This past Tuesday, Feb. 21, The University of Maine hosted a Diversity Dialogue. This program was an opportunity to openly discuss topics surrounding diversity between the general public, UMaine students and staff and guests from the Tree Street Youths program from the Lewiston-Auburn area. This event was hosted by the College of Education and Human Development.

Tree Street Youths is a program that was founded in 2011 and began as a homework help program. It was designed to help up to 60 youths at a time, with specifically tailored learning opportunities, as stated on their webpage. It works in partnership with the Refugee Assistance Program, local AmeriCorps staff and a host of community volunteers.

The mission of Tree Street Youth is "to support the youth of Lewiston-Auburn through programs rooted in academics, the arts, and athletics in a safe space that encourages healthy physical, social, emotional, and academic development while building unity across lines of difference." The program has currently served over 800 students. The majority of students that attended from Tree Street youths were refugees or asylum seekers from African countries.

"On Nov. 8, 2012, nine UMaine students and I visited Park Avenue Elementary School and Tree Street Youth," John Maddus, an associate professor of Education, said about the event he helped organize. "We were very much impressed with both places. That visit gave rise to the idea of a group of staff and students from Tree Street Youth coming to UMaine during February school vacation week, which they did for the first time in February 2013. The visit on Feb. 21, 2017 was the fifth annual visit for Tree Street Youth to UMaine."

The dialogue saw about 20 participants and was designed as a round room discussion. A question was posed and was left for any individual to respond with their thoughts and feelings. Questions ranged from “What do you think of the UMaine campus?” to “How do you feel during this political climate?” and “What does being in the United States mean for or to you?” It allowed the group to see how individuals, whose backgrounds varied dramatically from person to person, would respond. The space created for this discussion was also a safe closed space, as attendees were asked to keep the personal information shared during the discussion within the bounds of the group.

"There is an imminent fear of immigrants here in Maine, because some of them are from the countries that have been banned by the President and we have a lot of people from here at the University of Maine, who truly care and are compassionate about these families here in Maine," Silvestre Guzman, the director of the Office of Multicultural Student Life, said. "They want to learn more about how to help, which definitely helped draw people to the dialogue."
Students and staff alike were very relieved to have the opportunity to speak in this setting, especially with the young students of Tree Street Youth. This event was one of the later in the Black History Month lineup, which ends this Tuesday. Other upcoming events similar to this event include the Wilson Center International Panel Discussion which will take place on March 29, the graduate Student Discussion on March 30 and Diversity Week, which will be taking place from March 27 to March 31. All of these events are based on the idea of diversity and similar topics.

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