing of critical discussion, as we saw in the outcome of the large parent meeting with school administrators, and the ways in which accommodation feels like containment.

I return to these particular points again in later chapters, but here want to highlight one criticism in particular: that a reactive approach of accommodation without transformation—of treating diversity, multiculturalism, and outreach to foreign immigrants as add-ons rather than integral to institutional culture—silenced other approaches that might have introduced reforms or transformations of local institutions. People frustrated with the slow pace of change berated Lewiston’s approach as guarded, self-protective, insular, and parochial, especially in comparison with cities like Portland, where numerous strong advocacy groups for refugees and immigrants had formed, whose public school system quickly developed a robust multicultural program, and whose citizens were discussing the extension of voting rights to resident non-citizens (a ballot proposal ultimately rejected in 2010 by a vote of 52 to 48 percent). By comparison, critics note that institutions like hospitals and schools in Lewiston added translation services and ELL programs as their effort toward diversity, but did not transform their normal operating culture, allowing staff who subscribed to the anti-Somali myths detailed in chapter 5 to remain hostile and resistant to Somali patients, students, and staff. Bringing the provision of social services, medical care, and schools in line with bureaucratic mandates for language access did not mean changing institutional culture, and critics suggest the result has been an outward appearance of accommodation while, as we will see in chapter 5, racism and hostility rage within.

Discussing the resistance in Lewiston to adapting or learning from models developed in other cities for embracing multiculturalism and refugee outreach, a woman from Lewiston who is heavily involved in refugee resettlement initiatives explained the attitude of her colleagues: “They don’t want people from Portland to come tell them what to do. They don’t want intellectual outsiders to come in.” People in Lewiston, she suggested, “don’t want to ask for help because that might reveal ignorance or lack of capacity. Lewiston fears it’s unqualified and lacks the intellectual resources to make things work. Doing the right thing might mean the person supposed to be doing it is unqualified and someone else should actually be doing it.” Like the activist quoted above and others, it is frustrating to her that throughout the city’s first decade of

Somali settlement, many of the major public institutions remained staffed by people hostile to refugees, unwilling to learn from well-functioning models elsewhere of refugee outreach (whether through language access and interpretation services, new school models for ELL and multiculturalism, or new multicultural approaches to physical and mental health care), and closed to the upward mobility of Somali cultural brokers and professionals. Another woman who has a long history in education and health care administration in the city described to me her frustrations with her colleagues' conservative, constrained orientation toward change: "Portland has so many innovative programs [for immigrants], but the attitude of Lewiston's service providers is, 'We aren't Portland! We don't want to be Portland! Don't talk to us about Portland!'" She continued in a tone of exasperation, "If Portland has developed a program, then Lewiston wants nothing to do with it. They won't even learn about it!" She's anxious about Lewiston's refusal to innovate because she thinks the city is "sitting on a time bomb" because the approach to containing and managing the new immigrants rather than integrating them through innovative programs that will transform public institutions like schools will end badly, as immigrant kids become increasingly alienated. These concerns escalated in 2009–10 when police began arresting Somali Bantu kids for criminal activities and city officials became concerned that Somali immigrant youths were forming criminal gangs. A frustrated social studies teacher who quit her job to move to a more innovative and dynamic school district in Portland summed up her experience with initiatives to expand multicultural programming and social justice initiatives that would support alienated immigrant youths in the schools: "No one in Lewiston is on board with anything."

The critics are frustrated that tolerance and accommodation in Lewiston during the city's first decade of Somali immigration took the form of meeting legal requirements for managing diversity rather than intercultural collaboration and institutional transformation. Writing about the dangers of "tolerance" as a foundation of multiculturalism, political scientist Wendy Brown argues that tolerance is also often about superiority, "the marking of subjects of tolerance as inferior, deviant, or marginal vis-à-vis those practicing tolerance."<sup>19</sup> She continues, "Moreover, since tolerance requires that the tolerated refrain from demands or incursions on public or political life that issue from their 'difference,' the subject of tolerance is tolerated only so long as it does not make a political claim, that is, so long as it lives and practices its 'difference' in a depoliticized or private fashion."<sup>20</sup> In the first decade of Somali immigration, tolerance as accommodation meant policing the boundaries of Somali involvement in decision making about their lives in Lewiston to ensure their

inclusion in city institutions met the letter of the law but did not change institutional practice or culture.

### **Lewiston as a Model for America**

And yet, as one ELL teacher, who herself has many complaints about the management of non-English speakers in the school system, observed to me, “I don’t think Lewiston gets enough credit for how well it has done.” Assessing Lewiston’s successes and failures in adopting a proactive approach to embracing refugees depends on one’s expectations about the general American attitude toward diversity and bilingualism. While one white woman rages about blocked parental involvement in ELL programs and the absence of Somalis in positions of authority in city institutions—“This is the twenty-first century! It’s just totally unacceptable for any town in America to be unprepared for multiculturalism!”—others note that many towns in America are insular and unversed in accommodating difference and that, in fact, Lewiston has done quite well in terms of a low incidence of violence and a strong voice of support for refugees by activists and some city leaders. As one Somali culture broker acknowledged, “Things *have* really improved here since the Many and One Rally.” Condemning Lewiston for its failures to be even more proactive seems to some like just a continuation of the long-standing jokes across the state about Franco-American Lewiston being poor, parochial, and backward.

As befits a city administrator, Phil Nadeau clearly wants to emphasize Lewiston’s success at valiantly and generously managing the unexpected arrival of thousands of Somalis in the absence of directed state and federal support. Praising the efforts of the local schools, hospitals, and social services agencies for expanding their programming to refugees, Nadeau acknowledges, “They weren’t quite where they needed to be in the early days. Now they’re on top of things. It’s a complete waste of time to criticize these people.” He is proud that he has been contacted by other city administrators in the United States and abroad who have heard Lewiston’s story for advice about how to manage the arrival of immigrants. He also wishes to undermine the claims in several national news stories, such as a 2009 *Newsweek* article called “The Refugees Who Saved Lewiston,” that celebrate the revitalizing energy of immigrants in rejuvenating a dying town rather than the generosity of Lewiston’s resident-hosts in accommodating uninvited refugees.<sup>21</sup>

Mayor Larry Gilbert, a strong voice of support for immigrants during his tenure (2007–11), echoes the story of Lewiston’s success at welcoming refugees in his public presentations, and publicity about Lewiston as a success story has entered the national arena at conferences and workshops about immigrant integration. When I give public talks about Lewiston’s experience, I

inevitably meet people in the world of refugee resettlement who tell me how fascinated they are by Lewiston's successful story of immigration integration.<sup>22</sup>

Other organizations also sought to market the story of Lewiston's success in accommodating difference. Maine's (now defunct) nonprofit Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence (CPHV) won a large ORR grant to take Lewiston's story to a national audience, beginning with a well-publicized 2010 conference in Lewiston called "Advice for America: What Lewiston–Auburn Has Learned since 2000 about Fostering Relationships between Residents and Newcomers." The CPHV had held "conversation groups" early in the decade to bring together Somali immigrants and non-Somali locals, offered workplace workshops on diversity, and worked in Lewiston's schools to confront youth racism and violence, culminating their efforts in a national tour to promote Lewiston as a model of immigrant integration. Cheryl Hamilton, who led the CPHV projects after leaving her job with the city, hoped the conference would remove "the blot" on the city's name left by the Letter incident, which she believes continued to hinder the ability of city organizations to attract national funding for refugee assistance because of the media portrayal of Lewiston as "refugee resettlement gone wrong." The Advice for America conference aimed to summarize everything that went right in Lewiston, helping to promote the emerging new narrative about Lewiston's success at accommodating thousands of uninvited refugee immigrants.

### Conclusion

The feelings held by many of Lewiston's leaders and citizens that they valiantly adapted to the arrival of a large number of illiterate, black, Muslim people who needed or were entitled to benefits and services that did not previously exist (such as a full-fledged ELL program and translation services) reflect the fact that host communities shoulder the economic and cultural responsibility of welcoming and accommodating resettled refugees whom they did not invite. Yet this is the very heart of the humanitarian basis of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, which states that the objectives of refugee resettlement are rapid achievement of economic self-sufficiency and integration while leaving the details up to host communities and refugee self-help groups.

So what, exactly, does refugee resettlement as a form of humanitarianism mean in this context? If it means allocating public resources to support and welcome strangers, people in Lewiston feel like they got caught holding the humanitarian bag, so to speak, in which humanitarianism toward strangers competes with commitments to citizens in a context of economic decline for all. The paramount concerns of Lewiston city officials were to minimize the financial burden to the city of uninvited indigent refugees in the absence of sufficient federal funding, to meet legal mandates for how public institutions and hospitals

are to serve non-English speakers, and to manage Lewiston's public image and citizens' criticisms of city assistance to refugees. While they were gravely concerned about the ability of refugees to become economically self-sufficient, they felt their only recourse was to ensure refugees could access benefits to which they were entitled and to plead for state and federal support for job-training programs. For many of the city's organizations and citizens, integration also meant ensuring that refugee claims to benefits did not compromise or displace the rights and entitlements of citizens, which meant the slow, cautious, uncertain, and sometimes grudging extension of social services to refugees.

The practical effects of refugee resettlement appear to suggest that humanitarianism is actually defined only by geography, to the concept of refuge in a physical sense: that the United States will provide a relatively safe physical environment within which refugees can attempt, with little assistance, to create a new future. Providing refuge is a form of humanitarianism fundamentally based on exclusion and exclusivity; the decision to take in refugees is the exception to the normal practice of exclusion and containment. In this way humanitarianism toward refugees is simply exceptionalism, a choice to violate national integrity by allowing in people who do not belong. When such exceptions move to a town whose citizens already feel forgotten and marginalized by their own history of struggle and economic disintegration, expecting a clear route to economic self-sufficiency and integration for newly arrived refugees seems like little more than a bad-faith demand.

The United States has a complicated orientation toward refugees, as noted in chapter 2, because of the competing meanings of refuge, especially in the context of heightened security fears post-9/11. While the concept of refuge has an ancient history as protection offered by religious communities to escaping slaves or those cast out of their own communities, today's offer of refuge by governments ensures that refugee resettlement accords with reigning ideologies about the obligations of citizens, which in the United States means a dominant orientation toward neoliberal values such as self-help, individual responsibility, and spare government support for the unemployed.<sup>23</sup> Refuge, for Somali Bantus, meant paying for their airfare to the United States, redefining their identities and family relationships to meet American criteria for resettlement, leaving behind family members who failed to meet the criteria, and, for everyone over the age of sixteen, subverting the dream of education to the demands of low-wage, undesirable, dead-end jobs. (In the Orwellian words of one resettled Somali Bantu woman, "There is freedom here. But you need a job to be free.")<sup>24</sup> That refuge might include support for the enormous life transformation resettled refugees experience and to ensure that refugees have adequate time to develop language and job skills is absent because the

United States lacks a developed public discourse that refuge should include anything other than the opportunity for legal border crossing. An educated Somali caseworker who helped settle Somali Bantus in the United States told me in exasperation, “Now I see how marginalization works. I see the impact it has on people. Somali Bantus were brought here and there’s no support! There’s no support for them here!” Eloquently summarizing the confounding experience of people who wonder why they were brought to the United States to be abandoned, he asked, on their behalf, “What is the basic reason that you bring me to an ocean and then tell me to go swim by myself?” The sink-or-swim attitude is a neoliberal definition of refuge, steeped in economic rationalities and valuations.

Lewiston’s experience reads like an object lesson in abandonment, where “economies of abandonment,” to borrow Elizabeth Povinelli’s useful phrase,<sup>25</sup> are everywhere in abundance: a town abandoned by industry, inhabited by citizens who feel abandoned by the economy they helped to build, taking in refugees who have been abandoned by the government that admitted them, and then feeling abandoned by that government in their effort to provide support for those refugees. The city leaders have to adhere to federal mandates for the accommodation of diversity (through medical translation and ELL programs in public schools)—an accommodation resisted by many residents—but, crucially, support for bewildered refugees who fail in school and are rejected over and over by employers is absent. Instead, federal and state programs that fund support for refugees are facing cuts because of the neoliberal logic that claims economic support inhibits refugee self-help and integration.<sup>26</sup> To city authorities who are wedged between federal mandates to accommodate diversity, the lack of economic assistance to support indigent refugees while they become settled, the reality of the extreme poverty of refugees, and citizen hostility to the provision of support to refugees, the entire system of refugee resettlement feels like a bad-faith effort of humanitarian rescue. That they define success as the absence of violence reflects an austere American definition of refuge as legal border crossing rather than intentional life enhancement, care, or opportunity.

A city abandoned by economic growth unexpectedly and valiantly absorbing foreigners abandoned by the government that brought them to American shores is indeed an American success story of perseverance, hard work, and responsibility. But the costs of a sink-or-swim attitude means some people are left to sink, many people live in fear of sinking, and everyone wonders how far their responsibility to save those who are sinking extends. Such insecurities strike at the heart of community life, nurturing the rumors and myths about the dangerous insecurities brought by indigent foreign refugees that I explore in chapter 5.