I’m Your Neighbor, Portland

In the midst of the 2013 divisive national conversation about immigration and assimilation, the refugee resettlement city of Portland, Maine, debated, not policy, but which book to read first.

I’m Your Neighbor, Portland (IYNP) was a year-long, city-wide read and series of six public events designed to promote a sense of community among the city’s diverse citizens. The city-wide read featured nine books whose characters and subjects made Maine their home in the last several decades and in doing so transformed Portland into a vibrantly multiracial and multicultural city.

The Books
Maine is rich in writers and artists and the cultural transformation of the state shows up in many adult and children’s book titles. Authors Frederick Lipp and Maria Testa started the trend: Lipp with his 2004 picture book, Bread Song, about a Thai American boy looking for the language to express his experience in Portland’s Standard Bakery; and Testa with her 2005 prose poetry novel, Something About America. Testa’s story follows the experience of a Portland family, refugees from the Balkans Wars, experiencing the tide of both resentment and support for “new arrivals” that was unleashed when the mayor of Lewiston asked the Somali community to scale back their arrival.
Eight years later, Maine’s "new arrival" novels include *The Good Braider* by Terry Farish, about a mother and daughter that flee the war in South Sudan and arrive as refugees in Portland, and *Out of Nowhere*, about a Franco-American soccer player and his friendship with his Somali teammate, set in a fictional Lewiston.

There are also picture books for readers of all ages, including *A Path of Stars*, by Anne Sibley O’Brien and published in association with the Maine Humanities Council, set in a Maine Cambodian American home where the scars of war hold on two generations after the Killing Fields; *Moon Watchers: Shirin’s Ramadan Miracle*, by Reza Jalali, about a sister and brother in an observant Muslim family in a Maine suburb; and one import from Canada, *My Friend Jamal*, by Anna McQuinn, about a friendship between two boys, one of Polish descent, one of Somali descent.

Non-fiction books rounded out the collection with *New Mainers*, short biographies of "new arrivals" from all over the world; and *I Remember Warm Rain*, autobiographical essays by teenage immigrants and refugees about their journeys to Portland, their lives here, and their memories of home.

"These books document intimate moments in the lives of newcomers to Maine. My hope is that a community reading these books will feel curiosity and begin to imagine each other’s lives with interest and feel safe with one another," said Terry Farish, author and immigrant family literacy coordinator for the New Hampshire Humanities Council.

**Book Purchases**

*Image: IYNP Assistant Delanie Honda Packing Collections for Community Distribution*
The Maine Humanities Council (MHC) grant allowed the Portland Public Library (PPL) to buy 8-10 circulating copies of each of the nine featured titles. In the original MHC grant, copies of the collection were to also go to Portland Adult Ed (PAE), but the PAE suffered severe structural damage in the first months of 2013 forcing them to evacuate the building. Our contacts at PAE asked that their books be given to PPL as they did not know at the start of the grant where their operations would be located.

Individual and organization donations allowed for IYNP to distribute free books to important key community partners including Rachel Talbot Ross, head of the City of Portland’s Multicultural Affairs (also head of the Portland NAACP chapter); Hildy Ginsberg, Executive Director of the Greater Portland YMCA branch; Regina Phillips, Director of Refugee Services; and Judith Southworth, Elder Refugee Coordinator for Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services. Each received all nine featured titles on behalf of their organizations. These organizations were chosen because of their services to Portland refugees and immigrants and/or for partnering with IYNP on event planning and execution.

The Display & Circulation
The IYNP collection of books was prominently displayed near the Circulation Desk of the PPL Main Branch from May-December 2013. Readers and families of readers checked out the books and took flyers on the upcoming events celebrating the cultural elements of the books.

IYNP Section at Portland Public Library
Bookplates created by PPL were placed in the books and “I'm Your Neighbor, Portland” became the name of a collection in their system.

"The Library places a great emphasis on promoting a sense of community through reading and programs," said Library Executive Director Steve Podgajny. Mary Peverada, Coordinator of Youth Services for the Library, added, "Every day we have interactions with a cross section of the city's diverse population. 'I'm Your Neighbor, Portland' helped children and their families understand and appreciate similarities and differences in their neighbors. Additionally, it celebrated the rich legacy of children’s literature in Maine."

Circulation of the titles from May-December 2013 was strong. 373 IYNP books were checked out and 140 were renewed for a total circulation of 514 items.

**The Goal**
The goal of "I'm Your Neighbor, Portland" was to engage members of the Greater Portland, Maine community, both new arrivals and long-term residents, in reading books about recent immigrants to Maine and sharing in discussion of differences and commonalities, to build understanding between the two groups.

"I have come to understand the transformative power of books and stories in effecting social attitudes," said the project scholar, Dr. Krista Maywalt Aronson PHD, a professor of Psychology at Bates College. "Although Southern Maine has become increasingly diverse over the past decade, negative social attitudes and discomfort with cross-group interaction persists. As is evidenced by my own research, books
and literature may provide people with an opportunity to engage with and explore important topics like immigration and culture, using a common story to frame the resulting conversation."

"Listening to each others stories is the best way to initiate the building of strong communities," said community organizer, Pious Ali, founder of Maine Interfaith Youth Alliance and advisor to IYNP, "Everyone in Portland shares a story of both living together in this city and remembering where we came from. I look forward to those stories coming out when we read as a city."

To meet these goals, we strove with our events and outreach to include cultural details from each featured book, to invite key non-white community members, and to always provide opportunities for discussion. Steps to achieve opportunities for discussion include: breaking into small groups to invite personal interaction and response to reading, cultural icebreaking activities such as the sharing of the history of names, facilitated discussions in which readers are invited to share diverse responses to ideas and scenes in a book, and question and answer periods to invite readers of all backgrounds to ask and respond to questions of one another.

**I'm Your Neighbor, Portland Launch**  
(May 25, 2013)

At the IYNP launch at PPL, attendees were greeted and encouraged to write “I’m Your Neighbor” in any language that they knew on a banner. People uncapped

"Attendees wrote “I'm Your Neighbor” in other language"
Sharpies and wrote the phrase in Japanese, Arabic, Italian, French, and Somali. They each also wrote their name on a nametag under the phrase, “I’m Your Neighbor.” (These two welcomes were present at each event.)

A sampling of snacks and candies from various ethnic markets around Portland, including Sun Oriental Market, Safari Grocery, Mittapheap International Market, Sindibad Market, La Bodega Latina and Tandoor Bakery were available for refreshments. Attendees could try Turkish Delight or Korean sesame candies or the tremendously popular freshly made hummus and bread from Tandoor Bakery. Anne Sibley O’Brien and international student Hiroko Fogarty went to each market and shared the program with the owners at the cash register. Owners were surprised and delighted that the library was honoring them.

Children and adults were invited to draw and/or collage pictures of their neighborhood. Those drawings were collected at this and other events and displayed in a notebook on the IYNP bookcase at PPL.

Rather than asking the authors, illustrators, librarians, or IYNP staff to present the books to the attendees, Kirsten Cappy and Lanie Honda consulted with community organizer Pious Ali, who suggested we work with the high school students in the NAACP King Fellows leadership program. Cappy met with each of the students, gave each a copy of one of the books and a script with the author biography and event plan, and asked each to prepare a few sentences about the book.
The King Fellows’ presentations of each of the books was strong and compelling. The strongest was by the Iraqi American teenager who spoke of how *The Good Braider* was *his* story. Although the character is a South Sudanese girl of Christian heritage, the young man said he recognized the flight, the peril, the “problem with parents,” and the time of “trying to make friends here and do my school work.” This young man beautifully demonstrated Project Scholar Dr. Krista Aronson’s invitation at the opening of the event “to read across cultures for deeper understanding of our community.”

As each book was presented, authors, illustrators, and publishers were asked to stand in the audience. Terry Farish, Frederick Lipp, Maria Padian, and Anne Sibley O’Brien, as well as Aruna Kenyi, who wrote a story in *I Remember Warm Rain*, stood and were recognized. Each King Fellow was given an IYNP book of their choice (as well as an Amazon gift certificate) and had the authors sign the books for themselves and their siblings. Barbara Kelly of the USM Bookstore offered all of the IYNP books for sale. Unfortunately, due to our scheduling the event on a holiday, PPL was unable to provide check-out of the IYNP circulating books or permit them to be displayed in the room. The IYNP collection was, however, beautifully on display the following Monday.

Following the presentations, attendees were invited by former Maine legislator Jon Hinck to donate to the Free Book Distribution, which helped fund and provide the collection of books for the community. Almost half of the year’s donations were solicited at that event.
I’m Your Neighbor, Portland: Maine Humanities Council Narrative Report (04/14)

IYNP Authors Terry Farish (left) and Maria Padian (right)

King Fellows with copies of *Out of Nowhere*
The audience then broke up into small discussion groups and Anne Sibley O’Brien led them in introducing themselves by sharing the history of their names (a cultural ice-breaking activity recommended by our Project Scholar). The discussion invited attendees to express how they envisioned these books being used in the community and asked them to recommend books.

Over 50 people attended the event and 30 filled out surveys. (Attendance could have been higher. A miscommunication with library staff about holiday hours led the front doors to be locked before the event was finished and people coming later, unbeknownst to us at the time, were unable to enter.) Of those 30 people taking surveys, 6 reported being born outside the US, in the Sudan, Jamaica, Iraq, and Kenya. Of the 30 people reporting their primary race, 20 recorded themselves as Caucasian with the remainder recorded themselves as African-American, Sudanese, Somali, Arab American, and Asian American. The oldest reported attendee was born in 1941 and the youngest in 2010.

**The Good Braider: A Sudanese Journey Story**  
(July 11th, 2013)

IYNP celebrated the first featured book in the collection, *The Good Braider*, with author Terry Farish and local Sudanese American performers O.D. Bonny and Bianca Abdalla. The evening was an exploration and celebration of both the title, the Sudanese American community in Portland, and the commonalities of family relationships and journeys.

Project Director Kirsten Cappy opened the evening by wishing South Sudan a “Happy Birthday,” as July 9th marked the country’s second year of independence. Student and performance artist Bianca Abdalla read from *The Good Braider* chapter “Be Free,” an opening scene set in Juba, South Sudan. Bianca beautifully expressed Farish’s writing and the character Viola’s voice.

Farish then led the audience through a discussion of the mother-daughter relationship, a central theme of the *The Good Braider*. One audience member noted Viola’s preference to confide in her grandmother over her mother and wondered if that was a common occurrence in Sudanese culture. Bianca responded that like Viola, she often preferred to talk to her grandmother about difficult subjects. She shared that her mother commanded more authority and might try to lecture, whereas her grandmother, as an elder of the family, would simply listen. Many in the predominantly white, middle-aged female audience shared that that was also their family experience growing up.

Sudanese hip hop artist OD Bonny then took the Rines Auditorium stage to perform songs from his album “Kwo I Lobo Tek” sung in Acholi, OD’s native language and one of the languages spoken in Sudan. He concluded his set with “A Girl from Juba,” a song inspired by the book. He also shared a special preview of a music video he was producing in conjunction with Farish and Cappy to promote “Girl from Juba” and *The Good Braider*. 
OD Bonny and his friend Chris then joined the circle and the discussion. Attendees expressed “heartbreak” that they could not see the full production that evening. OD and Chris, who appears as the Irish American fisherman teen depicted in the book, answered questions about locations, actors, and inspiration. They shared that the video was being made with an all-Portland Sudanese American cast (save for Chris), director, support team, and was shot in Portland with news footage of South Sudan and Egypt.

Anne Sibley O’Brien asked OD and Chris about their friendship. Chris volunteered that even though he was white, he did “not like white kids much. I grew up in

**Bianca Abdalla read from The Good Braider**

Bayside being beat up by other white kids. When the Somalis and Sudanese started coming, they were getting beat up too. I thought, why not join them and get beat up together. I have been friends with Africans ever since.”

OD compared his own personal experiences coming to Portland from the Sudan and Uganda to Viola’s story. Bianca followed this with a plea to not automatically expect immigrants in Maine to tell their stories. “Don’t expect them to spill their most painful memories and also don’t assume they all have painful memories. I was raised in a beautiful house in Kenya and my family came here for a job.”

While the circle peppered Bianca with questions as the only African woman in the room, another young woman came to her rescue comparing Bianca’s “otherness” to her own as the only Jewish girl growing up in her small Maine town. The same woman also said that if we all look back far enough we have family coming to America for economic reasons like Bianca’s or because of war, like OD’s. She recounted that her family came to America fleeing the 1900’s pogroms in Russia.
Bianca performed a second reading, “Flea Market,” which describes Viola’s step towards a new identity in the U.S. The discussion concluded with a conversation on the ability of fiction to connect readers with people of a different culture and life experience. A woman wrapped things up beautifully with the comment, “I moved to Portland a few years ago and I’m aware of the immigrants in the city, but I don’t know any of them, I don’t know their stories. This book series opens your eyes...It offers a chance to hear their stories.”

Afterwards, the audience was free to talk with the performers or have Farish sign a copy of her book (on sale from the USM Bookstore), as they tasted Sudanese cinnamon sweet tea, and vegetable sambusas and himbasha bread from Asmara Restaurant. They were also able to pick up an IYNP discussion guide to the novel to continue the conversations.

Over 25 people attended the event and 18 took surveys. All were born in the US except for 2 born in South Sudan. 14 recorded themselves as Caucasian with the remainder as African-American and Hispanic American. The oldest reported attendee was born in 1951 and the youngest in 1994.

The story behind The Good Braider and the story of OD and Terry’s collaboration was expanded beyond the event by Terry Farish, OD Bonny, and Kirsten Cappy's appearance on MPBN on July 5th. You can listen to that recording at: http://imyourneighborportland.org/2013/07/07/good-braider-on-mpbn/
Bread Song: Cross Cultural Friendships in Maine
(July 24th, 2013)

Adults and children gathered in the Portland Public Library’s Children's Room to celebrate *Bread Song* with a appearance by author Fred Lipp and the tasting of bread from many cultures.

Lipp opened the event with a discussion about new neighbors and overcoming shyness. He talked about the taking the initiative to talk to someone new. During his time as a minister at First Parish, Lipp would often meet new people by simply walking the streets of Portland and striking up conversations. Lipp imagined that the language barrier between new arrivals and Portland’s long-term community created shyness on both sides. This shyness over connection and language was the inspiration for *Bread Song*.

Alison Pray, the owner of Standard Baking Company was in the audience and Lipp recounted “AHA” moment that was sparked in her shop. Lipp’s story would be about a friendship between Alison the baker and a young boy named Chamnan.

Lipp read aloud from his book, acting out Chamnan walking across the street and counting the steps with his grandfather. His energetic reading engaged all members of the audience and kids followed along with copies of the book.

After he finished, Lipp shared a secret with the audience. He explained that when he was younger, he too was quiet and rarely spoke because he had difficulty reading and stammered. He remembered what it was like to be shy and the importance of having a friend who reached out and helped him overcome his shyness. “A little bit of Chamnan is in me,” he said.

Following Lipp’s reading, everyone was given a *Bread Song* matching activity, in which pictures of different kinds of bread had to be matched up with the bakery and country of origin. While it was easy to connect baguettes with Standard Baking and French origins because of the story, others were more tricky. Even some of the adults were stumped!
Attendees were given the chance to sample three different breads from local bakeries each representing different cultures. There were Iraqi samoons from Tandoor Bakery, Chinese red bean buns from Bubble Maineia, and French baguettes from Standard Baking were available to taste. The red bean buns were most unfamiliar, although some had had similar pork filled buns at Chinese restaurants. The samoons were very popular, and we sent families across the street to buy them at the Farmer’s Market.

Evaluations were not handed out at this event, but attendance was over 20 people including 5 families. While USM was on hand to sell books, we gave away several copies of the book to families who appeared unable to purchase.

**Ramadan Mubarak: A Holiday Celebration and Education for Families of All Faiths** (August 2, 2013)

In several planning sessions with our Muslim advisors, Pious Ali of Maine Interfaith Youth Alliance and Reza Jalali, Director of USM’s Multicultural Student Affairs Office, the decision was made to use the heavy street traffic of Portland’s First Friday to draw the community into a discussion, education, and celebration of Ramadan. The event would have levels and stations to draw people as far into the conversation as their time, comfort, and interest would allow.
In preparation, Pious Ali also escorted Kirsten Cappy to the Maine Muslim Community Center to meet with Brother Ahmed. Cappy presented the Muslim books in the collection, talked about the PPL celebration, and left copies of the books and invitations to the event.

PPL loved the First Friday approach and committed extra funds to expand the small invitations we had distributed in the community to poster size. The poster declaring “Ramadan Mubarak” faced out onto Monument Square, the first Ramadan greetings to be prominently displayed in a Portland municipal building.

The event’s first station was at the base of the stairs leading into the PPL gallery, a popular First Friday destination. There, a Caucasian volunteer of Christian descent welcomed people, handed them a sheet, and asked, “Did you know members of our community are celebrating Ramadan?” The sheet had a description of Ramadan on one side and a schedule of events on the other. The volunteer chatted about Ramadan and the events. She especially encouraged people to return for the breaking of the fast at 8:15 PM when a catered Iraqi meal would be served. Regardless of whether they proceeded to the Rines Auditorium for the programming, we connected with each about Ramadan and the IYNP book collection.

The second station was a table outside the Rines Auditorium where an Iraqi American volunteer offered to write names in Arabic. People intending to attend the event and many more that had not, bent over his calligraphy, marveling at its beauty. Well over 200 people came by his station, some staying all evening and some going out into the ArtWalk crowd with Arabic calligraphy stuck to their shirts.

The third station was a display of books on Islam and set in Islamic countries provided by PPL. Having learned from the missed opportunities of our launch, PPL scheduled staff and set up a remote checkout so people could borrow relevant library books and even get a library card.

The fourth station was a long line of female volunteers of diverse races offering free
henna application. That table and the volunteers were positioned so that the attendees could listen to and participate in the discussion of Islam as depicted in the featured books, *Moon Watchers* and *Out of Nowhere*. The promise of the free henna drew many people to the conversation that would have never attended a Muslim book discussion.

The fifth station was the Rines Auditorium stage where Reza Jalali, author of the children’s book *Moon Watchers*, talked about Ramadan and practicing his Islamic faith in Maine. He also touched on his own experiences coming to Portland, the growth of the Maine Muslim community, and the five pillars of Islam. Attendees then asked questions, some of which Reza encouraged Muslim teenagers in the audience to answer from their points of view.

Pious Ali of Maine Interfaith Alliance then hosted a panel discussion with Reza Jalali; Anne Sibley O’Brien, the illustrator of *Moon Watchers*; Maria Padian, author of *Out of Nowhere*; and Padian’s Somali Muslim cultural adviser, Shobow Saban. The topic of the panel was the cross-cultural collaboration that occurred in the creation of *Moon Watchers* and *Out of Nowhere*. O’Brien and Padian, as the non-Muslims, shared what they learned about Islamic practices and the Iranian and Somali culture during their research. Jalali and Saban discussed how they represent and express their faith in the predominantly non-Muslim state of Maine and in literature.
The panel concluded with Pious asking the audience to answer the question “What is one thing you will take away from this evening?” Many commented on a greater understanding of Islam and Ramadan. One attendee expressed a reawakened desire for connection across faith. Another said it was “wonderful to be here with so many neighbors.”

As the discussion wrapped up and people waited to break the fast, attendees explored the sixth station, a tabletop display of the illustrations and reference for *Moon Watchers*. Others bought books from the USM Bookstore. The store quickly sold out of *My Friend Jamal*, an IYNP book featuring a Muslim child of Somali descent. Copies of the book has been handed around to keep child attendees engaged during the adult discussions.

The seventh station could be reached from the Rines or from the PPL gallery. Members of the Muslim community generously loaned their prayer rugs for display and several young Muslim men were on hand to have quiet conversations about the rugs and their faith. The room became a center of worship when an Iraqi young man at the invitation of Reza Jalali, sang the call to prayer in the middle of the Rines. For many non-Muslims, this was the first time they had heard the call and several had tears in their eyes.
Breaking of the Fast

The fast was broken with a generous spread from Tandoor Restaurant. Hearing what IYNP and PPL had planned, Tandoor doubled the amount of food without charging IYNP. The son said, “My mother and father thank you all for doing such a good thing.” At the end of the discussion about 60-75 people remained. As the food was being laid out, another 50-60 returned for the promised meal. The line for food ran through the Rines and out the door. People sat with friends, family, and most satisfyingly with strangers outside of their ethnic and religious groups.

Over 200 people attended the event and 78 took surveys. 48 recorded themselves as Caucasian, 7 as Arab American, 5 as African or African-American, 1 as Hispanic American, 3 as Native American, and 2 as Asian American. The oldest reported attendee was born in 1935 and the youngest in 2000.

This event showed that a city of difference can be a city of neighbors.

A Path of Stars: Blooming in a New Country
(August 8, 2013)

What was planned as a weekend story hour for the picture book, A Path of Stars, was completely transformed after a meeting with Hildy Ginsberg, the Executive Director of the Greater Portland YMCA. Looking over the IYNP events, Ginsberg said
she would bring a field trip of YMCA camp kids if we only had something on a weekday.

With her desire to bring 100 kids to this Cambodian American children’s event, we moved the date and location to the roominess of the PPL Rines Auditorium. Having approached Joe Bornstein’s office about general IYNP funding early on, we imagined the specificity of this request might compel them to participate. Would Joe Bornstein support the purchase of 100 books to be given free to 100 YMCA kids? We could offer bookplates with their logo and coverage on the IYNP website and social networks.

Joe Bornstein’s office donated a check to IYNP for $2800, enough to buy 100 books plus a small box of colored pencils for each child. The day before, the books were signed by Anne Sibley O’Brien, had a bookplate placed in them, and were slid into Joe Bornstein bags. As the IYNP team left PPL from an afternoon of prepping books, the Time and Temperature building flashed “Path” and “Star” in honor of the book and event.

Another unexpected community connection was the generosity of Sokunthim Nou and her husband, the Cambodian owners of Portland’s Chiang Mai restaurant. Anne stopped by their restaurant asking for ideas for Cambodian packaged snacks we could serve. Nou was delighted by the idea that the community was celebrating Cambodian history and culture, but disliked the idea that kids would eat packaged snacks. She reminded Anne that it was mango season and offered to make mango
and sticky rice for 100! When she and her husband arrived to deliver the desert the morning of the event, they also delivered a large pot of soup to thank the PPL staff.

As the event opened, Kirsten Cappy briefly explained IYNP to campers and gathered families, encouraging them to find books in the library that had characters that did not look like them. As Anne Sibley O’Brien took the stage she invited Sokunthim Nou and her husband up first to thank them with, “These two wonderful people have been up since 4:00 this morning making you the best dessert you may ever eat.” There were cheers to that.

The audience sat captivated as O’Brien read *A Path of Stars* while the images were projected large behind her. As background to her story, O’Brien showed a map of Cambodia and told some of Cambodia’s history. She projected pictures of Veasna and Peng Kem, introducing them as Portland neighbors, partners on the book, and citizens who had fled Cambodia because of the war (just like the grandmother and mother in the book).

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YMCA campers listen to *A Path of Stars*

After the storytelling, the children watched a video of traditional Khmer dancing before standing up and trying a short dance of their own. O’Brien led the audience in learning the steps and hand movements of the dance and soon the room was filled with sounds of Khmer music as children stepped and flicked their wrists.

Once the music ended, the audience prepared for a drawing lesson of the lotus flower. O’Brien showed pictures of the lotus and explained its significance in Cambodian culture, “The lotus flower is a symbol for purity because it roots itself in the mud but blooms on the surface of the water beautifully clean and pure,” she said.
She connected the experience of war, flight, and resettlement to the life cycle of the lotus. Children gasped when O’Brien showed pictures of the famous temple, Angkor Wat and a giant statue of the Buddha sitting in the lotus flower.

O’Brien led the children in the drawing lesson and drew different examples of a closed and open blossom. Once everyone had learned and practiced drawing the flower, cards with “I’m Your Neighbor” written in Khmer were handed out to everyone in the audience. They could draw and color the lotus on the front, trace over the Khmer, and then write their own messages on the inside. While they drew, they snacked on the mango and sticky rice.

*IYNP Card in Khmer*

Children were encouraged to leave their cards with our promise to give them to members of Portland’s Cambodian community. Some kids wrote that they hoped to visit Cambodia one day or that they thought Cambodia was cool. Others wrote “I’m Your Neighbor” on the inside and signed their name.

Sokunthim Nou was tearful when Cappy handed her the collection of cards several days later, along with an empty soup pot. She decorated the front counter and restaurant with the cards. This was a perfect conclusion to a powerful cultural and community-supported event.

Attendance, ages, and ethnic backgrounds were not collected at this event. The inclusion of the YMCA, however meant that we had an excellent cross-section of the Portland youth community.

**Something About America: Putting Out the Welcome Mat for New Arrivals**
(September 16, 2013)

The *Something About America* event was built around the poem “Lemonade” from the prose poetry novel. The final stanza reads, “If you can’t find the welcome mat / when you arrive, / put one out yourself.”

Kim Simmons of the Portland Choose Civility Initiative (a project and grant of PPL),
Heidi Randall of the Maine Youth Action Network, and Kirsten Cappy designed an event for teens that opened with a series of readings by Maria Testa and a discussion of events in Portland and Lewiston leading up to 2012 “Letter” and its aftermath. Using the poem as a transition, Kim planned to talk about the civility of “welcoming” neighbors and community members. Heidi Randall then planned to lead an arts project where teens collaged and wrote messages of “welcome” on poster board.

Unfortunately, both Heidi Randall and the educator who was bringing the teens were quite sick on the day of the event. The audience was a small group of 10 women who had attended the majority of the events. A compelling conversation about the history of immigration to the state of Maine, the unique situation and notoriety of the Lewiston incident, and the strides and slides we had made as a welcoming state followed Maria Testa’s presentation.

Armed with scissors, glue sticks, and markers, the remaining attendees made posters of welcome. Kim Simmons wrapped up the remaining supplies and brought the project to the Friends School of Portland on the following day. With contributions from these students including posters with “welcome” and “I’m Your Neighbor” in many languages, 15 large posters were brought to the September 18th Naturalization Ceremony at the Portland Gateway. Although that space is lovely, there is a long walk up a fenced-in ramp.

Using a hole punch and twisty ties, we hung the posters like a gallery show along the last stretch of walkway. Attendees pointed, exclaimed, smiled broadly, and read the
signs aloud in languages they knew. The result was an unscripted moment of
celebration in an otherwise very scripted federal ceremony. In this case the
“welcome mat” was there when they arrived.

My Friend Jamal: Friends Are the Same & Different
The final event of the IYNP year was to be the reading of the picture book My Friend
Jamal by a white teen and a Somali teen at elementary after-school programs. If
supplemental funding was secured, these stops would have been in conjunction
with the PPL Bookmobile and free copies of the paperback picture book would have
been distributed. Due to adding the Bread Song event to the schedule, significant
overruns of budgeted time by the IYNP staff, and PPL not receiving anticipated
grants, this event was removed from the plans before school outreach began.

This event, however, was produced by Kirsten Cappy and Catherine Anderson of the
Ocean Avenue School in the Fall of 2012. A Lewiston middle school educator who
attended that event and all of the IYNP events was inspired to make her student’s
Martin Luther King day of service be about reading. Teens in Lewiston read books to
their siblings and other gathered children on MLK’s birthday and copies of My
Friend Jamal were given away. The Ocean Avenue event also became a series of
“I’m Your Neighbor” events at the school. At each of three additional events, a
different Portland cultural group is celebrated and a matching book is given away.

Discussion Guides & Non-Fiction Books
IYNP Program Assistant Delanie Honda, an English major at Wheaton College in
Massachusetts, produced six discussion guides for the novels and picture books in
the program. Each leads with the quote from poet Amit Majmudar, “The true
meeting takes place when the book opens, and a stranger reads about — and
comprehends — a stranger.” The guides contain discussion questions, a list of
opportunities to engage with the featured culture via restaurants or events, and a
list of additional recommended reading. Honda consulted with Kirsten Cappy, the
authors, and a cultural advisor when possible. For example, Veasna and Peng Kem
welcomed Honda to their home to review and make suggestions on the A Path of
Stars guide.

Honda carefully selected chapters from New Mainers and I Remember Warm Rain
as complimentary non-fiction reads and featured those on the IYNP website and in
the guides.

Website & Logo & Social Media
Honda and Cappy created and maintained a website for the project offering features
on each author, event, and on community partners. You can view the site at
www.imyourneighborportland.org to see how we shared information and to
download materials like press releases.

The site and program’s branding and message of welcoming was greatly enhanced
by the creation of the “I’m Your Neighbor” logo. The logo was commissioned from
Moth Written, a small craft business in South Portland that produces t-shirts with
American sayings translated into Arabic. Mary E. Robbins and Nabil Sibouih captured the feel of the program in their design, which has been praised by immigration support groups all over the country.

IYNP created a page and event listings on Facebook to communicate about events and to share national stories related to the mission. The page has 115 followers.

**City Connections**
A summary of the qualitative partnerships with Portland, Maine businesses and organizations includes:

**ARTS & HUMANITIES NON-PROFITS & INDIVIDUALS**
- Portland Public Library
- Pious Ali, Maine Interfaith Youth Alliance (advised on cultural content and connections; moderator at 1 event)
- Maine Muslim Community Center (advised on cultural content and connections)
- Author Reza Jalali (advised on cultural content and connections, speaker at 1 event)
- The Telling Room (books for the PPL collection and launch event participation)
- Performer O.D. Bonny (music performance and cultural content)
- Performer Bianca Abdalla (spoken word reading and cultural content)
- Author & Illustrator Anne Sibley O’Brien (key member of IYNP, speaker at 2 events)
- Author Terry Farish (key member of IYNP, speaker at 1 event)
- Author Maria Testa (speaker at 1 event)
- Author Maria Padian (speaker at 1 event)
- Author Fred Lipp (speaker at 1 event)
- Maine Youth Action Network (provided arts programming)
- Portland Choose Civility Initiative (providing programming)
- 15 NAACP King Fellows (presented at launch event, worked at Ramadan event)
- USM’s Multicultural Student Affairs Office (advised on cultural content and connections)
- Portland Adult Ed (advised on cultural content and connections)
- City of Portland’s Multicultural Affairs Office (given a book collection & advised on cultural content and connections)
- Portland NAACP chapter (given a book collection & offered key cultural advice)
- Greater Portland YMCA (given a book collection & brought 100 campers to an event)
- City of Portland’s Refugee Services (given a book collection)
- Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services (given a book collection & advised on cultural content and connections)
- Friends School of Portland (provided artwork for an event)
- Catherine Anderson, Educator (advised on cultural content and connections)
• Audrey Maynard, Editor & Publisher (advised on cultural content and connections)

RESTAURANTS & FOOD STORES
• Sun Oriental Market (refreshments purchased here)
• Safari Grocery (refreshments purchased here)
• Mittapheap International Market (refreshments purchased here)
• Sindibad Market (refreshments purchased here)
• La Bodega Latina (refreshments purchased here)
• Tandoor Bakery (refreshments purchased here for two events and catered Ramadan event)
• Asmara Restaurant (refreshments purchased here)
• Bubble Maineia (refreshments purchased here)
• Standard Baking (refreshments purchased here and participated in an event)
• Chiang Mai Restaurant (catered one event)

BUSINESSES
• Curious City (program director)
• The USM Bookstore (book sales at all events)
• Longfellow Books (books for the PPL collection)
• Law Offices of Joe Bornstein (sponsor and marketing partner)
• Artist & Craftsman (provided discount art supplies)
• XPress Copy (provided discounted printing and supplies)
• Moth Written (designed logo)
• Discount Halal Market (henna purchased here)

Maine Connections

I'm Your Neighbor Lewiston
Project Scholar Dr. Krista Aronson of Bates College plans to continue the mission of “I'm Your Neighbor” through her own research. Feeling that IYN needs data to show a direct correlation between reading outside of your cultural group and the reduction of cross group anxiety, Dr. Aronson is working with Kirsten Cappy to pilot a study in Portland and Lewiston. The study will have a group of long-term Maine residents read The Good Braider. A group of new arrivals will read the children’s novel Counting on Grace, a novel featuring a French Canadian family moving to Northern Vermont during the Industrial Revolution to work in the mills. The family faces crushing poverty, poor working conditions, and prejudice against their culture and language. Each group will read and discuss, swap books, and then have a group discussion and gathering.

Ocean Avenue School
As mentioned previously, this Portland elementary school piloted an IYNP event using My Friend Jamal in 2012 and continues to offer IYNP events with a featured children’s book and cultural programming.

The first event invited Somali parents as cultural advisors and readers. The entire
community heard the book read in English, Somali, and French before being given a copy of their own. Families shared a meal of pizza and sambusas and children collaged drawings of their household onto a mural of the neighborhood. White parents shyly approached Somali parents and asked questions like, “If I have a Somali boy at my son’s birthday party is there anything I should know about food or rules?”

**MLK Day of Service**

As previously mentioned, Lewiston educator Jenn Carter, whose daughter attends Ocean Avenue School and who attended the majority of IYNP events, was inspired to include reading in her student’s MLK Day of Service. The teens she tutors in the Lewiston Public School system held read-alouds in their neighborhoods and gave away children’s books set in Africa selected by Kirsten Cappy, including *My Friend Jamal*.

**Reading Round-Up**

Terry Farish was presented with a Lupine Award for *The Good Braider* by the Maine Library Association at their annual conference in April 2013. After receiving the award, she presented the IYNP program and IYN database in a workshop.

In April 2014, Kirsten Cappy was invited to the same conference to report on the outcomes of IYNP. Joining her was Anne Sibley O’Brien who won the Katahdin Award for her body of work including *A Path of Stars*. Participating from the workshop audience was Maria Padian who had won a Lupine Award for her IYNP novel *Out of Nowhere*.

**National Connections**

**National Council for the Teachers of English**

In November 2013 Maria Padian presented her novel *Out of Nowhere* in two sessions at the annual convention day-long workshop entitled *By Land, Air or Sea: Border Crossings in Literacy Conversations*. Padian presented her novel, research process, and community engagement including sharing the IYNP program and IYN book database with attendees.

**American Library Association**

IYNP was invited to present their program at a poster session at the American Library Association’s (ALA) Annual Conference in Chicago in the summer of 2013. At the ALA Diversity Fair, IYNP staff Kirsten Cappy, Delanie Honda, and Anne Sibley O’Brien talked with librarians and other project representatives who were excited about the database, citywide read model, and inclusive logo.

**Children’s Publishers**

Taking advantage of their time at the ALA Conference, Honda and O’Brien approached every children’s publisher exhibiting about the IYN database and our interest in titles set in new arrival communities. A postcard about the database and the city-wide read pilot was left with each. Samples from publishers has been
flowing ever since.

**Annick Press**
The Toronto and Vancouver-based publisher of *My Friend Jamal* was inspired by our use of the book and our programming and have committed to publishing more books set in the new arrival community and are asking IYN for help. Anne Sibley O’Brien, Terry Farish, and Kirsten Cappy will consult and/or write picture book manuscripts for them. Additionally, Annick Press would like to call the new series, “I’m Your Neighbor.” We could not be more honored.

**Welcoming America**
Welcoming America is a national, grassroots-driven collaborative that works to create a welcoming atmosphere – community by community – in which immigrants are more likely to integrate into the social fabric of their adopted hometowns. After sharing some of our summer 2013 programming and database with them, Welcoming America has invited us to be both present and featured on a series of national training calls. They have also invited us to submit proposals for partnerships with affiliates across the country to integrate literature into programs welcoming new Americans. This will be the next step for the “I’m Your Neighbor” project.

**Conclusion**
We are deeply grateful to the Maine Humanities Council and the Portland Public Library for the opportunity to pilot new arrival and long-term community cross-group understanding and communication through the use of multi-aged children’s books and programming.

Despite issues of securing additional funds, having insufficient staff, and low press coverage, we succeeded in having compelling conversations, partnering meaningfully with cultural advisors, attracting a multi-racial audience, and inspiring both Maine and national action towards using literature to promote a sense of community among the country’s diverse citizens.
Those outcomes would not have been possible without the team of Anne Sibley O’Brien, Delanie Honda, Terry Farish, Pious Ali, Dr. Krista Aronson, and others putting in long hours alongside Kirsten Cappy to imagine, outline, explore, plan, partner, and experiment with this concept. Those outcomes would not be possible without the deep community respect for the Portland Public Library, the city’s inherent trust for their literary and cultural programming, and the commitment of staff to graphic design, operations, and bookkeeping.

We look forward to the next steps of determining impact with Dr. Krista Aronson of Bates College, national community interaction through Welcoming America, and new books through Annick Press.