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In the Ivory Coast, where he was born and lived until three years ago, Issouf Coulibaly worked in a foundry as the director of operations. He and his wife had a young son, and life was good. "I like to be involved," Coulibaly says, coaxing out his thoughts into English, which he speaks slowly, with a lilt that hints of the French of his native country. In his spare time, Coulibaly, who had just turned 30, was general secretary of the local chapter of a political party, the FPI. Which is why, it turns out, he is standing in the corridor of the Portland Ballet—in front of the men's room, to be precise, which he has just finished cleaning.

But do not assume, by knowing that, that you now know the rest of Issouf Coulibaly's story: the move to America, the refugee status, the crummy jobs. True, Coulibaly was forced to leave his country and his family because of his political activities and seek asylum wherever he could get it. True, he was sent to Maine, a chilly place where he knew not a soul. True, he is cleaning a rest room. But Coulibaly has a full-time job with decent pay, working the night shift as a machine operator in a rotor factory. By day he can often be found helping out at the ballet, or babysitting, or assisting English speakers translate correspondence into French, or gardening, or wallpapering. All of the work is voluntary, yet none of it is volunteer work.

Issouf Coulibaly is a member of the Maine Time Dollar Network, a collection of nearly 300 people in Portland from all walks of life—elders, doctors, single moms, old salts, engineers, personal trainers, welders, teachers, musicians, and refugees among them—along with organizations like the ballet and the city's adult-education program. Members of the network bypass the traditional money economy by using a radically quotidian currency: time. In this system of exchange there is only one denomination, the hour. For every hour that Coulibaly contributes to the ballet, for instance, he receives an hour of credit in the Time Dollar bank. For members of the network, it's an equal exchange—an hour for an hour, no matter how it's earned or how it's spent. An hour of babysitting for an hour of tax preparation. An hour of translation for an hour of haircutting. An hour of wallpapering for an hour of massage.

"Money may be very efficient in distinguishing the haves from the have-nots," says Edgar Cahn, the founder and president of the Time Dollar Institute in Washington, D.C. "It seems to be singularly inefficient in bridging that divide or in enabling society to place value on what it says it values: caring, neighboring, rearing children, civic participation, learning, and building community."

In the more than 20 years since Cahn first came up with the time-dollar concept, he has seen it go from idea to reality in 21 states and four countries. Each community adapts the notion to its own needs. In Chicago, elementary school children earn time dollars for tutoring other kids, and get a computer after 100 hours of service. In St. Louis, 8,000 residents exchange time dollars in a vast support network within a single public housing complex. In Mesa County, Colorado, and New York City, elderly patients enrolled in HMO's receive companionship and help with shopping—an exchange that assists the infirm while cutting health care costs.

For refugees like Coulibaly, participation in the network translates directly into a range of new experiences. "I was able to buy a computer with time dollars," he says, "which I sent back to my village." (His first computer.) "I saw a performance of *The Nutcracker*." (His first ballet.) "I got a massage." (His first massage.) "I'm taking driving lessons." (His first American driver's ed.) Coulibaly now has a license—the real passport to his adopted country.

"For refugees, being a member of the network is about connecting with American culture," says Auta Main, executive director of the Maine group. "It's about friendships and social connections. They tend to be very well connected with other refugees, people from their own country or religion, but this is a way of meeting people outside those groups." Main can tick off the examples: Liliya Shapp, an Estonian member, offers piano lessons in exchange for math tutoring for her academically gifted son. Mohammad Muti, an Afghani member, caters dinner at a Time Dollar meeting, serving up curried chicken, rice, and potato pancakes. The event is attended by Shapp,

and Issouf Coulibaly, and Miriam Morgan-Alexander, an American who earned time dollars doing Muti's taxes.

When the Maine network was started three years ago—around the same time Coulibaly was coming to America—about 30 percent of the founding members were refugees. Now, as more longtime residents have joined, that number has dropped to 10 percent—a closer reflection of the overall population of Portland, which is home to most of the refugees in Maine. .

If the words refugee and Maine seem discontinuous, that is because, as Auta Main says, "Maine is not a terribly diverse state." It is, to put it baldly, one of the whitest states in the union. But Portland, a city of 64,000 two hours up the Atlantic coast from Boston, is different. In 1980, Congress required every state to take in and provide services to a portion of the approximately 90,000 refugees who flee persecution and come to America each year. As Maine's official resettlement center, Portland refers these newest Americans to educational, medical, and psychiatric services. The goal, says Matthew Ward, program director of refugee and immigration resettlement for Catholic Charities in Portland, is "to help these people get on an equal footing with new immigrants." Most immigrants come here by choice, he notes, and have family and connections. Refugees typically come alone, and have nothing.

Maine has the nation's smallest resettlement program—about 5,000 refugees have been sent to the state since 1980. Surprisingly, though—surprising because of its long winters, its essential racial homogeneity, and its location—Portland has become a magnet for refugees who move here on their own to escape the noise and crowds and crime in cities like New York, New Orleans, and Miami. "Sure it's cold up here," says Ward, "but weather doesn't matter when you want a good place to raise your family." Somalis, Vietnamese, Ethiopians, Bosnians, Estonians, and Afghanis all live peaceably in Portland. Unlike refugees in most other cities, they tend not to live in segregated enclaves. A tight housing market forces new arrivals to take what they can find, and no single group has enough critical mass to form a separate ethnic community.

Still, this doesn't mean that refugees moving to Portland are automatically integrated into the community at large. Those who provide refugee resettlement services don't attempt to propel the newcomers into the American mainstream. "We try to help people rebuild self-esteem and overcome the trauma of having been rejected by their country," says Ward. "We say to them, 'You don't have to become an American tomorrow.'"

It was not Issouf Coulibaly's intention, when he joined Maine Time Dollar, to become an instant American. An adult-ed teacher recommended the group to him, and he jumped at it for more than the services offered. It also fits his personality—the part of him that likes to join things and be involved in his community. But intent aside, being a Time Dollar member has exposed him to Americans and American culture in an immediate and intimate way. Just as important, it has exposed Americans to him. Coulibaly became so well acquainted with one Time Dollar member, for example, that she asked him to house-sit for her when she went to France for a month last year. Now Portland feels like home.

"There are only four people from the Ivory Coast in Maine," says Coulibaly, "so last year I went to Philadelphia. There are 1,000 of us there. I was thinking of living in Philadelphia because of this—but my friends are in Maine, so I came back."

This conversation takes places as John Charlebois, another Maine Time Dollar member, is sticking pins into Coulibaly's body. Coulibaly's feet hurt from his factory job, and he's hoping this will give him some relief. (His first acupuncture.)

"To serve the community as I would like to, I have to do it on every level of commerce, and that doesn't always mean dealing in greenbacks," Charlebois explains. "I'd like to donate my time, but if I just give it away, it doesn't have any worth."

He turns to Coulibaly. "How's your energy?" he asks.

Coulibaly's energy is good. By the end of the year, he hopes, his family will be able to join him in Portland. They will be coming as immigrants, not as refugees. With his paycheck, they will have a place to stay. (His place.) And with his time dollars, they will have connections in the community.

(His connections.) Though their English will be spotty at first, they will, nonetheless, have something to offer to the people of Portland. Their time.