

Come Closer: Immigration in Maine

English Transcript



Come Closer: Immigration in Maine (2018) was produced by Claire Brunner and Sydney Avitia-Jacques with participants from South Portland High School for Guestbook Project's Exchanging Stories initiative.

Participants

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COME CLOSER: IMMIGRATION IN MAINE

Narrator Maine is an old state known for its history. Almost 200 years after its founding, Maine's horizon is full of change. Between 2002 and 2016, almost 4,000 refugees arrived to Maine. Half of those came from Somalia seeking refuge from conflict, but still finding bias here.

[Donald Trump: "...and as Maine knows, a major destination for Somali refugees, we admit hundreds of thousands—you admit into Maine and to other places in the United States hundreds of thousands of refugees, and they're coming from among the most dangerous territories and countries anywhere in the world.]

Maine's public schools are a window into its rapid demographic change. Some schools have changed from being 80% white to 20% white, just since 2000. When immigrants are faced with resistance to their arrival, schools are places where their children can show their potential and contributions to their new communities if they are allowed.

How do young Mainers—some born here, some from away—understand themselves and their classmates through cultural and political change?

We asked four South Portland High School students exactly that.

Abbie I'm Abbie. I'm 16 and I'm a sophomore at South Portland.

Hussein My name is Hussein. I am 17 years old. I was born in Somalia, Mogadishu.

Nafviso My name is Nafviso. I live in Brick Hill. I'm a junior at South Portland High School. I was born in Columbus, Ohio. My mom was born in Somalia. She immigrated from Somalia to Kenya, from Kenya to America.

Cliff I was born in Connecticut, and then, when I was three and a half or four, we moved up to Maine in South Portland—same house.

Hussein I didn't know about racism. I didn't know about treating people differently, and coming here and seeing that you're looked at differently, you're not the same as everyone, and there's stuff that you can't say, there's stuff that you can't do—that's just hard to deal with with somebody that basically...

I feel like, with everyone we—all of us are human beings and deal with all of that, and saying that we're different, we're not this, we're not bad—it's just hard for me to deal with because I haven't dealt with that since I was born, basically. Even though in Ethiopia, yes, we knew we were different, but we weren't hating each other.

Nafviso I don't think anyone genuinely means to hurt anyone or be racist or anything, but I think no one cares about it. Everyone's just like, "let me go to my next class." There's no climate around here, it's just neutral.

Cliff There might be a few people, and no one comes to mind, but I think there might be a few people that don't like people from other places coming here. But overall, this school is overwhelmingly welcoming of people from other places.

Abbie At this school, definitely towards people who have come from the countries who have different stories. I've heard lots of bias towards them and I don't—I don't understand it. It's something that like, when I hear it in the hall, it just kinda makes me angry because you don't really know them. You can't be talking about them.

Nafviso I've been going to religious school since I was two, I think. I've been going there even before then, but I didn't understand anything back then. I used to go with my siblings.

Hussein On the weekends, I have Islamic school where we, from five to eight—really five to whenever we're done, we would go to the mosque, and there's a room in the mosque that is

a classroom where we learn and memorize the Quran.

Abbie Growing up Jewish was definitely hard, especially around Christmas-time because, in elementary school, all we did was watch Christmas movies, and do Christmas crafts and stuff. So I was kind of sitting in the corner alone. But it's kind of something I'm more proud of now.

I always went to Hebrew school twice a week, but I was not really a good student there. I kind of just went to make my parents happy, so learning the language in the year was really hard, but it's now one of the things I'm most proud of.

Hussein People in Africa think America is like—I don't know how to say it—it's like heaven, basically, because it's like you can get money wherever you want, you could do whatever you want, and there's so much freedom, there's so much happiness and all that, and we don't have to worry again. And then you come here and you realize that's all a lie. I think it's really hard accepting that when you're a little kind and not understanding how people treat you, not understanding—like now realizing "oh yeah," I never said it to myself or assume, "oh yeah, I have a different skin than everyone else," or even though, yes, I did see people that were lighter, I did see people that were darker, I never—that never crossed my mind until I stepped into this country and realized that "Oh, I look different. That's why people are looking at me different."

Narrator To better understand the experiences of Somali immigrants in the US we asked Hussein and Nafviso to show us around the mosque where they study.

Cliff So I've never been in the Mosque before and I'm impressed by this building. It's a really nice building, and we've seen a few people, like two people maybe, and they've all seemed like really nice and caring people, and I can see why you guys feel like this is such a nice, caring place. Probably one of the biggest things I learned is how important a mosque is just as a community hub, and having mosques here in

America and religious freedom here in America that's—I think that's an incredibly important thing especially after what you guys just told me because it just provides and helps significantly.

Abbie At the school, we should try to get everyone to just kind of like welcome. I mean there's nothing bad about being nice to the new people, not being—you don't have to go out of your way to do it, and I don't think enough people in our school realize that it's not hard to be nice to anyone.

Nafviso Well, I think people, just like you guys said, you guys were here 30 minutes you guys heard different stories that either our parents went through or stuff like that, and automatically you seem more accepting, and I realize like what other people might be going through—I did with more about you guys too, but, if the school did the same thing I think more people would be accepting towards other people and they'd be able to go the extra mile.

Cliff I think more education about immigration and more awareness of immigration—I think that's something that could be implemented and help a lot.

Abbie Learning about, like what you said, current events, immigration, would be a lot more useful in schools, especially in South Portland because there are, in recent years, a new kind of wave of immigrants coming here and a lot of people growing up don't know how to deal with that. So I think that learning what we've learned today would help a lot in the community, not just school because if you learn it at school you can spread to your families and just make the community a better place and more accepting. I definitely feel blessed to be here with you guys, like it's like you talking about how your—what this place means to you is really—it's really cool.

Hussein People don't—sometimes a lot of people don't know about where people come from and they just say "Oh yeah, I heard about this in the news and I think that's what's going on" instead

of knowing the person and knowing their experience.

Nafviso I always felt like a lot of the time people in our school, especially people of color, were kind of different. They went through more difficulties and stuff like that. And I kind of assumed I was kind of different from everyone, I was going to religious school and stuff like that. So, learning a lot more about people in our school and knowing that they're going through difficulties, too...

Cliff I learned a lot about just like the different hurdles that different people from different cultures and different things had to go through.

Abbie I think that a class like everyone else said would really help, especially now because there's so many things regarding immigration, and not necessarily good things about it. So I think having people learn all these things, all the laws, all the hardships people go through will really help. Definitely surprised me how much we actually have in common with—just we all kind of want to dedicate ourselves to others, and I think that was pretty cool because I know a lot of people don't want to do that.

Narrator It is customary in Somalia to greet visitors by saying “Soo dhowow” which means “welcome” or “come closer.”

This document has been provided by the Guestbook Project, an international project committed to transforming hostility into hospitality, enmity into empathy, and conflict into conversation.

Come Closer: Immigration in Maine was produced as part of the Guestbook Project's “Exchanging Stories - Changing Histories” initiative, creating opportunities for young people from communities that have been polarized by religion, race, ethnicity, or culture to come together to trade stories and make short videos. Working with peace organizations, community art groups, innovative schools and cultural workers from areas torn by conflict and injustice.

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