

The Refugees Who Saved Lewiston

A dying Maine mill town gets a fresh burst of energy.

By **JESSE ELLISON**

Barely a decade ago, Lewiston, Maine, was dying. The once bustling mill town's population had been shrinking since the 1970s; most jobs had vanished long before, and residents (those who hadn't already fled) called the decaying center of town "the combat zone." That was before a family of Somali refugees discovered Lewiston in 2001 and began spreading the word to immigrant friends and relatives that housing was cheap and it looked like a good place to build new lives and raise children in peace. Since then, the place has been transformed. Per capita income has soared, and crime rates have dropped. In 2004, Inc. magazine named Lewiston one of the best places to do business in America, and in 2007, it was named an "All-America City" by the National Civic League, the first time any town in Maine had received that honor in roughly 40 years. "No one could have dreamed this," says Chip Morrison, the local Chamber of Commerce president. "Not even me, and I'm an optimist."

Immigrants from Somalia may sound like improbable rescuers for a place like Lewiston. Maine is one of the whitest states in the country, second only to Vermont, and its old families have a reputation for distinct chilliness toward "outsiders." And many of the immigrants spoke no English at all when they arrived. But even beyond the obvious racial, cultural and religious differences between the Muslim newcomers and the locals, the town's image had become so negative that it was hard to imagine people choosing to move there. "Nothing could have rightfully prepared them," says Paul Badeau

of the Lewiston-Auburn Economic Growth Council. "And nothing could have rightfully prepared us, either." It wasn't easy at first. Townspeople feared for the few jobs that remained in the area, and they warned that the strangers would overload local social services. In 2002, the then Mayor Laurier Raymond wrote an open letter to the Somali community begging them to stop encouraging friends and family to follow them to Maine.



DOWN-EAST AFRICA: Lewiston became the Ibrahims' home in 2005

But the Somalis kept coming, followed by Sudanese, Congolese and other Africans. By some estimates, 4,000 new immigrants have moved to Lewiston since 2001, and dozens are still arriving every month. Eight years ago, the town's adult-education center had only 76 students learning English as a second language. Now some 950 pass through every year. "This is just the teeniest little part of what has happened to the city," says the center's coordinator, Anne Kemper. "Everybody has had to scramble." Today, Somali women and children in donated winter parkas carefully navigate the snowbanks in the town's formerly crime-ridden low-income residential area.

The center of town still has pawnbrokers and bars, but now there are also shops with names like Mogadishu and Baracka, with signs advertising halal foods and selling headscarves and prepaid African phone cards. "Generally, refugees or migrants that come into a town give a new injection of energy," says Karen Jacobsen, director of the Forced Migration Program at Tufts University's Feinstein International Famine Center. "Somalis particularly. They have a

very good network [with strong] trading links, and new economic activities they bring with them." Retailers sell clothes and spices imported from Africa; other entrepreneurs have launched restaurants and small businesses providing translation services, in-home care for the elderly and other social services. There's even a business consultant. "Increasingly, there's an acceptance that immigration is associated with good economic growth," says urban-studies specialist Richard Florida, director of the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute. "How is Maine going to grow? It's a big state with a sparse population. One of the ways to grow quickly is import people."

Commerce isn't all the Somalis are reshaping. Maine has America's highest median age and the lowest percentage of residents under 18. Throughout the 1990s, the state's population of 20- to 30-year-olds fell an average of 3,000 a year. Demographers predict that by 2030, the state will have only two workers for each retiree. "In many small Maine towns they're looking at having to close schools for lack of schoolchildren," says State Economist Catherine Reilly. "It will snowball. Right now we're seeing the difficulty of keeping some schools open; in 10 or 15 years that's going to be the difficulty of businesses finding workers." The same ominous trend is seen in other states with similarly homogenous demographics and low numbers of foreign-born residents—states like Montana, North Dakota and West Virginia. Reilly adds: "If you told a demographer just our racial composition, they would be able to guess that we're an old state with a low birthrate."

Lewiston's sudden jolt is reflected even in enrollment at local universities. Although University of Maine enrollment has dropped systemwide since 2002, the student population at its Lewiston campus jumped 16 percent between 2002 and 2007. And Andover College, which opened a campus in Lewiston in 2004, had to start expanding almost immediately to accommodate a boom in applications. Enrollment doubled in two years. The reason? "Young people didn't want to go to a place that's all white," says Morrison. Practically everyone in Lewiston credits the Somalis' discovery of their town with much of its newfound success. "It's been an absolute blessing in many ways," says Badeau. "Just to have an infusion of diversity, an infusion of culture and of youth. Cultural diversity was the missing piece." The question is whether the rest of Maine—and other states like it—can find their own missing pieces.