

Elevating Voices

Meet the Women Behind the New Greenlight Maine Series

BY LYNN FANTOM

When Maine Public Television begins airing the inaugural season of *Elevating Voices* in April, perceptive viewers may sense a genuine rapport and connection between the co-hosts.

For the new series, Kenyan-born lawyer Alyne Cistone joins veteran broadcast journalist Julene Gervais to celebrate diversity among businesses in Maine. The two are friends. Over six episodes, they travel around Maine to spotlight minority-owned companies ranging from start-ups to community cornerstones.

The program is part of *Greenlight Maine*, which originated as a head-to-head competition among business innovators for cash prizes. *Greenlight Maine*, now in its sixth season, has been a popular success, in part by exploring different dimensions of Maine's business landscape and introducing variations. The producers have previously launched "College Edition," featuring student entrepreneurs from Maine's acclaimed colleges and universities. *Elevating Voices*, the new diversity-focused series, is not a competition, but each honoree is awarded \$5,000.

What is common to all three is that they are about "growing Maine . . . one dream at a time," says executive producer Nat Thompson.

The new series comes at a time when Maine is increasingly aware that it has the highest percentage of white residents of any state in the US. That demographic statistic may be changing, albeit slowly, as people with diverse backgrounds, including recently resettled refugees, choose to call Maine home and start businesses here.

Before Alyne Cistone was recruited as co-host of *Elevating Voices*, she was a *Greenlight* guest about a year ago on the segment called "Sunday Morning Conversations." In that interview, Julene was curious about the experience of newcomers to Maine, and she asked Alyne about her impressions.

"I was scared at first. It's different, and there are fewer of my kind," Alyne responded. "So, I have been surprised. I think people are more curious than racist in this state. There has been a warm embrace of my uniqueness, and I've had many opportunities for work."

Clocking in under three minutes, the segment ended, but Julene couldn't leave it at that. She asked Alyne to lunch. Then, the two couldn't stop talking.

For Maine, they may seem an unusual pair: an African from rural Kenya who has an elegant Swahili-tinged English accent and an Irish-Italian American from the Boston area. "When we walk down the street or when we get together, people look at us," says Julene.

But they discovered their lives were "so much alike"—their values, the fact they are both from big families, their careful balance of motherhood and careers, and their experiences of both being new Mainers at one point. "We just became great friends," says Julene.

Now TV viewers will be watching them even more intently as the two women interview small-business owners who have wide-ranging cultural histories. With each visit and conversation, Julene's and Alyne's goal is to "get a sense of where the owners work, and where they live, and to find the aha! moments in these people's stories," says Nat Thompson. Filming the episodes safely on location throughout Maine during COVID was "exponentially more difficult," the executive producer adds, but it is a dimension that differentiates the new series in the *Greenlight Maine* portfolio.

Spurred on by the commitment of Bangor Savings Bank, the project has evolved. It has generated excitement among an array of stakeholders, including the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development. From over 30 candidates, a selection committee chose 12 honorees. Among them are

- A husband-and-wife team of Penobscot tribal heritage, who have been creating luxury jewelry for the past 20 years.
- A former Bolivian who is introducing Mainers to empanadas and his own carrot salsa that complements the savory hand pies.
- A Penn Law "super litigator," an African American, who has successfully argued cases in state and federal courts throughout Maine, including the Maine Supreme Court.
- A group of Somali immigrants now able to lease farmland in an agrarian trust. For the last 30 years, these farmers had moved throughout Somalia and then to refugee camps in neighboring Kenya.

Alyne has made a valuable contribution to the program through her knowledge of African history and geography. For example, as the team planned for the interview with the executive director of the Somali Bantu



Alyne Cistone and Julene Gervais, the co-hosts of *Elevating Voices*. Photo by Jeff Kirlin



Community Association, Alyne's knowledge shed light on what this gentleman had been through. "He actually *walked* from Somalia across the border to Kenya to get to the refugee camp," she explained to them. That might be some 300 miles—like walking from Caribou to Kittery.

As Nat Thompson accompanied the co-hosts on interviews around the state, he noticed that the honorees, "almost to a person, have said that they've been very welcomed and very accepted, with mentors and people who've done so much for them. That's a big part of the story, too."

Alyne agrees, saying, "It was easier for me to build that 'community' right here in Maine than any other place in the US that I've been. And the reason: the nature of who Mainers are."

She and Julene are capable guides for all the inquisitive viewers who will be tuning in. Both are storytellers who come from families of teachers, although their differences in background are another facet of their friendship.

Julene is a TV "pro" who has been on camera in Maine as a reporter, sports anchor, talk show co-host, and moderator for 25 years. She coached Alyne on the subtleties of interviewing people and being filmed.

Alyne grew up on a farm in southwestern Kenya where there was no electricity or running water. True to her ethnic Kisii name "Kemunto," which means "cheerful one," she made toys when she didn't have them and studied hard by candlelight. Her mother was a teacher and her father eventually became a banker—both "really good role models and forward thinking." They spared her from the "dowry tradition," Alyne says. "Girls were viewed as a way to make money because you get so much dowry out of them." With a strong performance on a key national exam in Kenya, Alyne was fast-tracked into the best educational opportunities in the



Alyne Cistone and her daughter Kemy on Mount Desert Island. Photo by Katherine Emery

country. Then, as she was studying law at the University of Nairobi, a mentor encouraged her to pursue her interest in international law at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Ohio. That was almost two decades ago.

Since 2011, Alyne has lived on Mount Desert Island with her husband, the chief executive of an inter-faith, international nongovernmental organization, and their two children. For clients like the Jackson Laboratory, Alyne's firm Global Tides Consulting offers "community on-boarding"—helping newcomers to Maine access different services so that they can put down roots. She has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the College of the Atlantic since 2013.

Alyne is excited that *Elevating Voices* will acknowledge the contributions minority-owned businesses are already making to Maine's economy. What's more, she says, the program reveals some of the challenges these business owners face—overcoming the language barrier, getting access to capital, finding simpatico mentors, and orienting to the particular business environment here. By

raising awareness of these and other challenges, she hopes the program will spur government and service organizations in fruitful directions, for the good of all.

But, more than that, "it's time for people to understand that we are their neighbors, their friends, and part of the fabric of Maine," she says.

Julene knows that already. After a long weekend of filming, the crew was wrapping up at the historic Dana Warp Mill, where Alyne had interviewed the Ghanaian sculptor and jewelry designer Ebenezer Akapo earlier in the day. Portland City Councilor Pious Ali joined the Sunday night get-together of friends.

In this open and creative space—home to photographers, artists, and designers—Alyne and an honoree Adele Ngoy, the owner of Antoine's Formalwear, offered up an African banquet. Curry scented the air. Diners pulled off pieces of ugali, the traditional white maize porridge, to scoop up flavorful fish, chicken, and vegetables midst the hum of relaxed conversation. Monday, Martin Luther King Day, would be another day of filming, another day of elevating voices. •