

## *Discrimination is unjust and painful*

To the Editor:

After listening to, and reading about, Mayor Robert Macdonald's recent comments regarding the culture of our Somali neighbors, I can't help but ask, "Haven't we made it past this yet?" How many times does the L-A community have to repeat past mistakes? How many times do we need to go through the exercise of having a new group of people move here, be at first scared of them and aggressive toward them, and then realize the value they can give us and finally accept them?

Years ago, French Canadian migrant workers settled in Lewiston. Many native-born Mainers discriminated against the French Canadians. One basis of the discrimination was their language. In 1891, an amendment to Maine's Constitution was passed that restricted Maine voters from voting in Maine State elections unless you "were able to read the Constitution in the English language."

The effect this type

of prejudice had on many French Canadians was long-term. For example, my husband, Marcel, a Franco-American, like many other Franco-Americans, made the concerted decision to not speak French to his children to avoid putting his kids through the same discrimination he felt.

Despite being at first considered second-class citizens, Franco-Americans have contributed substantially to our local economy. Today, many Franco-Americans are leaders of businesses, active members of our communities, and one is even our governor. While it has taken a great many years, our French neighbors have integrated in and become a vital part of our community—and one that is, for the most part, appreciated and respected. We learned the value of diversity and the importance of immigrants.

As far as we have come, it is clear that we haven't come far enough. It is sad that we

are yet again reliving history by discriminating against another group of people. The Somalis may speak a different language, they may have accents and may have different tastes in food and music, but they are hard working and deserve our respect. Yet, here again, we have a group of people who look down on these immigrants because of their differences.

And, despite what we have learned as a society about acceptance and the benefits of diversity, we have an elected official, the representative for Lewiston, Maine, voicing his discriminatory notions and demanding that the Somali immigrants leave their culture at the door.

As a mother of two African-American children and the wife of a Franco-American, I have seen the effects of discrimination first-hand. But on a positive note, I have also seen the benefits of diversity first-hand as well. I appreciate the incredible opportunity we have in L-A to be able to raise our children in a safe place where differences are celebrated and not punished. Our children are becoming so much more informed about the different cultures and customs of people all around the world.

Think about the outcome of our children learning and living with children of other cultures. Consider the possibilities this presents, not only for our city, but also for our state and our nation. World peace is not possible without understanding. Discrimina-

tion is unjust and painful. This is why I am absolutely outraged at the remarks that have come from Mayor Macdonald. They are not only offensive, but they serve to break down the progress we have made. As an elected representative, Mayor Macdonald should know better than to single one group out and prohibit them from embracing their culture. We should all learn from history and embrace different cultures the same way we have finally found a way to embrace the Franco-American culture.

My husband faced incredible discrimination as a Franco-American in Lewiston. He was told he'd never be successful in banking because he had a French accent. He became embarrassed of his heritage and his accent because of what he faced by a few native Mainers.

Despite the prejudice, he proved all of the naysayers wrong and ended up not only being a successful banker, but an active, engaged, and respected community member.

Let's not throw away the opportunity to embrace our future community members and business leaders. There is no need for discrimination in our cities, least of all from one of our leaders.

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