

My name is Joanna and I've been in Maine for 6 years now. When I first relocated here from a war-torn country in East Africa, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had visited the USA once before as a successful young professional who enjoyed a comfortable life. I spent a summer studying at Yale in New Haven, and a few days in New York. But this time it was different. I was homeless, jobless and on government assistance (due to a mandatory 6 months wait period before asylum seekers could apply for a work authorization). A couple of months later, I moved into an affordable but unsafe apartment complex in Portland, with neighbors who struggled with substance use. It's in that apartment that I started over my life.

When I met my now husband, all I knew of Maine was Portland and that decrepit apartment complex on Forest Ave. Until I started seeing more of Maine with him, I didn't know that there are so many beautiful and quiet towns, farms with white fences, and tranquil rivers. So once we decided to settle down and buy a house, I was thrilled that we had set our minds on New Gloucester. I remember telling him that it looked like those places in the American movies I used to watch, where people go to live happily ever after.

It wasn't long before I started to notice some hateful political rhetoric being reflected on people's lawns with a sign here, a flag there. I still believed in New Gloucester, however, because the neighbors I share a lane with are some of the kindest people I know, and the local daycare takes amazing care of my daughter.

But when I heard horrible racist comments coming from the a member of the town's selectboard leadership, my heart sank. Leaders are a mirror of those they govern, so the majority of my community had chosen such a person to govern and represent them. Did the majority of my community also think like that?

I was quickly shown otherwise by the many people who rallied in the dead of winter, the many signs telling me that people who look like me matter too and are welcome here, I saw people organize and come together to remove from leadership a person who they didn't think represented New Gloucester. And I saw them succeed.

Having this vacant seat is proof that New Gloucester is ready to live up to its full potential, the one I saw when I decided to call it home and plant my East African roots here, the one I saw when I enrolled my child in a local daycare, and the one I see every time I support local businesses.

New Gloucester is ready to have authentic conversations that cannot happen in a vacuum, especially not at its leadership level. Selectboard candidate Dustin Ward will represent the voices of everyone, he will help guide conversations the next time something inappropriate is said at the leadership level so people can pause to acknowledge it instead of laughing nervously or in unison.

I am very excited to see what great things Dustin Ward will do for our town, and I cannot wait to see New Gloucester be what it was always meant to be: home, sweet home. For everyone.