

News

Reborn Maine Milling City Offers Lessons Amid Refugee Crisis

15 years ago, Lewiston saw an influx of Somali refugees, who are now a part of the community's fabric

By David Sharp
Associated Press

LEWISTON, Maine—The arrival of thousands of Somali refugees in this former mill city in the nation's Whitest state sparked a backlash at first, complete with a rally of White supremacists and a pig's head rolled into the local mosque. Fifteen years later, the

Somali newcomers are solid members of the community, as evidenced by its proliferation of shops, restaurants and mosques — and a championship-winning high school soccer team featuring players from Somalia and other African countries. Shukri Abasheikh, owner of Mogadishu Store, a general store

that caters to the African community, said she and her fellow newcomers have won respect from residents through hard work. “When Somalis came in, Lewiston people, Maine people, they think we need welfare, but we don't need welfare. We need jobs. We need peace. We need education,” said Abasheikh,

who worked as a janitor before achieving her dream of running her own business. As the U.S. prepares to accept thousands of refugees from war-torn Syria in coming months and years, this riverside community illuminates the challenges such newcomers can face — and shows that integration can be slow and painful,



In this Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2016 photo, Abdi Said, right, trims the rubber bottoms of Bean Boots at an L.L. Bean factory in Lewiston, Maine. Said, a refugee, was originally put in San Jose, California, before he moved cross-country to Lewiston. “We are working hard and we're going to school and everything - like regular American people. They see that we are not different,” he said.

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but ultimately successful. Since February 2001, more than 5,000 Africans have come to Lewiston, a city of 36,500 on the Androscoggin River, in a prime example of what scholars call “rapid ethnic diversification.” At first, Lewiston residents didn't know what to make of these newcomers who spoke no English, providing a challenge for schools. Many knew little of Somalia beyond news coverage of a soldier from a nearby town who was killed in a Somali firefight that became the basis for the movie “Black Hawk Down.” Some locals resented so many Black Muslims moving to a Roman Catholic community where the twin spires of the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul dominate the skyline. Rumors spread that the newcomers were getting perks like better housing and even free cars. Then came a letter from the mayor to the Somali community in 2002, asking them to discourage their friends and family from moving to Lewiston, saying “our city is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally.” An out-of-state White supremacist group seized upon the discord to hold a rally. Residents were bewildered to find their community painted as racist in the national news, and that low point became a turning point. Today, the smell of deep-fried samboosa fills a store in Lisbon Street, and the aroma of basmati rice and goat meat emanates from another. Shops feature colorful clothing and African staples like fufu flour. Somalis have taken

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en jobs with L.L. Bean, Maine's iconic outdoors retailer, and other local employers. Refugees and asylum seekers will account for about half of the city's general assistance spending in the coming year, but overall spending is the same as it was in 1990, said Deputy City Administrator Phil Nadeau. The success flies in the face of a wave of anti-immigration sentiment nationwide that's fueled by concerns over recruitment by Muslim extremists, something that could cause problems for Syrian refugees, said Westy Egmont, director of the Immigrant Integration Lab at the Boston College School of Social Work. Immigration opponents include Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who wants to ban Muslims, and several governors who have rejected the president's call to accept Syrian refugees. “Syrians, like all newcomer groups, will face both a warm welcome and serious opposition,” Egmont said, “depending on where they end up being placed.”