



Daniela Melo

Naomi Slipp:

This is Naomi Slipp. I'm here recording a story for Common Ground. I'll let my interviewee introduce themselves.

Daniela Melo:

I'm Daniela Melo. I live on Maple Street in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I'm a political scientist, and I am the Chair of The New Bedford Light.

Naomi Slipp:

Great. Well, thank you for joining, agreeing to give your story and sitting down. So, I'm going to start out with a couple broad questions. So, what brought you to New Bedford?

Daniela Melo:

What brought me to New Bedford? It's a funny question because what brought me to New Bedford was my husband, who was not from New Bedford himself. He, too, is a transplant. But Tim and I met in Lisbon because we both received the same fellowship to The National Archive in Lisbon, and we met there. It's a very academic meet, cute.

And he lived in New Bedford, and he loved living in New Bedford. It had always been his first choice of place to live, as soon as he got a job at UMD, at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. So, he had always lived there, and he was very excited about the city, and he was very excited about me getting to know the city.

We got married nine months later, so it was a very fast meet, get married, move to New Bedford. What we always think is funny, I don't know if it's that funny, but is that everyone assumes that he's in New Bedford because of me, because I'm the Portuguese person in the relationship, and he's a Midwestern from Ohio, but it's exactly the other way around.

He lived here. He loved the proximity to the city. He loved living in the middle of Portuguese-speaking communities, and he never considered anything else. And after seeing New Bedford and living in it, I can see why.

Naomi Slipp:

Mm-hmm. So, what has kept you in New Bedford or what has cultivated your relationship with New Bedford, kind of outside of his passion for the city?

Daniela Melo:

So, interesting question again. Tim was a tenured professor already, so he had some rootedness here, but I was doing my PhD at the time. And in fact, as many people pursuing their PhDs, there are very few jobs. And if you want a tenure track job these days, you're unlikely to get it. But if you do, you're likely to have to move across the country to different places.

And this is something that we discussed a lot, in the early years of our marriage, because if I wanted to pursue an academic career, I was afraid that we would have to do ... to be distant or have to move elsewhere.

And I think, at the end of the day, I've decided that I didn't want to just go anywhere else. I liked where I was. It took me, I think, like most people, four or five years to feel like I belonged in the community, to feel more rooted. But once you're in, this is the type of city and the type of place where you feel connected to the people in your



neighborhood. You feel connected to the people in your block. And that's a very, very strong pull.

I was living in downtown New Bedford. And downtown didn't have a very dense population. But I wrote half my dissertation at the Green Bean, and arriving in the morning with my laptop at the Green Bean, being greeted by name, everyone knowing exactly what I was going to have that day, and sitting in the corner and typing away at my dissertation. I would say that pretty much married me to the city, to downtown, in particular.

But even in looking for a house, we decided to buy ... We wanted to be close to downtown because that was our community within the community as well. And we decided to buy on Maple Street, which was wonderful. And what anyone who comes from the outside of the city tells us, and I recognize it, and I see it through their eyes as well, is that, on Maple Street, we have what feels like an old neighborhood, in the sense that the neighbors go by, and they greet you and they say hi to you, and they know your kid's name, and your kid knows the name of every person around the block, but you're in the middle of the city as well. And there are very few places that offer that.

Anyway, long story short, I guess what I'm saying is that I fell in love with the city. It's a city for people like me, in between identities, I think. So, I have an immediate affinity to it, to its history, and I felt welcomed here. And academic job or no academic job, I decided that I was going to try to root myself here, build my family here, and if the academic thing didn't work out, I'd find something else to do. It has worked out so far, even though it means a commute to Boston, but it's an okay price to pay, from my point of view anyway.

Naomi Slipp:

Can you talk about some of the strategies that you found for rooting yourself, in individuals, community groups, organizations, that you've kind of built ties with?

Daniela Melo:

Interesting. So, in my early years, I was so absolutely absorbed by graduate school that I didn't have time, well, graduate school and teaching, because like most PhD students, I was teaching at two or three different institutions, while taking classes and writing my dissertation.

So, I would say my early years, my integration didn't come through organized groups, even though I, myself, study organized groups because I write about social movements and mobilization, but there was no space in my life. I would say my first community was, of course, the community that my husband had already built for four years because he had arrived four years before me, and it was through the university, so friends that we had in the academic community, and then branching out to the artist community in downtown New Bedford, by going to their events and attending gallery events and getting to meet people like that.

So, that's how I got started. But it wasn't until I moved to Maple Street that I was at a different stage. I had already found a job, and my son was just born. And it's not that I had a lot of free time on my hands, but I had a lot of ideas and a lot of interesting meeting a lot of other people.

And I accepted an invitation by Ken Hartnett to attend a political discussion meeting that he held informally, once a week, with various people from his own life and from his own circle of friends. And that was incredible because, once a week, I was sitting down with 20 other people. Many of them have had major roles in the community. They were former mayors. People came from all ... lawyers. They came from all academics. They came from all parts of the city and had had a big impact in the city.

And they really helped me see a history of the city that I hadn't seen before, understand an evolution of the city. John Bullard, in particular, when he starts speaking about the city, he's so passionate about it. I mean, there's a man who should be teaching a class about New Bedford, to anyone who wants to learn more about it.

So, anyway, what I'm saying is that, from this group, so we're meeting a year, a year-and-a-half before the elections, in which Trump had went against Biden. And we were concerned about the state of the country. We were concerned about polarization. We were concerned. I mean, these were always the topics that kept coming



up in our weekly discussions.

And about a year-and-a-half ago, Ken Hartnett turned to the group and said ... Well, this is COVID had already started, so we had switched to Zoom. He said, "Okay, we need to move from words to action, because just talking about it isn't doing anyone any good. We need to think about things to do, in order to make some sort of change, little, small, national level, state level, city level, whatever. Let's brainstorm ideas to do something." Right?

And it started with letter writing to specific politicians and individuals expressing concerns, sometimes writing op-eds for pieces. But eventually, Ken said, "I'm interested in thinking about news." Of course, he had worked in news his entire life. Right? "If anyone in the group wants to join us and brainstorm ideas to fill the gap in our local news coverage, in investigative journalism and all that, let's go have a separate meeting."

So, we did. I'm telling you perhaps too much detail. 10 people decided to start a separate meeting, and we started discussing the idea of creating an alternative news outlet for the city. And what I love about it, this particular early stage, is that I wouldn't say we were naive. I would say we were filled with real enthusiasm for improving our local level democracy. I know it sounds corny, but what was most inspiring to me is that I was, by far, the youngest person in a group of people who were mostly retired, had already had this long career and history of giving to the community, most of them.

But there they were, in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. And they were pumped up about ... And they truly believed that we could do something about shifting the course of things and that, if we were going to do it at any level, we should do it in our city, with our community, with people who trusted us.

And again, we were deeply, deeply concerned about polarization, the type of discourse, the absence of unbiased voices, as much as possible, in public discourse. Right? The rise of new types of news organizations that clearly had political agendas behind them and were then kind of pouring gas into the fire, rather than ... and the disenchantment of the population across the country, but certainly, you could see it in New Bedford as well. When you only have 10% of the population showing up to vote at the polls, that's sending a strong signal of disengagement. Right? So, we were true believers, truly animated by a sense of collectively being able to do something that could begin to improve the state of the conversation in New Bedford.

So, it took us months to decide what we were truly going to do. We thought about, I don't know, minimum 10 different versions of what could happen, whether we wanted an actual newspaper coming to people's doors. And we spoke to people who did similar projects across the country. Once a week, we'd go and have meetings with them. And they were really wonderful with us, give us a lot of information.

And then we decided on a non-profit news organization model, and here we are. So, I would say, to come back to your initial question that got me speaking about this, I never got as involved with any organization as I did with The New Bedford Light. But part of that has to do with sort of critical junctures in your life. Right? So, when I first arrived, I was young. I was ... well, younger. I was in my 20s. I was completely self-absorbed by my immediate needs and by the needs of my program.

And as I established myself and was able to stabilize my professional life, then I had time to branch out and focus on what I wanted to do and how I wanted to contribute to my community as well. Right?

I mean, again, another thing that was really extraordinary in those early meetings is we spent a lot of time just talking about our community, who we were, who we were seeing, the silos within our community and why they're not speaking to each other. And not just political silos. Right? But we have linguistic silos. We have socioeconomic silos, and like most communities, most big cities. And we wanted to find a way of speaking to all of them, and we're hoping it will be the light.

Naomi Slipp:

Great. Thank you for sharing those pieces about The New Bedford Light. I want to turn now to thinking about what it's been like for you. As you mentioned, you came here when you were 17, from Portugal. And New Bedford has this deep kind of roots within the Azores in Portugal. How has it been with that community and



finding yourself here in New Bedford?

Daniela Melo:

Mm-hmm. So, I'll take a step back momentarily to say this. My family migrated from Northern Portugal in 1998. My parents brought us here, five kids. I'm the oldest of five, and I was 17. And we moved to Central Falls, Rhode Island. So, Central Falls, Rhode Island was my first foray into the United States, not too dissimilar from New Bedford, in terms it's a multiethnic city. It has some challenges that are similar to the challenges in New Bedford, but it no longer had the strong Portuguese community by the time that I arrived. In fact, I was very much a minority.

And then I moved to Connecticut for most of my education. So, when I came to New Bedford, it was actually my very first time leaving and experiencing deeply a Portuguese community. Right? And as you said, the majority of the community is Azorean American. And that has been sort of a learning within itself because I grew up in ... As I said, I grew up in Northern Portugal in the Porto District. I had never met anyone from the Azores until I came to the United States. Seems unusual to travel so far, in order to meet people from your own country, but that's true.

And suddenly, I was the minority, rather than the other way around. Right? The minority identity, in terms of Portuguese identities. And that has been fascinating. Right? I mean, I never knew about [foreign language 00:17:47] which are an Azorean tradition and so strong here as well.

I feel like this experience, I don't know if this image will stick, but it's like a matryoshka of identities, right? In that I'm not exactly Portuguese American, but I'm not exactly just Portuguese anymore. And I'm not Azorean. So, I'm a continental Portuguese who assimilated into American culture, in a community that has a very large Azorean Portuguese community, that I also assimilated into and fully embrace.

But I'm some sort of go-in-between, between a Portuguese American who was born into this community and that has a very distinctive way of living their Portuguese-ness, which is distinct from growing up in Portugal. So, I'm not even sure how I would define that. I'm an in-between, but it's wonderful.

When I was a teenager, and I first arrived to the United States, I wasn't too ... I mean, there were too many things going on. I had to learn English as fast as I could, and I wanted to go to university. So, I knew I needed to adapt as fast as possible, so I didn't make any effort to integrate myself into a preexisting Portuguese community. And now, I'm at a stage in my life in which I not only can appreciate it and appreciate that it's here, but I now find myself teaching Portuguese to my son at home. So, he's growing up bilingual, and he's getting that sort of immigrant kid experience, even though he's not an immigrant, born and raised in New Bedford.

But he's going to be born and raised in New Bedford, speaking Portuguese and speaking English. He will probably be joining a Portuguese school down the street soon enough. And here I am, doing exactly the same thing that so many people before me have done, to make sure that Portuguese identity continues to last.

So, I like that. Of course, it's an incredible benefit of being in New Bedford, that I can go to a Mom-and-Pop shop, in the North End or in the South End, and buy my child the same cereal that I ate as a child because the community imports it. It's an incredible privilege.

Naomi Slipp:

Great.