

## Helpers in the Neoliberal Borderlands

The recipient of hospitality, no less than the recipient of the bureaucrat's rude rejection, remains "other" until the groaning tables can be turned, or until both chairs are moved to the same side of the desk.

—Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*

It is a typical Thursday at Trinity Jubilee Center on a winter morning: freezing outside, the kind of bone-rattling Maine cold that makes your eyeballs feel frozen and your throat raw. Inside, the large basement room is packed, as usual on food pantry Thursdays, with a vast array of people. The long food pantry line of refugee moms and kids, old homeless alcoholics, young scarred men, middle-aged men and women down on their luck, and very young white families with babies in tow snakes from the kitchen to the outer room, where people in line compete for space with those sorting through the mounds of donated winter clothing piled on the tables on either side of the line. Somali women move up and down the line greeting each other, their kids trailing behind with mittens dangling, snow boots leaking water, parkas partially unzipped, noses running. Everything is muddy today. Many of the

Somali women wear sweatpants under their thin dresses and long underwear under their sweatpants, although, astonishingly, some continue to wear sandals throughout the winter. The center is also a gathering place for people who live on the street or in homeless shelters with lockout hours during the day, some of whom struggle with substance dependence or mental illness. While the food pantry line slowly moves, some of Trinity's other clients mill about the room as they wait for lunch, talking to themselves, humming, chatting with each other, watching TV, looking at the wall, gently rocking. A few munch on the free doughnuts available at a side table. The director, Kim Wettlaufer, perches on his stool at his usual place, struggling to keep order in the food pantry line as women continually abandon their spots to talk to friends and as people in line push against people sorting through clothing. When an unstable man begins yelling his suspicions that Somali women are cutting in line in the course of greeting each other, a couple of the Somali women try to engage with him, saying in a way they intend to be friendly, "Sorry my friend" and "What's your problem?" while other Somali women giggle at their attempts to speak English. Other men kindly invite young Somali moms with toddlers to move ahead of them in line. Patsy, a Trinity regular who once accused Kim of favoring the refugees over his other clients, is busy pointing out nice things in the donated clothing pile to a Somali woman.

Kim asks me to take over monitoring the line while he attends to some office chores. I shiver as I climb onto the stool, placed in front of the room's only entrance, which is constantly opening as people stream in and out. Kim notices my shivering and confides that he is never not cold during the winter at Trinity because the door is rarely closed for long. The kitchen is busy preparing the day's free lunch, and the smell of good food mingles with the rancid smell of the buckets used to mop the old linoleum floors. At noon, as the food pantry line winds down, the man in charge of the hot lunch program tells everyone to stand and gives a short rousing prayer before the lunch line opens. A skinny older white woman wearing a fringed faux leather jacket says to the man in front of her, "I'm too drunk to pay attention."

Despite, or maybe because of, the mingling of bodies, voices, smells, and stuff, Trinity always has a relaxed feel, even when women in the line are fighting over a spot, even when a young man high on drugs begins causing trouble and is quietly ejected by Kim, even when the woman who responds to voices only she can hear starts talking out loud, even with the TV blaring, the phone ringing, the kitchen staff hollering to each other, the little kids squealing, the door constantly flapping open, and the anthropologist trying out her rusty Somali on her old friends. Trinity's uniqueness is its universal welcome,

where visitors are subject to no expectations or demands other than mutual consideration.

This chapter looks at people like Kim who work in the wholly or partially state-funded neoliberal borderlands to patch together a fraying safety net for those living in economic precarity and social marginality, including impoverished refugees. Neoliberal borderlands are fraught, contested spaces, where the provision of assistance by the welfare state to those living in precarity confronts neoliberal reforms and rhetoric that pillories those who receive assistance for their dependence on “government handouts.” As the welfare state contracts with curtailments in food stamps, TANF, General Assistance, unemployment assistance, Head Start, and public funding for education, and the extension of some social services shifts to nonprofits and other agencies that compete for shrinking government support, people like Kim network with each other and with public employees in the schools, hospitals, courts, and welfare offices to pick up the pieces by trying to provide assistance to those who need it. My years of fieldwork in Lewiston ensured I spent a lot of time in the neoliberal borderlands as well, volunteering in Trinity’s food pantry and in ELL classes at local public schools, serving on statewide boards concerned with multiculturalism in state agencies and the provision of legal services and advocacy for immigrants and refugees, and joining committees with local caseworkers, social workers, mental health counselors, health care workers, and teachers to discuss how better to extend educational, social services, and health care support for “New Mainers.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores what is happening in the neoliberal borderlands where people who are being crushed by some combination of poverty, homelessness, mental illness, illness, racism, and xenophobia go to seek help and support, and where frontline social service providers in schools, hospitals, police, and social welfare agencies engage them. This interface is the location of a third narrative about Lewiston’s experience with Somali refugees, a narrative that sees the offer of assistance to refugees as a component of community responsibility for assisting the poor and the marginalized.

Many studies of social support agencies that operate in the neoliberal borderlands reveal the ways in which case workers, social workers, and street-level bureaucrats are often forced to operate as agents of neoliberal reform, mandating expectations such as work requirements and obedient subjection to state surveillance (for substance use, household membership, unreported income), and more. These studies make sense of how the “helping professions” simultaneously help and police, offer care and cruelty.<sup>2</sup> Somali refugees fully recognize the ways in which they are regulated and monitored by the

agencies that offer them help. My field notes are filled with examples: rumors about families in danger of losing their children to the state because of one infraction or another; fears that shoplifting by little kids could result in deportation; a Somali man at a cultural orientation meeting offered by Catholic Charities in Lewiston elegantly voicing his experience: “In Africa children listened to and respected adults. In Africa I was the head of the household, with my wife beside me, and the children listened to me. Not here. Back home the government wasn’t involved in the families but here the government is the head of the family.” He and others describe the ways in which caseworkers scrutinize family life, observing interactions between parents and children, policing parental discipline, imposing standards for hygiene and domestic cleanliness, recording births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and any other changes in household membership, monitoring wages gained and lost, and conducting regular inspections of family homes in public housing projects. Talking about the treatment of newly resettled Somali Bantu families in Lewiston, a Somali social worker ranted to me one day about the government surveillance that accompanies public assistance:

Public assistance allows people to come in and inspect and question everything about your private life. My private life is nobody’s business! All the people who are on welfare are brutalized by it. They are just beaten down by it. It is punishing, and demeaning, and makes them dependent and unable to make a decision on their own. If anything happens in my life I’m not going to have a caseworker coming down the hallway to inspect my house, interview my children. Housing agents have their own keys and can come in whenever they want! They claim that they are inspecting things, that there are bed bugs. They tell a poor Somali Bantu guy that he has to throw away all his mattresses and bedding and rugs and everything! What is he supposed to do! Oh! it makes me cry!

Resettled refugees who depend on social services and publicly funded programs during their adjustment to life in the United States are utterly exposed to the surveillance of government authorities in their lives.

But in addition to discipline, judgment, surveillance, and control, the encounter between those seeking assistance and those employed to offer assistance might also be characterized by care, mutuality, affection, and respect. This chapter draws attention to those who work in publicly funded neoliberal border zones, like public school ELL programs, social services agencies, welfare offices, and day shelters, who see themselves as struggling, alongside their clients, against the marginalizing forces of xenophobia, racism, and neoliberal reforms to welfare. The pressures in the state-funded neoliberal border-

lands are acute in Maine, where the current governor (Paul LePage) ran for office on a promise to reduce the number of people receiving welfare, disability, unemployment, and MaineCare (the state's public assistance program for health care), to put state employees in the unemployment line themselves, to deny many noncitizen immigrants access to welfare assistance, to reduce state funding for public schools (expressing his desire to close down the state's Department of Education), to break the remaining vestiges of union power, and to deregulate everything that hinders business. Even though he won his first term with only 38 percent of the vote, his policies and rhetoric demand compliance from state employees, many of whom are horrified about the proposed and intended cuts to public support programs.<sup>3</sup> As funding for welfare programs, public housing, and public schools repeatedly comes under attack, and as the rhetoric from some of the city's and state's leading politicians persistently identifies immigrants as a problem to be eradicated, those who work in the social services sector with immigrants and the poor feel acutely the unstable, insecure provision of assistance to people living in economic precarity and social marginality. People whose career choices were motivated by a belief that those who need help should get it, yet who work in an environment where people who seek public assistance are negatively judged for their failure to achieve self-sufficiency, responsibility, and autonomy, are also being crushed.

Focusing on those derided by Lewiston's Mayor Macdonald as "boo-hoo white do-gooders" and by the city newspaper's managing editor as out-of-touch "insulated" social workers and educators, this chapter offers short profiles of people who, through their jobs and personal philosophies, contest the xenophobic discourses described in chapter 5.<sup>4</sup> The people described here extend care and support to immigrants and poor people through poorly compensated work that is often challenging, depressing, subject to bureaucratic assessment pressures, and met with hostility by those opposed to the provision of social services to the poor and those perceived as foreign. Many live materially modest lives and some live in the same neighborhoods as the Somali immigrants with whom they work. My focus here is not on their economic circumstances as employees, but rather on the affect they bring to the neoliberal borderland where they extend help and care to resettled refugees. Watching them try to locate sources of economic assistance for people unable to pay their utility bills, to provide extra child care for toddlers to mothers with many other children to care for, to connect hungry families to food pantry provisions, to offer extra educational support to children whose language and family background stymie their progress in school, to guarantee safety and security and trust in the law, I was repeatedly struck by their insistent devotion to an expansive understanding of community and to the provision of

professional services to people stigmatized as economically unproductive, in a social and work context where neoliberal rhetoric blames their clients for their poverty and marginalization and pillories them for complicity in welfare dependence. The profiles below try to explain why they do this work and what they struggle against to extend help and care.

A conversation in 2010 with a local welfare supervisor opened my eyes to the professional pride that I highlight here. After several years of bureaucratic confusion in Lewiston's welfare office about the rights of immigrants and refugees to welfare assistance, this man volunteered to take on the extra responsibility for overseeing and coordinating benefits for refugees in the Lewiston-Auburn area. He explained to me his special interest in working with refugees: "You don't want to have the reputation of not being able to give people the assistance they are eligible for. These people have experienced a lot of stress and we don't want to give them any more. This is very rewarding work, seeing the hardships these people have gone through lessen because of this agency [DHHS]. I get a lot of joy out of it."<sup>5</sup> While attending every diversity training offered by his department and educating himself about the benefit structure available to refugees, he was upset to see, early in the first decade of Somali immigration, "clients coming in and not getting assistance for benefits they are eligible for and just breaking down. *That can't happen*. I take pride in this. I take pride in making sure they're not left out or excluded, because they are part of the community." Reflecting on his thirty years of work in welfare assistance, he explained that as "a die-hard Democrat" he really believes in the safety net and the responsibility of the government to help people in need, expressing frustration at people who say, "If they don't have a job, cut them off!" "Look around!" he tells me in response. "Look at the unemployment here! Look at the businesses closing! If the government doesn't help out-of-work people, what will happen to them? If your neighbor loses his job, are you going to take in his family, give them shelter and food? You better be glad we have a government who offers support, who ensures a safety net for people who run into hardships. If the state doesn't help who will?" He is infuriated at the unfounded complaints about Somali welfare fraud and unworthiness, remarking that in his long history of home visits, he never once visited a family whom he believed to be fraudulently requesting assistance. And yet he faces, daily, accusations from other citizens and from the state's politicians that his clients are undeserving, that their benefits are negatively impacting the benefits of "real" Mainers, and that he is complicit in supporting people making illegitimate claims to assistance.

I found echoes of the welfare officer's insistence that people who need assistance deserve assistance in the frustration I heard from some of the

publicly funded job skills and CareerCenter counselors I knew, who expressed far more irritation with close-minded or racist employers than with job seekers, as discussed in chapter 5. In standing up for the people they assist, several city, state, and federal employees who work in welfare, employment, and public housing offices clearly articulated to me, over numerous interviews, their views about deleterious effects on poor people of budget cuts to critical social programs, especially in the face of tax cuts for the rich and special state-supported financial benefits for corporations. As professionals who work to alleviate poverty through the provision of welfare support and job training, these service providers insist on an understanding of community that situates the refugee newcomers as equally legitimate and deserving recipients of support, a sometimes exhausting position to hold in the face of constant assertions to the contrary.

In short, while the ethnographic accounts of how the helping professions police and discipline refugee subjects are undoubtedly true, of equal importance are those in the helping professions who, feeling the weight of injustice and exclusion deep in their hearts and souls, work to subvert and maneuver within a system that constrains them just as it constrains the refugees. Those caseworkers and public employees who hold those jobs because they believe strongly in the value of a welfare state rather than because they see themselves as the shock troops of neoliberal reform are fighting such reforms, alongside their clients, every step of the way. Often they struggle against colleagues who do not share their view, and sometimes they work in environments where they are lone voices of resistance, but that does not make their actions or philosophical orientations marginal or unimportant. Recognizing the emotional lives and personal philosophies of teachers, welfare officers, police, and other social services providers is important because, as part of the bureaucratic machinery that reproduces social hierarchies, patterns of exclusion, and the governmental production of subjectivity, their subjectivity is often erased in accounts of bureaucratic racism and the imposition of neoliberal reforms.

The snapshots below highlight three dimensions of the attitudes and motivations of those profiled here: professionalism, an expansive and future-oriented understanding of community, and reflexive mutuality. Some people mentioned here, like the welfare officer, explain their orientation as a commitment to professionalism defined by the belief that the state exists to provide for and protect those who need help, that those who need welfare or extra schooling or health care should get it, and that their job is to ensure everyone gets access to the support they need. They are proud of their ability to solve problems and ensure access to food, housing, diapers, health care, security, or quality education. Some people, like Kim Wettlaufer and former Mayor Gilbert, are

clearly motivated by a profound sense of responsibility for those marginalized by mainstream society, a compassionate orientation that they feel particularly acutely for refugee immigrants struggling to adjust. Defining “community” as inclusive of difference and alterity offers a very different vision of Lewiston’s future than the one presented in chapter 5.

Finally, some of those profiled here emphasize how they have grown personally through their relationships with refugees and meaningful engagements with difference. Their motivation emerges from a sense of mutual human connection through which they are creating a new self. When Cheryl Hamilton says, “Refugees saved my spirit,” or Janet Saliba describes her commitment to her community work by saying, “This isn’t a job. It’s a lifestyle,” they are expressing an alternative understanding of personhood, engagement, and community to the one pressing in from broader discourses of self-help, independence, autonomy, and xenophobia. They are trying to work toward a community in which diversity is not something to accommodate but is, rather, at the heart of community life, where Somali immigrants are fellow community members rather than needy clients or guests and where engaging alterity is about mutuality rather than difference.

Glimpses of their moments of despair also appear in the profiles below, when their compassion, desire for professionalism, and experiences of mutuality are squashed by the hostility, denigration, or resistance of their colleagues or by the mechanisms of accommodation that enforce hierarchies of human value. Fragile and earnest people get bruised, including not only the refugees but others who define their lives in tandem with them.

### **The Day Shelter Director, 2009–2010**

The tone at Trinity is set by its director, Kim Wettlaufer, a kind, gentle man who admires and respects the people he serves. For years, Trinity, located in the basement of an Episcopal church but maintaining a nonreligious identity, has provided assistance with life’s necessities and challenges to Lewiston’s downtown population, offering a welcoming place to hang out during the day, a free hot lunch, (pre-owned) clothing and toys, and free caseworker assistance with landlords, the courts, lawyers, the police, schools, utility companies, bills, doctors, counselors, and more. When the refugees began moving in downtown, Kim went door to door to meet the new arrivals, hired Somali-speaking caseworkers to ensure the center’s services were accessible and available to them, and started the city’s first after-school homework help program for Somali-speaking kids. The tiny Trinity staff, which for years included Janet Saliba, a feisty Bates college student, and Jama Mahmood, a Somali Bantu refugee and founding member of SBYAM, along with a few other Somali and non-Somali



staff and volunteers, act as counselors, job skills trainers, translators, listeners, drivers, advocates, scribes, tutors, mentors, and friends. During the day a constant stream of people passes through Trinity seeking help with everything from reading mail to paying bills to responding to a legal summons to asking for money to cover a shortfall. Kim regularly opens his wallet to offer small loans, proudly noting the full repayment rate of his clients. Trinity is usually the first stop for other NGOs and city institutions seeking to make contacts with the refugee population. Coaches at the city's schools depend on Trinity to make sure the Somali kids have completed their physicals before the start of each athletic season; school principals call Trinity when Somali kids are in trouble and for help meeting with Somali parents; social services staff from local agencies shadow Kim to meet the city's downtown Somali residents and use Trinity's interpreters; the public health authorities use Trinity to give vaccines and public health information; local businesses with goods to donate (mattresses, shoes, food, electronics) go through Trinity to manage the distribution; and the juvenile justice staff depend on Trinity to shepherd families through the system when their kids get arrested. While many other organizations in the city dithered about how to extend their services to Somalis, Kim spent little time making plans but rather just said yes to things if he thought they would help his constituency. His attitude seems to be one of generous faith that good intentions will work. For example, one day a local physician dropped by while I was at Trinity to ask if she could open a public clinic in Trinity's basement room for the downtown population. After resigning her position at the short-lived downtown International Clinic in frustration over management issues, she hoped to start a new free medical clinic. Surveying the modestly sized space, Kim answered "Sure" without hesitation, as I looked around with uncertainty about where the clinic would be located. Although their meeting lasted less than half an hour, it was a stunning departure from the many meetings I had witnessed elsewhere in Lewiston in which participants' worries about logistical, legal, social, linguistic, and economic challenges repeatedly derailed new refugee-oriented program suggestions. The medical clinic was up and running within months.

A typical Thursday begins with the lineup for the food pantry as up to three hundred people file through to collect whatever is on offer that week. Donations determine much of what is available, which may vary from hundreds of pounds of rapidly thawing potatoes one week to hundreds of jars of peaches in syrup the next, along with diapers, canned foods, occasional vegetables, and, sometimes, hotel-sized body products. There is often an abundance of things like canned sauerkraut and bottled salad dressings in uncommon flavors (blueberry ginger, pomegranate, chipotle ranch). When I volunteered at Trinity in

2009–10, staff members Janet and Erica usually worked the pantry, along with the occasional Somali student volunteering during school vacations, greeting each client by name with hugs, handshakes, and smiles, and using the moment to check in about recent or upcoming doctor’s appointments, kids who might be old enough to qualify for Head Start, school paperwork to be signed, or other pending matters. Working the pantry was exhausting—individualized socializing across language barriers combined with the physical monotony of four hours of turning, bending, lifting, handing, turning, bending, lifting, handing. Janet and Erica seemed to love it.

While the food pantry line weaves through the basement and the kitchen, another line forms for the hot lunch served at midday. After school the room fills with up to a hundred kids, along with the volunteers who help them with homework, while women sort through the donated clothing and Kim runs errands for his clients—taking food to a sick mother, taking a young man for his driver’s test, seeing a lawyer about a recalcitrant landlord, visiting people in the hospital and in jail, tracking down a kid whose worried mother can’t find him, attending sporting events and citizenship ceremonies of his clients. Over the course of an hour-long conversation with Kim in the office, his phone might ring a half dozen times and over a dozen people will peek through the door to ask for his help, while students working on homework line up to use the computer or borrow office supplies. Attendees at the Advice for America conference were asked to name the most important organizations in Lewiston for supporting the refugee population, and Trinity topped the list, a sentiment repeated in a 2010 meeting with Somali Bantu teenagers who immediately said “Trinity” and “Kim” when they were asked to name the best things in Lewiston.

The staff at Trinity actively rejects the myths reviewed in chapter 5 that castigate foreigners as the enemy within. In addition to standing against xenophobia, Trinity stands with the poor more generally by rejecting neoliberal discourses that equate poverty with laziness and irresponsibility. In Kim’s view, the new refugees and Lewiston’s historically impoverished population have much in common because of the social and economic calculus of marginality that bundles together and stigmatizes the poor, minorities, and foreigners as marginal and threatening to national security. While some of Kim’s non-Somali clients occasionally grumble that the refugees get undeserved special treatment, during my days at Trinity I noticed many small moments of mutuality. One day, for example, I chatted with Lucien, a crusty old Trinity regular, as he watched Xawo’s little grandson, decked out in a tiny denim jacket dotted with sequins that spelled out “Pretty Girl” in looping script, playing hide and seek between the racks of donated clothing. Smiling—Lucien is

always smiling—he said to me, “All kids are alike, aren’t they?” After a pause to chuckle at the boy’s antics, he continued, “Underneath this [skin and clothing] we’re all the same, that’s what I say. I came here from Canada; they came here from Somalia; but we’re all alike.” Lucien has lived in Lewiston nearly all his life, mostly in the downtown neighborhood. “I hear the others say bad things about the Somalis,” he confided. “They call them the Salamies, and I tell them to stop it. I tell them, if you don’t want the Somalis here, then you don’t want me here either. We’re all the same. If you treat them bad, then you’re treating me bad. We’re all the same.” Lucien’s jovial attitude is infectious. Shifting his attention from Xawo’s grandson to an elderly Asian American woman, another Trinity regular, he grins and propositions her. She laughs. Then he flirts with me and I laugh.

Kim agrees with Lucien that all the families living downtown “have a lot in common,” listing the issues that arrest the lives of all the people with whom he works—extreme poverty, fragmented families, illiteracy or little education, poor health, economic and emotional instability, children getting into trouble—and noting that Trinity is the only place in the city, apart from Walmart, where adult white Lewistonians and Somalis come together every single day. Because of their poverty, Kim says, “These folks, on a day-to-day basis, are the exact same way. Their biggest barrier with each other is communication.”<sup>6</sup>

Kim’s job at Trinity is really more like his life. Along with his small staff of caseworkers, he is always on call, running errands or meeting with clients until late in the evening and on weekends. After I’d known him several years, I asked Kim to explain why he does the work he does. He became the full-time director at Trinity after almost twenty years as a successful businessman, trading a routine working day for a 24/7 job with people struggling with some of life’s greatest trials. Looking away, he knitted his eyebrows and responded, “Hmm. No one has ever asked me that before.” The next week he recounted his path to Trinity, which began with volunteer work at a local hospice, then delivering food to elderly people, and then learning about Trinity and joining the board, volunteering a few hours a week, which grew to a few days a week, which became a full-time job when he agreed to step in as director and committed to running Trinity seven days a week as a day shelter. When he began to spend time in the homes of some of the first Somali arrivals in the downtown neighborhood, he was deeply moved by their resilience in the face of enormous pain, physical ailments, and huge cultural and linguistic barriers. He offered special support to one refugee mother, whose loving care and affection for her severely disabled wheelchair-bound child particularly touched him. “Some of the things we’ve seen are just amazing. And to be treated as part of the family . . .” he broke off, emotional. “To say it changed my life is

an understatement.” Kim’s work, and routine involvement with car accidents, injuries, arrests, violence, psychological breakdowns, evictions, and other life catastrophes, has inoculated him against crisis: “Now I don’t sweat the small stuff. The little things that used to upset me, like my basement flooding or something wrong with my car, are put into perspective. It makes you realize how lucky you are. When you hear the stories and know what people have been through, it puts things in perspective. Not just the refugee population, but everyone I work with at Trinity.”

While Trinity offers a model of collaborative, inclusive community building, Kim is unable to extend this practice into a more activist form of politics because Trinity is dependent on public and private funding for its tiny budget. After Trinity helped to organize the public meeting where refugee parents yelled at school authorities, Kim experienced enough of a backlash from those authorities to convince him that Trinity must steer clear of activist politics and, instead, continue to maintain its public profile as modeling a preference for the poor. In this sense Kim’s orientation is more reactive rather than proactive; he ensures Trinity is able to offer support and advocacy (with landlords, for example), but he does not define himself as an activist. As a space of refuge and nonjudgmental care based on a fundamental commitment to compassion, Trinity can offer a buffer but not a solution to poverty and precarity.

### **The Mayor, 2007–2011**

During his two terms as Lewiston’s mayor (2007–2011), former chief of police Larry Gilbert maintained an insistently positive attitude about Lewiston’s transformation by the arrival of Somali immigrants, in stark contrast to the mayors who preceded and followed him (Mayor Raymond of the Letter fame and “leave your culture at the door” Mayor Macdonald). Mayor Gilbert used his regular column in the *Twin City Times* to express support and admiration for Lewiston’s newest immigrants, to decry “corporate welfare,” corporate greed, and tax cuts for the prosperous, to promote progressive immigration reform, and to offer expansive definitions of community.<sup>7</sup> Mayor Gilbert explained to me that his attitude emerged from two formative dimensions of his life: his immigrant ancestry and his Catholicism.

I see so many similarities to Franco-Americans and people get upset with me for saying that. Francos came here to work. Somalis came here out of necessity and to feel safe. They are both good family people. The number one thing they’ll say about choosing Lewiston is safety. They fled a civil war. Terrible things happened to them, and then they fled the gangs

and drugs of the cities where they were first settled in the U.S. By word of mouth they learned it's nice here—the people are good; the education is good; and it's safe. They came from an area where, when the police come to get you, you're never seen again. Here the police are working with them on community issues. When they came here, after getting their kids into schools, the first thing they wanted to do was build a mosque. What was the first thing the Catholics did?<sup>8</sup>

The answer, of course, is that they built a church. Noting that the Ku Klux Klan in Maine targeted Catholic Irish and Franco-American immigrants, Mayor Gilbert argues that each new immigrant group experiences xenophobic hatred despite all the values they hold in common with previous arrivals. In his newspaper columns, Mayor Gilbert was clear that the real problems are not immigrants and the differences they bring, but rather state-supported corporate greed and its withering effect on communities, a political perspective he actively promotes in his vigorous public and online presence and political activism. The role of government, according to Gilbert, is to lead, which he understands to mean fighting inequality, caring for those who need help, and promoting an inclusive definition of community.

During his tenure with the police department, Gilbert inaugurated a cultural training program that emphasized the commonalities shared by people who, despite their different cultural backgrounds, care about similar community-oriented issues like family, safety, religion, education, and decent jobs. “We’re all one humanity. If people would just take time and communicate! Communication is critical,” he explains, regularly chastising complaining constituents who acknowledged to him they had never actually talked with a Somali immigrant before making generalized character judgments about the newcomers. One day he recounted to me his dismay when, the previous Sunday, his priest asked in Mass for a show of hands by congregants who had spoken with a new immigrant during the previous week. Gilbert’s was the sole raised hand. During his campaign and after assuming office, he made a point of getting to know as many Somali residents as possible, placing Somalis on his advisory boards, greeting Somalis in Somali in public, and finding in their life stories and hopes and dreams for the future resonances with his own background in a French-speaking working-class immigrant family. In one conversation about his background, he told me his memory of watching his mother, a shoe stitcher, walking to the bus station in the dark every morning to go to work, where despite her skill she always struggled to master new patterns, knowing she stuck with it to provide for her family. “I see that they [Somali immigrants] are doing the same thing and we are all

God's children. . . . I believe in God and I believe in life after death and that you will meet your maker one day and it's all going to depend on how you live your life. When God asks you, "I sent my children to live among you and how did you treat them?," you had better know how to answer that question."

Mayor Gilbert's stance contains a religious philosophy of mutual humanity and care as well as a belief that Lewiston's future, as was its past, is intimately bound with immigrant participation. Because of his belief in an expansive notion of community and collaboration, inflected with compassion, empathy, and an ethic of social justice toward all of Lewiston's poor, Gilbert shares with Kim Wettlaufer the conviction that communities must provide for their poorest members and that the role of government is to offer assistance and care rather than exclusion and judgment.

In a searing editorial denouncing the claims of a local newspaper editor that Lewiston's immigrants and poor are welfare cheats who are destroying the city, Maine's Roman Catholic bishop, Richard Malone, supported the alternative vision promoted in Mayor Gilbert's newspaper columns. Bishop Malone's editorial articulated an understanding of community based in an effort to create a "just and compassionate humanity" in the midst of an economic recession and growing inequality, noting that the answer is not gentrification to displace Lewiston's poor, as the newspaper argued, but rather "a recommitment to the principle of the common good that is at the heart of Catholic social teaching." Rejecting the newspaper's call for a residency requirement for welfare assistance, Bishop Malone promoted instead a "covenant of caring" that offers assistance to those in need regardless of their length of residence in the community.<sup>9</sup> While no one would suggest Catholic churches have been particularly proactive in connecting with Lewiston's newest immigrants, these men have used their positions of leadership to promote an image of collaborative community based in their religious understandings of shared humanity.<sup>10</sup> Theirs is a moral statement about community building as expansive and inclusive of the economically and socially marginalized, and about who should benefit from the welfare state (the poor and not the rich).

Mayor Gilbert's vigorous battle against the anti-immigrant rhetoric analyzed in chapter 5 remains tough: he was followed in public office by the right-wing Mayor Macdonald, whose campaign rhetoric denounced immigrants. When Mayor Gilbert decided to run in 2013 against Mayor Macdonald in the latter's bid for a second term, voters indicated whose views on immigration they support. Mayor Gilbert lost, 39 percent to 61 percent.

## The Police, 2010

In light of concerns about possible criminality in the heavily Somali-populated neighborhoods, in 2010 Lewiston's police department created a special substation downtown staffed by community resource officers. Prior to its creation, popular attitudes among the Somali Bantu refugee population toward the police were negative at best: at community meetings people complained that the police typically protected white Lewistonians but not black Somali immigrants. The new community resource officers had a lot to prove.

Police lieutenant Marc Robitaille, the freshly appointed leader of the substation, shared Bishop Malone's "covenant of caring" in his approach to building the community resource police squad. His officers began their tenure by taking Somali language classes (to the consternation of online commentators to the local newspaper's story about the new substation), tutoring kids in Trinity's after-school program, going door to door to meet refugee families and learn names, and partnering with SBYAM and Trinity's Janet Saliba to provide informational programs for parents and youths. Allowing the kids to call them by their first names (although, appropriately, they called Lt. Robitaille "Baldy") and appearing at events both in and out of uniform, the officers tried to "police from the heart," in Lt. Robitaille's words.

For Lt. Robitaille, policing from the heart meant developing a relationship of mutuality and community building with the population they were serving. In a conversation at the substation, he shared a story about one of his first experiences in a Somali home in response to a midnight call about a vicious rat attack on a baby in one of the downtown tenement buildings. After tunneling through the wall to capture the huge rat and calming the horrified parents, Lt. Robitaille and his partner returned to the police station, where the baby's father showed up at 2 AM, on foot, to return the flashlight the officers had inadvertently left behind. For him, the gesture symbolized the kind of relationship he wants with his community, where policing from the heart is about loving his community and demonstrating a commitment to a shared future. "Lewiston is my town and the Somalis are part of my town," he told me. "The future of Lewiston is tied into how Somalis manage here."<sup>11</sup> He believes it is his responsibility as a community police officer to facilitate that process. (During this conversation, one of his officers interjected, laughing, "And now I've become a social worker!") To enhance community involvement, he placed his officers in the schools, at parent meetings, on bicycles peddling the streets, and in community action groups, where they worked long hours that regularly extended beyond the normal workday. One of his officers told me, "I could be working all day at the muffler factory where I'd



be demanding overtime pay for any extra hours and going out of my mind. But here, I love this.”

While a primary purpose of the community resource team was outreach to the Somali community and to overcome antipolice prejudice (“so they know we’re not thugs or taking bribes,” one officer explained), the officers also talk about how their work forges new interpersonal connections. One officer who spent a lot of time in an elderly housing complex near the downtown with many Franco-American residents became frustrated with the anti-Somali grumblings in the building. He recounted to me his response: “One time this old lady goes off on the Somalis. I said to her, ‘Get in the car.’ I take her downtown, take her to the Somali café for lunch. I take her for some Somali tea. I take her to two shops. About an hour later I drop her off at home and she has her bags of purchases, spices and some fabric, and she’s telling everyone she got these things in Somali stores. Now Mohamed has nine elderly people [from that housing complex] coming in to buy things!” Drawing on a local stereotype (despite the disapproving look from Lt. Robitaille) to make his point about how to change people’s minds about Somalis, he joked, “There are three forms of communication: telephone, e-mail, and an old French woman.” Another officer interjected, “Not only is it people we bring on a daily basis to meet members of the Somali community, but it has also stemmed into the family dynamic too.” He described bringing Somali food home to his wife and introducing her to his Somali professional acquaintances at the grocery store. “You’re educating people in your own family as you’re educating yourself! I can see that change.” The officers’ point is that such small acts—taking someone to buy spices at a Somali store, introducing a family member to a Somali colleague at the grocery store—are the incremental changes that will transform Lewiston.

The community resource officers worked hard to build trust and confront stereotypes. One of Lt. Robitaille’s officers schooled me one day on this very point. Hearing that he was the newly assigned high school resource officer, I offered my congratulations and joked with him, “Ooh! You get the new class of ninth graders!” an allusion to the general school consensus that the rising ELL ninth graders came with particularly acute behavioral challenges. He smiled and gently reminded me, “They’re not bad. I know them all. There are a few who make some problems, but they’re all good kids.” Viewing all residents, regardless of citizenship status or origin, as equally entitled to policing with compassion and protection from stereotypes, and understanding that community building rather than bracketing is a fundamental component of community security has produced, for these officers, a strong sense of police professionalism and rewarding personal journeys.



And yet, their efforts remain challenged, as Somali youths in focus groups name “the police” and “the schools” as their primary antagonists, and as some city leaders demand that the police take a hardline attitude against Somali juvenile misbehavior. When other officers arrest Somali youths, or when another officer promotes the idea that Somali kids have formed dangerous criminal GANGS, or when ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids a Somali-owned store for undisclosed reasons, all police are blamed as the enemy.<sup>12</sup> Building trust in an environment of mistrust, legal insecurity, terrorism panics, and ICE raids conducted with no advance warning means the community resource officers are constantly fighting an uphill battle. The officers are also stuck between policing with compassion and their professional obligation to hold people accountable who commit crimes, including the refugee youths they are attempting to befriend. Despite their initial obvious excitement and the success of their collaborations with SBYAM to reach out to refugee parents (described in chapter 7), by 2013 all had left the substation for other jobs.

### **The Social Worker, 2009**

Beth, a young woman from southern Maine with an advanced degree in child studies and training in Africa, found her dream job in Lewiston with an agency that assigned her to work on child development with Somali refugee families with many small children. Her position was brokered by Kim Wettlaufer, who wanted to connect early childhood development specialists with newly arrived Somali-speaking parents with large families. Kim matched Beth with twelve Somali-speaking families, where her role was to work with one preschool child in each family, introducing games that parents could play with their preschoolers to nurture cognitive development and prepare them for the classroom environment. Although her focus was to be with one child in each family, she was quickly overwhelmed with the pressing concerns of the families themselves, who, between them, included seventy-two children, although few families included fathers who lived with the mother and children. When she began visiting the families at home, she learned that some lived in apartments with no heat, no screens on upper-floor windows, leaking or collapsing ceilings, or stairwells in such disrepair that they were dangerous to navigate. Some of the children she worked with had skin rashes from bedbugs, cockroaches, and rats, had no winter clothing at all, or had blood tests for lead that were extremely high but whose siblings had never been tested.<sup>13</sup> One of the families with whom she worked lived in a tenement where doorways were boarded up with plywood sprayed with warnings: “High Lead Levels.” One week, invading rats mauled a baby in one of the families with

whom she worked. Although her job was to play for one hour per week with one preschool child in each family, she was quickly swamped with requests for all kinds of help: reading mail, paying bills, talking with landlords, interacting with schools, calling doctors, understanding unfamiliar cleaning supplies, and more. Because the social services agency that employed her would not offer additional support, she appealed to Kim for caseworker assistance to ensure the families received follow-up care from doctors, proper repairs from landlords, appropriate winter clothing, pest control, assistance with utility companies that were constantly threatening to turn off heat and electricity, and help with interacting with the schools about the children. Trinity funded the translator and caseworker.

During her first two years on the job, Beth's horror grew at a social system that offered so little care to struggling refugee immigrants. The mothers with whom she worked regularly broke down telling her about their exhaustion and frustration trying to parent many children in a new country with little support. On many of her weekly visits, she found moms critically depressed about the difficulties their older children were facing with school suspensions. "They had thought life would be better here," she says, with sympathetic anger. "I keep thinking, this week I'm going to meet a group who has a plan. They've been here long enough that there must be some system. But there's no system! They're being discriminated against, badly. I'm really angry about their treatment. The lack of understanding about why they're here. What they've been through. The lack of understanding at every level. People you would expect to have understanding and compassion don't. How is this allowed to go on?" Beth remembered that when she accepted the job, her friends predicted she would experience a huge culture shock, but, she told me, "My greatest culture shock wasn't my clients. It was my coworkers. I've never worked with people with such a limited worldview." At work, she endured the anti-immigrant remarks of her social services colleagues while fantasizing about creating a wraparound clinic that would provide coordinated care, ensuring each family access to a parent-school coordinator, health care workers, literacy volunteers, and caseworkers. Like Kim, she saw how the struggles of her clients related to the struggles of other poor people in Lewiston: "What the refugee population teaches us is what aspects of our system don't work. I would hope we could learn. It's glaringly obvious when we look at refugee populations, but these are problems for mainstream people also."

Although her job afforded her weekly debriefings, she still found that her on-the-job experiences radically altered her sense of a normal life, as, like Kim, she reconstructed her expectations: "I can't do baby showers anymore, or even weddings . . . realizing how little you need to live and be happy. Something

horrible might happen to me, but I realize it's really nothing. Sometimes I feel childish when I'm with one of the families because of what they've been through. I'm aware of my privilege. I'm aware of how resourceful and resilient they are. Their humor! I really appreciate that they laugh and joke around: that after all they've been through they can still do that. Now I have very little patience for people who complain.”

Hoping to contribute to building a community of wraparound services, Beth was instrumental in forming and leading the community collaborative mentioned in chapter 4, the goal of which was to ensure equal access to health care and education for New Mainers. But after the public meeting when parents yelled at school administrators, the collaborative's appetite dimmed for activist or advocacy work that might be impolitic, because so many in the group, like Kim and Beth, were employed by organizations that depended on city, state, or federal funding. Like Kim, Beth also realized the limits of advocacy work by organizations that depend on the support of local leaders.

### **The Teachers, 2008–2011**

One of the ongoing concerns of the collaborative was the situation faced by refugee ELL students in school.<sup>14</sup> To comply with the 2006 agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice, the school system had to build an ELL program that reflected the growth of the district's ELL demographic from 1 percent of the student body in 2000 to 20 percent by 2010 and that complied with curricular and testing expectations set by No Child Left Behind. Rapid transformation was a tall order. For school administrators, as we saw in chapter 4, top priorities were control and management of the new population, compliance with federal and state requirements for testing and provision of ELL classes, containing parent complaints, and ensuring loyalty from staff during the challenging period of program building. But for some teachers and staff, an additional set of goals emerged as priorities because they felt their ability to do their jobs well was compromised by the lack of useful training about ELL and diversity for all faculty and staff, by the lack of focused, informed, directed, culturally appropriate support for ELL students, and by the lack of meaningful engagement with parents. These deficits produced, in the eyes of distressed teachers, community workers, and parents alike, an escalating spiral of punishment and misbehavior precipitated by cultural misunderstandings, frustration, and the unacknowledged effects of trauma in some children from refugee families. Over the course of the first decade of Somali settlement in Lewiston, suspension rates for Somali children relative to non-Somali children skyrocketed, despite valiant efforts by some of the ELL teachers to shield children, protest suspensions, reach out to parents, and seek support from

nonprofit agencies that work with children. As one school employee told me, in distress, “It’s easy to kick kids out of school. It’s harder to deal with them.”

After hearing parent and teacher worries about suspension practices in the schools, it dawned on me that every time I visited a Somali Bantu friend in Lewiston, there was a child at home who had been suspended. Somali friends were quick to note that all Somali-speaking children were subject to high suspension rates. Anecdotal observations gathered over the course of a few weeks included a wide range of infractions. A friend’s child who had gone to tell a group of boys on the playground to hurry into the classroom at the end of recess was suspended along with the entire group for their tardy return. The child, a serious student at the top of her class, was so devastated and humiliated that her grades suffered and her parents sought psychological support. A middle school child was suspended for failing to wear his winter coat to recess. The five-year-old son of a friend was suspended for a week for saying, in a language he does not yet understand, “I will kill you.” Another child received a three-day suspension for failing to serve an office detention and then immediately an additional ten-day suspension for failing to put away his iPod and for “giving attitude.” A daughter of a friend was suspended for two days for writing a song in math class rather than attending to her math assignment. I heard of one parent who was so mortified by her child’s suspension that she decided to stop sending her child to school in an effort to avoid any future suspensions. A teacher mentioned parent-teacher conferences where the parents just sat and cried in embarrassment, apologizing for their child’s behavior and their shortcomings as parents. In my conversations with parents, many struggled to understand the significance of so many suspensions: Are their children terrible? Are they failures as parents? Or is the problem with the school?

Wondering about the actual facts, I filed a Freedom of Information Act request from the Maine Department of Education to obtain suspension statistics. They are grim. In the 2007–8 school year, Somalis were 9 percent of high school students and had 20 percent of suspensions, 14 percent of middle school students (grades six–eight) and 24 percent of suspensions, and 16 percent of elementary school students and 24 percent of suspensions. The next year, numbers in the middle and elementary schools shot up even higher: Somalis were 15 percent of the student body in the middle school but had 70 percent of the suspensions,<sup>15</sup> and 18 percent of the elementary student body but 65 percent of the suspensions. By 2010–11, schools began recording number of suspension incidents as well as number of total days suspended, and the numbers continued to be bleak. That year, Somalis were 13 percent of high school students but had 38 percent of total suspension incidents and 45 per-

cent of total days, in the middle school Somalis were 19 percent of students but had 37 percent of incidents and 40 percent of days, and in the elementary school Somalis were 21 percent of students but had 53 percent of incidents and 45 percent of days.<sup>16</sup>

The ELL teachers, who have the most contact with Somali children in the school system, expressed constant distress about the number of suspensions meted out to ELL students by their colleagues and the impact of suspensions on their students. Suspensions were most frequently for infractions like disobeying, fighting, and displaying inappropriate attitudes like threats and intimidation. “Throughout the United States, schools tend disproportionately to punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs,” writes education scholar Pedro Noguera. Noting that minority students in particular are disproportionately disciplined for minor infractions and behaviors identified as disrespectful, and that students of color, boys, and low-achieving students are disproportionately suspended, expelled, or removed from the classroom, he continues, “In many schools, it is common for the neediest students to be disciplined and for the needs driving their misbehavior to be ignored.” Yet, he argues, research suggests that such forms of discipline only further alienate students and rarely contribute to improved behaviors, including among students who are not often suspended, because high suspension rates suggest more pervasive problems in the school between adults and students.<sup>17</sup>

Only after I spent time in ELL classrooms did I really understand how the bodily discipline required at school posed severe challenges to some students unaccustomed to such an environment in ways that vigilant teachers uncertain about engaging with ELL students marked as black and foreign might find cause for suspension. For example, one day a new child joined the lowest-level ELL class. He had never attended school before and absolutely could not sit in his seat. The Somali tutor followed him as he moved throughout the classroom during the lessons, constantly shifting between standing, squatting, kneeling on his seat, lying across his desk, and pacing. Despite the tutor’s quiet efforts to get him back to his desk, it was clearly beyond his physical abilities. (As one ELL teacher to whom I told this story reminded me, “Simply learning to be in a classroom is not intuitive.” She likened the physical discipline of school to her experience with a Japanese host family, where she constantly fidgeted during long meals while family members sat on the floor with their legs neatly tucked under them.) While the ELL teacher in class that day, familiar with this issue, was willing to accommodate the child while he adjusted, a staff member in a non-ELL setting might not be, a suspicion corroborated by the stories of many ELL teachers who believe that some mainstream teachers

and staff are far too quick to dole out suspensions for bodily indiscipline in Somali students. “The ELL teachers are great,” one Somali tutor told me. “It’s with the other teachers where the problems start.”

The ELL teachers recognize how difficult it can be for a child who has never been to school to learn to conform to the bodily requirements for school: to walk and never run, to raise your hand and wait to speak until called on, to obey the precise time requirements for each activity, to sit still for an entire class period, to obey shouted instructions in the lunchroom, hallways, or playground in a language one barely understands. Everything about school is physically and intellectually hard for many children who have never experienced school, and children who fail to follow the rules get suspended. The ELL teachers concerned about high suspension rates tried to protect their students in the zones where mainstream teachers were inclined to distribute suspension slips, like hallways and playgrounds, while protesting what appeared to be an almost arbitrary pattern of suspension because of the lack of clear documentation about the relationship between actions and consequences.

But of course not all suspensions were for new students who broke rules of bodily control; even the most sympathetic ELL teachers knew that some students acted out to get attention, primarily because of things that the counselors, social workers, and ELL teachers identified as related to frustration, trauma, and racism but that other teachers and administrators treated as disciplinary problems to be punished rather than as evidence of the need for support and intervention. I witnessed boys arriving late to class with attitude and swagger, dropping books loudly on their desks, or offering a running background commentary sprinkled with curses or offensive language as the teacher tried to teach. Some of the girls teased, giggled, and provoked each other into arguments. Some students simply withdrew altogether, refusing to engage, talk, or attend to their work. While such behaviors meant a challenging teaching environment, many ELL teachers developed a range of strategies for managing disruptive students that rarely resulted in suspensions, treating them as frustrated, needy, or emotional adolescents rather than “bad” kids. One dedicated teacher who is beloved by her students resorted to yelling on occasion in one particularly difficult class, for which she felt terrible, but the students consistently remarked on how nice and kind she was. She felt she was anything but nice, and told them she felt bad about yelling: “When I hear other teachers yelling, it’s definitely not nice!” She told me that her students responded, “But you don’t call us names. You don’t insult us. Other teachers say, ‘You Somalis are all blank blank blank’ or ‘You people always blank blank blank.’”

Stereotyping is an insidious way to malign an entire category of students as a problem, and its destructive nature is recognized by ELL teachers and staff

as well as parents and the counselors with whom some of them work. The ELL teachers felt that the ELL wings of local schools were treated as completely separate zones, avoided by mainstream teachers, mysterious (or even frightening) to others in the school who never engaged with the ELL program, and disarticulated from broader school activities, expressing frustration that non-ELL teachers and staff repeatedly came to the ELL teachers to demand, “Tell the Somalis X, Y, or Z,” rather than learning how to work with the ELL students themselves. Some Somali staff members are frustrated by a school administrator responsible for discipline at one school who tells Somali kids, “In this country we don’t behave this way,” which implies that swearing, disrespect, or disruptive behavior would be acceptable in African schools. The Somali staff understand that telling kids, in effect, “You come from somewhere else where this is allowed—you don’t belong here and you don’t know the rules here,” alienates them by placing them outside local culture and within some other, uncivilized culture, which reinforces problem behavior. When the school loudspeaker squawks, “Will the following *Somali* boys report to the principal’s office,” or when teachers make blanket remarks about Somalis taking away jobs from more deserving Americans, or when a high school social studies teacher screens the film *Black Hawk Down*, pausing the projection to point out the actor portraying the dead soldier from the Lewiston area while offering no guidance for how the class of white and Somali students are to discuss this incident, Somali students feel held up to public scrutiny and condemned. Not surprisingly, the education literature is clear that students who feel their cultural backgrounds are validated rather than ignored or denigrated in school are more successful.<sup>18</sup>

Even though a new discipline policy was supposedly launched in 2011–12, the suspension statistics remained high that year and ELL teachers struggled with classes where as many as half of their students were absent on any given day because of suspensions. At the end of 2012, a normally quiet and contained leader in the Somali community sent me an e-mail message screaming in frustration: “Many kids are suspended and expelled from school. I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS SUSPENSION/EXPULSION.”

#### THWARTED EFFORTS

The ELL teachers, of course, knew exactly what would make a difference, and many with whom I talked about these issues easily drew up a list: extended day and more one-on-one tutoring for ELL students to help them catch up, greater involvement of parents, more staff training about ELL and the background of Somali kids (which, for most of the period of fieldwork, consisted of about 1.5 hours of training as part of the orientation for new teachers, described by



several teachers with whom I spoke as based on the deficit model),<sup>19</sup> validation of Somali culture in school, and allowing ELL students to participate in school sports. Some teachers felt the testing regime used by the school kept students in ELL classes too long, which frustrated them and ensured some would age out before attaining enough credits for graduation because only mainstream classes counted toward graduation.

In 2008 a few teachers tried to search for grant funding that would enable them to offer extended-day programming, devoting hours of personal time to researching models developed elsewhere for refugee kids who enter school with limited English, literacy, and previous experience with schooling. The teachers pulled together a series of meetings with enthusiastic local advocates, social services providers, and others to develop a grant proposal for the Office of Refugee Resettlement to fund an extended-day program. Their efforts derailed when the group was informed that the school system would not pursue grants targeted solely or primarily at refugee children, but would only seek funding for programs accessible to all students.

The following year, the schools received a major grant of nearly \$1.2 million to develop evidence-based programs focused on violence prevention, substance abuse prevention, behavioral support, mental health services, and early childhood development. Although the grant was a great coup for the school, it left the particular needs of the ELL students—almost 20 percent of the student body—to the discretion of contractors who submitted bids for the different programs to decide how to include them, if at all. Frustrated Somali translators and caseworkers found some of the programs and models implemented by contractors inaccessible to Somali-speaking students and their parents. Although ELL teachers are clear that some of the school counselors tried very hard to work with Somali-speaking students, in the absence of substantive and thorough antiracism and cultural competency training for school counselors, many floundered, leaving the ELL teachers poorly supported in their efforts to manage the emotional and psychological issues of their students.

But in a discussion about better cross-cultural training for school counselors, one school official reminded me, “Schools are for education. That is our mission. We aren’t here to provide mental health services.” Despite the focus on behavioral and mental health programs financed by the major external grant, this is a valid point. While schools struggle under the twin burdens of reduced funding and heightened requirements for standardized testing, managing the emotional and psychological difficulties that students bring to school may be an unfair expectation. Nevertheless, ELL teachers devoted to supporting students from Somali families fought to be able to build constructive ways better to engage with Somali parents, even after being forbidden



from doing so, because they believed so strongly that better relations with parents could only help struggling students. One teacher drew up a list of parents who could be invited to an inaugural parent-teacher support group, to be held just after the distribution of report cards, with the initial goal of reviewing the system of grades and the online system for tracking student progress as well as to discuss homework. Parents were eager, but the school canceled the meeting with the stiff reminder that after the experience of the large parent meeting the previous year, there would be no further such meetings hosted outside the school attended by teachers. The reprimand explained that teachers cannot handpick parents to participate, and because parents come to meetings with a variety of issues to discuss it is impossible to control what happens, and teachers with no sense of local politics cannot be put in such positions.<sup>20</sup> A school administrator canceled another evening event planned by ELL teachers for ELL students to share poetry and essays with their parents over fears that the inclusion of poems in Af-Maay Maay, one of the languages spoken by a minority of Somalis, might be overly political. Concerns about language politics relate to more general concerns that meetings with Somali parents might become riven with tribalism and internal community politics.

While protesting the profligate use of suspensions, exclusionary treatment, and barriers to better parent outreach, ELL teachers are also subject to the hegemony of standardized testing, which is required of all students no matter how long they have been in the United States or whether or not they speak English. Thus ELL teachers must ensure their classes are oriented toward standardized test materials and formats, an absurdity captured by one ELL teacher in a blog post worth quoting in full:

Whether you sat for your O-Levels and A-Levels, took the SAT or ACT, the dreaded Bac, or perhaps some other equivalent rite-of-educational-passage, one of the concepts you absolutely had to know and fully understand was how to compare and contrast. You might have faced a question that asked you to compare and contrast the lives of Juliette and Madame Bovary. Alternatively you could have been asked to compare and contrast gneiss and shale perhaps. In any event the concept of compare and contrast was one you had become very familiar with. Amongst teachers of English Language in the school and college settings today this is known as “academic language.” If you sit in the SAT examination hall for 4 hours and don’t know this concept you are well and truly lost. In our classrooms we aren’t teaching every day speech, such as, “How are you? It is so nice to meet you.” Nor are we teaching the skills required to drive a car and read road signs, nor the vocabulary necessary to purchase groceries or get a job.

We are teaching students to compete in the academic world, to strive to better themselves through the educational arena, to engage in scholastic and intellectual discourse. For many refugees this is a monumental challenge, but it is a challenge worth making. Our students have had little or no background to prepare them for the daunting task that awaits them. On May 1st in Maine all high school juniors (Year 11 students) will spend a Saturday morning struggling with tests that were developed to measure their ability to do well in an academic college setting. No matter if you have only been in an English speaking country for 12 months, no matter if you had no lessons in literacy prior to your arrival, you will take the 4-hour test along with everyone else. Compare and contrast, describe, explain, elaborate. It makes as much sense as the Red Queen and the White Queen in “Alice Through the Looking Glass” when they were testing Alice’s ability to do Subtraction:

“Take a bone from a dog: what remains?” Alice considered. “The bone wouldn’t remain, of course, if I took it—and the dog wouldn’t remain: it would come to bite me—and I’m sure I shouldn’t remain!” . . . “Wrong, as usual,” said the Red Queen: “the dog’s temper would remain.”

Our perceptions, our cultural background, our linguistic competence are all at variance with each other. We lack so many commonalities, and we’re constantly striving to close the gaps. Poor Alice, she tried so hard.<sup>21</sup>

Lewiston schools must teach to the test because test results have implications for how schools are evaluated. When schools failed to demonstrate adequate progress, letters to inform parents of the schools’ failure mentioned the poor test performance of ELL students, upsetting some ELL teachers, Somali staff, and Somali students and parents because of the implication that they were the problem. In classes I witnessed how hard ELL teachers worked to encourage and embolden their students facing the severity of standardized tests and the constant messages that they are the problem. One day when I arrived in a high school ELL English class, for example, the teacher was beaming with affection and encouragement to her hard-working students, telling them that they are smart, that by following the instructions carefully they can figure things out on their own as she took them through exercises to identify which terms in a list (protagonist, climax, rising action, theme, genre) pertain to each in a list of sentences and phrases. The lesson ended with a tutorial on irony and a reminder that this is the kind of material they must master to enter mainstream classes and perform well on standardized tests. Trying to build their self-confidence, she insisted, “You can do this! I believe in you!”

As suspensions continued unabated at the end of the decade and the efforts of some teachers to reach out to the parents of their Somali students

remained blocked, several turned to local activists, community workers, and social workers for help. Several area therapists with Somali clients joined the conversation because their clients' mental health challenges were exacerbated by concerns about the experiences of their children in school. After the community collaborative chaired by Beth pulled back from advocacy on parent-school relations, a nonprofit organization dedicated to health care access for poor or marginalized community members stepped into the breach to try to figure out ways to bridge the yawning gap between parents and schools around the issue of behavior by brokering help from a nonprofit parent advocacy organization. A series of meetings and small efforts emerged over the next couple years, as these "helpers" (social and community workers) worked under the auspices of the collaborative to talk about how to better support Somali parents and their kids in their engagements with the schools.

#### THE COLLABORATIVE'S EFFORTS, 2010–2012

At one of the first meetings between the helpers and the parent advocacy representative, frustration boiled over during a discussion about school hostility to better parental outreach and reformed approaches to working with behavioral issues of kids from refugee families. "Do you mean, when these people are brought here as refugees, they aren't given any resources? Any help? They're brought here from a war, they're traumatized and grieving, and they're just dumped and abandoned? They've been here ten years and there's nothing being done to help them adjust?" the incredulous parent advocacy representative asked. She persisted with further questions: why hadn't the schools instilled any kind of substantive cultural orientation for teachers and guidance counselors, put sufficient programs in place to handle trauma among the kids, or engineered effective opportunities to involve parents? Social workers from other agencies chimed in to ask why, during the first decade of Somali immigration, didn't the schools, hospitals, Catholic Charities, or other large agencies come up with an overall plan for extra outreach and assistance for children entering school for the first time and their parents, enhancing ELL education with extracurricular programs, developing coherent approaches to assisting families making the transition to life in America, or developing culturally appropriate forms of support for immigrants struggling with mental health challenges? We were seeing, in the suspension practices for children and mental health challenges of parents, the staggering effects of a business-as-usual approach on children who foundered and floundered in school for a decade.

A grief counselor from a local nonprofit who was allowed to run one after-school program for ten boys from refugee families who had lost a loved one

described the distress he read in the children with whom he worked: fear, insecurity, anger, uncertainty about their future, and instability. His ten-week program of weekly hour-long meetings, based on a model pioneered in Portland schools, helped the participating boys develop strategies for managing their emotions and especially their anger, and was coupled with home visits to meet the families and involve the parents in the program. Because the Lewiston school system does not allow ELL students to participate in school sports, the counselor was particularly attentive to the kids' lives after school: "At home they're so bored! There's nothing to do after school. They have no activities, no programs, nowhere to go." Shaking his head, says, "I can't believe that ten years after they started arriving, there are still so few programs for them! Only the homework help programs at the library, middle school, and Trinity." Even though at the request of ELL teachers he offered to add more groups, school administrators refused, with the excuse that they needed more evidence-based assessments of his program in Lewiston.

The reason why no comprehensive approach emerged to support refugees struggling to adjust to school is the spotty and competitive approach to providing assistance for refugee support and the school administration's priorities. The extra funds made available by the federal government to support the ELL program are minimal, and funding for anything additional like extended day, special tutoring, or special parental outreach either comes from the overall budget or has to be sought elsewhere. The school administrators were unwilling to prioritize the needs of ELL students over others in the allocation of internal funds for programs, and they were also unwilling, on principle, to go in search of extra grant funding that would exclusively target ELL students. By the end of the decade, several teachers had left the school system for other schools that offered an approach to ELL students that more closely reflected their own values, and the elementary school with the highest enrollment of ELL students was reorganized under the federal government's "failed schools" program because so many of the ELL children had failed to make adequate progress. If schools offer a window into community politics, many of Lewiston's ELL teachers tried hard to model an inclusive school community where ELL students are full members rather than outsiders, problems to be managed, or failures who compromise school quality.

A second reason why no comprehensive approach emerged was the piecemeal approach to refugee assistance adopted by each small nonprofit. Each nonprofit that attempted to engage with refugee families had a specific area of focus: preparing preschool children for school, monitoring lead levels in children, offering grief counseling for children who had lost a parent. Catholic Charities offered very limited programs that reflected priorities for the fed-

eral government, such as basic job skills training. Catholic Charities' tiny staff of caseworkers and the few caseworkers employed by Trinity attempted to stitch together a set of services to help people manage on a daily basis, but no single entity had the funding or the vision to build a comprehensive, wraparound system for supporting refugees in an economic environment characterized by austere funding for education, job skills, employer training, and basic family support. After attending meetings of the collaborative for two years, I realized that, for all its good intentions, the group could make little progress because of concerns about partnering across different agencies, reluctance to share resources and information, and, as described previously, fears about angering school or city authorities by overtly challenging exclusionary practices. For these and other reasons, the collaborative struggled to attract regular participation by members of the Somali and Somali Bantu communities, who were working on a different set of initiatives to support their communities. I turn to their initiatives in chapter 7.

### **Conclusion**

The people described in this chapter are trying to push back against the insidious myths presented in chapter 5, myths that equate poverty with irresponsibility and turn attention away from economic policies that produce insecurity and impoverishment and cause harm to the people with whom they work. As neoliberal assessments of human value and the dismantling of the welfare state make poor people a target of public derision and moral disparagement, poor immigrants come under particular scrutiny as unworthy foreigners who impose even more illegitimate burdens on public resources. Those who work in the neoliberal borderlands to help both the native and foreign-born poor are finding it increasingly difficult to promote a philosophy that values diversity and public support for the poor in the midst of popular discourses that conjoin inequality, economic insecurity, and xenophobia and blame the poor for their failures.<sup>22</sup> They join anthropologist David Haines, who asks why “the most common measure of progress in resettlement is employment” and economic self-sufficiency rather than education, the ability of parents to stay home with their kids while raising them, or ensuring resettled refugees are healthy and emotionally stable.

The creation of the welfare state in the United States and Europe offered the hope of an expanded definition of the commons and a broadened sense of community. Tracking its dismantlement through neoliberal reforms that prioritize privatization, the merits of competition, the narrative of self-help and individual responsibility, autonomy, individualism, and self-sufficiency, scholars catalog emergent discourses that scapegoat foreigners and the poor

as economically unproductive and dependent, exacerbating xenophobia and narrowing the boundaries of who qualifies as worthy citizens. Upset and surprised by the racist and xenophobic turn in multicultural advanced capitalist countries, progressive scholars struggle to explain a resurgent biopolitics that brackets rather than dissolves categories of people, targeting some—the poor, the racialized, the foreign—for exclusionary intervention. Although the myths in chapter 5 make the visibly different foreigner a convenient target as the source of insecurity and economic disintegration, fostering nationalist sentiments that obscure the policy engines of inequality and consolidate loyalty for regimes of exclusion, the people featured in this chapter are quick to note that those targeted by xenophobic myths are not alone in their exclusion. The hostile treatment of refugees reveals much about the hostile treatment of others in the neoliberal borderlands who struggle with idealized requirements for economic self-sufficiency and identities marked by cultural or racial difference. “It often seems as if everyone hates the poor,” write political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who suggest that the poor and the racialized are often viewed as one and the same: “One should also remember how often hatred of the poor serves as a mask for racism. . . . Everywhere there is hatred for the poor there is likely to be racial fear and hatred lurking somewhere nearby.”<sup>23</sup> The people profiled here would agree: one of their consistent observations was that the treatment of newly arrived refugees mirrored the treatment of the poor more generally. Grasping the relationship between xenophobia and racism and hierarchies of legitimacy, Lewiston activist Ismail Ahmed tells me, “We can no longer talk about refugees in Lewiston but rather must talk about the marginalized poor.”

We saw in part I that the humanitarianism of the international refugee regime is about containment and that containment is about sovereignty, nativism, and racism. It is about the question of who can legally cross borders, who belongs, who is worthy, who fits in, and who gets to make choices about their future. The nativism and racism lodged within humanitarianism are visible in the technology of refugee camps in the form of border controls, authoritarian camp management, and expectations of refugee docility and apolitical innocence. This and chapter 5 explored how the nativism and racism lodged within humanitarianism emerge again when refugees who are allowed to cross borders become unwanted neighbors. The specter of unwanted refugees moving in next door has provoked city protests against VOLAG-based refugee resettlement in several U.S. cities and a call by city administrators across the country for the right of cities to reject refugees contracted to VOLAGS for resettlement.

In Lewiston, antirefugee racist and nativist sentiments emerged in public forums (such as open public meetings run by city officials and the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence, Mayor Macdonald's anti-immigrant rhetoric, people yelling "Go Home!" and "Dress like an American!" in the street), in private conversation (in stories repeated among friends and family about chickens in the kitchen, government-provided cars, welfare support, and more), and in vitriolic commentary (both signed and anonymous) in the local newspapers. Does humanitarianism only "work" when it is carried out far away, on anonymous people who can easily be portrayed as helpless, docile, and grateful? When the objects of humanitarianism show up next door and begin receiving public assistance, driving cars, expressing opinions, and agitating for their rights, humanitarianism is confronted with its internal nativism and racism, especially in a context of economic insecurity and neoliberal rhetoric.

Racism uses neoliberalism as a rhetorical smokescreen, turning xenophobia and fear of foreignness or difference into an economic argument. Neoliberalism also makes use of racism: colonizing it for its own purposes, namely, stripping poor people of assistance and support. By utilizing the slippage between poor people and people of color, neoliberalism taps into racist fears to push economic reforms that hurt all of the poor in the name of worthiness.

While much has been written about the surge in popular and political rhetoric that vilifies the poor, anthropologists have begun paying attention to "a new structure of feeling that privileges empathy, care, and compassion" within neoliberal economies of inequality.<sup>24</sup> Calling attention to such forms of "affective labor" as forms of productive citizenship, Andrea Muehlenbach notes, "Affective labor remedies not material poverty, but collective relational crisis. It restores not economic wealth but the foundations of public morality."<sup>25</sup> Taking affective labor seriously as productive of social relations and moral communities, as holding "an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization, and perhaps for liberation" means validating the work of people like those profiled here as symbolically greater than their modest accomplishments might suggest.<sup>26</sup> When anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli suggests, "Rather than argue with neoliberals that social welfare was or was not a failure, we might ask what the conditions of failure were such that welfare and multiculturalism failed," she urges her readers to reject the neoliberal calculus "that bodies and values are stakes in individual games of chance and that any collective agency (other than the corporation) is an impediment to the production of value."<sup>27</sup> Rather, she asks, in tandem with those profiled here, why not emphasize instead how welfare alleviates suffering and enhances life, even if it has not produced financial independence or self-sufficiency?



The reaction to the arrival of refugees by some citizens and officials in Lewiston demonstrates how the rhetoric of economics trumps all other concerns and eviscerates arguments about the extension of care and the benefits of diversity. Even though the facts show that the presence of refugees has brought economic resources and vitality into the area (including, for example, at least \$9 million in grant funding from 2001 to 2010 and about eighteen new stores downtown owned and operated by Somalis),<sup>28</sup> concern about how much the refugees cost the city continues to dominate public discourse. Talking about money allows people who are unhappy about black refugees in their city to avoid accusations of racism and silences dissenting voices as out-of-touch softies and tax-and-spend liberals.

Musing about the polarizing perspective in neoliberalist attacks on the welfare state, in which people are either economically self-sufficient through waged employment (and thus responsible) or social leeches, Povinelli asks,

Why did welfare suddenly seem not to work? Here would be one answer: because within a neoliberal state, any social investment that does not have a clear end—a projectable moment when input values (money, services, care) can be replaced by output value—fails economically and morally. And a social investment is an economic and moral failure *whether or not the investment is life enhancing*. Even if one could demonstrate that social welfare enhanced the lives of the poor, if one could not also show that social welfare moved people from dependency to independence, as narrowly defined, welfare would be deemed a failure. Again, this is not some general condition of failure but the specific condition of failure in a world where social dependency has been cast as the moral opposite of individual responsibility.<sup>29</sup>

Those profiled here are deeply involved in fighting for a different calculus of success and human value. When Cheryl Hamilton says, “Refugee resettlement is about life,” she means it is about creating a healthy community where people feel safe, hopeful, and capable. Everyone profiled here brings an affective disposition to their work that privileges empathy, care, compassion, and mutuality. Through the everyday struggles of teaching children to read, addressing depression caused by war-related trauma and the loss of family members, challenging recalcitrant landlords, attending court hearings for kids caught shoplifting, and ensuring refugees receive welfare assistance that will enable them to eat, pay rent, and cover their utility bills, a fight is being waged in the neoliberal borderlands. Those whose work to provide services is based in an ethic of professional pride at providing help to those who need it and expanding the boundaries of community to all residents regardless of income, culture, language, origin, or ability to be self-sufficient are challenging



the policies that shrink the provision of support to those in precarity. They may be losing the current battle, but not without offering alternative understandings to predominant discourses that chastise the poor and insist that economic self-sufficiency is the definition of worthiness. It is in these spaces that the affect of community building and mutuality pushes back against neoliberalism, where solidarity predicated on sharing life in a particular place together produces efforts to build a better version of the city.

In conclusion, those profiled here are working in the neoliberal borderlands to model inclusive community and compassion, while avoiding local activism because activism perceived as confrontational might disrupt the public funding that pays their salaries and modest grants.<sup>30</sup> They are engaged in the sort of affective work that attempts to buffer the blows of racism, xenophobia, and neoliberal demands for economic independence, self-sufficiency, autonomy, and self-help, and through their work they are modeling a professionalism shot through with compassion, mutuality, and love for an inclusive vision of community. They see their work helping Somali immigrants as saving and renewing the city. The cost of loving one's way to social change is that change is incredibly incremental, more often personal than public, and emotionally costly as well as fulfilling. But many of those profiled here do not see any other way toward a future they want to live in.