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NEWS ARCHIVE

Fulfilling a pledge made after Sept. 11

July 4, 2002

BY ANA MENDIETA STAFF REPORTER Raising his right hand to swear loyalty to his new country and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" was all that George Dante M. Pineda needed to live the proudest day of his life. On Wednesday, Pineda, a native of ...

Citizenship applications were up 61 percent nationally and 41 percent in Chicago from Oct. 1, 2001, to April 30, 2002.

"I am so excited, I am going to sing it wholeheartedly," said Pineda, who sang the national anthem accompanied by the St. Thomas the Apostle choir of Naperville at the ceremony at Harold Washington Library. "I would like to say to the entire America, God bless you, because I've been blessed with a lot of stuff and I want to be part of it as a full-fledged American."

In the first seven months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, thousands of immigrants like Pineda rushed to apply for U.S. citizenship, many motivated by patriotism, others by fear of being targeted in an anti-immigrant climate.

In Chicago, 21,596 people applied for citizenship between Oct. 1 and April 30, up from 15,331 a year earlier, Immigration and Naturalization Service statistics show. Nationwide, 471,145 people applied in that period, up from 293,101 a year earlier. Annually, the number of citizenship applications is not expected to be as high as in the early 1990s, when many of the 2 million illegal immigrants who won amnesty in 1986 applied for citizenship.

"There is no question the terrorist attacks and the aftermath provided a new impetus for non-U.S. citizens to naturalize," said Karen Kraushaar, INS spokeswoman in Washington, D.C.

Some immigrant advocacy groups in Chicago have been overwhelmed by demand for citizenship classes. At the Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois in Uptown, demand grew by 148 percent. In the last six months of 2001, the coalition had 1,543 citizenship students enrolled, compared with 1,355 for all of 2000.

Oct. 1, 2001-	Oct. 1, 2000-	Percent
April 30, 2002	April 30, 2001	change
U.S.	471,145	293,101 61%
Chicago	21,596	15,331 41%

SOURCE: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service

A PUSH FOR PAPERS

"It is unbelievable; we have just blown out of proportion. Our predictions were for a 10 [percent] or 20 percent increase, but now our classes are packed," Executive Director Dale Asis said.

Citizenship applications are up nationwide and locally since Sept. 11.

World Relief Chicago, which now offers five instead of three citizenship classes, often runs out of applications, Executive Director Dori Dinsmore said.

"We cannot keep the naturalization forms in stock. We are giving away 100 a month, while before Sept. 11 we gave out maybe 15 to 20 a month," Dinsmore said. "People don't want to be perceived as outsiders, and citizenship is the final step they can take to say they care about this country."

The terrorist attacks prompted many legal residents to take the extra step to citizenship, assuming the rights and benefits of this country, including the right to vote, experts say.

"Immigrants like other Americans are remembering what America is all about, embracing freedoms and opportunities and choosing to become part of this democracy," said Barbara Strack, director for the Center for the New American Community at the National Immigration Forum in Washington, D.C.

Forty-seven percent of foreign-born people in the United States and 39.5 percent in Illinois are naturalized U.S. citizens, which shows that immigrants come to this country "to embrace the American dream," Strack said, citing 2000 Census figures.

Beatriz Juarez, 70, is excited as she prepares for her July 10 citizenship test, even as she faces spinal surgery a week later.

"I wanted to take the test first because this has been a lifelong dream for me. I'm very thankful to this country. I have a job, and the people here have been good to me," said Juarez, who works at a White Castle on the South Side.

For Auxilio Alcauter, a 46-year-old machine operator, the road to citizenship has been long and bumpy since he crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally 23 years ago.

Alcauter became a legal resident in 1988, but he waited until this April to apply for U.S. citizenship because he didn't want to lose his Mexican citizenship. Thanks to a provision in the Mexican constitution, he now can have both.

"That was the main reason why I didn't apply earlier. To be able to vote is also important for me. I want to feel part of this country now," Alcauter said.

But many legal residents have chosen to become U.S. citizens because they fear restrictions on non-citizens stemming from the terrorist attacks. And they see a growing anti-immigrant climate, including an old law that until now has not been enforced. That law would require immigrants who are not U.S. citizens to carry identification documents at all times and to report any change of address to the INS in Washington, D.C., immigration lawyer Gary Chodorow said.

"The fear is that if the INS wants to arrest somebody because they meet some profile, they can arrest anybody simply by citing this law and hold them for deportation while they seek other charges," Chodorow said.

That is why many more legal residents are seeking security and protection in U.S. citizenship.

"When people hear that the attorney general can certify somebody as a terrorist, people think that if you speak the wrong language or have the wrong religion you may be detained," Dinsmore said. "People fear what might happen to them if they don't become citizens."

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