

New citizens and civic engagement

Short stories from new citizens



Center for Civic Design

Christopher Patten

Dana Chisnell

This report collects the stories of people who became U.S. citizens and their experiences in civic life.

Contents

Preface.....	4
Short stories of new citizen experiences.....	6
Lucie: Patience leads to motivation	6
Sardou: Having an interpreter isn't always enough	9
Mike: After the naturalization ceremony, what's next?	12
Sarhado: Civic life happens once you find community	15
Kit: At some point to have you give something up	17
Sachini: "I'm sorry you became a citizen"	20
Debbie: Becoming a citizen allowed me to become an activist.....	23
Steve: I didn't want to stop being Canadian.....	25
Ben: Having a child connects you to community.....	27
Eric and Antonia: "I don't want to look like a criminal anymore"	30
Rosa: Watching what other people had to go through was awful	33
Mona: "Even though I understand English, when I listen to the news, I can't understand it"	36
Carmen: Leave it to the rich to change things. And it probably won't happen....	38
Chunmiao: Community is a process	40
Joanne: "I had higher expectations"	42
Yayi Su: I have to pay, shouldn't they?	44
Rosalba: "I was yelled at and told to go home"	46
Amadou: Just because it's translated doesn't mean you can read it	49
Darma: I'm motivated to help because I'm tired of being misunderstood	51
Chaldean Community Foundation	52

Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #1	55
Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #2	58
Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #3	62
New American Voters' Association	67

Preface

Whose stories these are

In 2019, we heard stories from 44 new U.S. citizens. They are from Canada and Cambodia, Cameroon and Nigeria, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. All together, we heard from immigrants from 26 countries. They told us about their lives, how they came to America and why, and why they decided to stay. They also told us about what community means, what it means to take part in civic life, and what it is like to be American.

Why we collected them

There are about 11 million naturalized citizens in the U.S. who are eligible but don't vote. We wondered what the barriers and motivations were to taking part in civic life, generally. The academic literature is clear that the more affluent and educated an immigrant is, the more likely they are to take part in community activities and to vote. (This is also true of natural born citizens.) These stories illustrate the challenges people face in learning English, learning rules and norms, and learning the larger systems of how public services and government work.

How and where we collected the stories

Finding people to tell us their stories was challenging. Even though there are 44.9 million immigrants in the U.S. according to the American Immigrant Council¹, we couldn't necessarily just walk up to people and ask their citizenship status. So, we worked to build connections and partnerships with communities that help new citizens integrate and acculturate to their new lives.

¹ <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/immigrants-in-the-united-states/>

About half our participants came through organizations like the Chaldean Community Foundation, New American Voters' Association, and the Gilchrist Center. We met those people and heard their stories in group events.

We also interviewed individuals who we met through various networks but who weren't connected to a specific ethnic, cultural, or heritage group. We did some of those interviews in person, and some of them over video.

Participants were from more than 25 different countries. They lived in Detroit, suburban Maryland, the San Francisco Bay Area, and New York City.

Why we're publishing them

The wide range of diversity of our 44 storytellers helped us get a rich picture of the experience that new citizens have. We learned about where they feel like they fit in, and what made a difference in their feeling of belonging. We heard about how culture in their countries of origin affects their attitudes about how elections and government work in the U.S. We heard over and over again that, no matter how hard it is to leave where you came from to commit to staying in the U.S., versions of "the feeling of freedom you get is unbelievable."

There is a report and a workbook that accompany these stories. Those are for local election administrators to use as tools for language access and civics education.

These stories are for everyone. If you're an immigrant, we hope you will find them relatable and familiar in a comforting way. If you are a natural born citizen, we hope that you will read the stories to know more about what it has been like for your immigrant neighbors to learn how to navigate the institutions and systems, and with you, strive for a better life.

Short stories of new citizen experiences

Lucie: Patience leads to motivation

Cameroon

Lucie was dropped off by her daughter at the Detroit Public Library for our interview, and she quickly shared that she's been busy with her grandson and going to school at Baker College.



Civic life

Lucie was an activist in her home country of Cameroon, and that she had been persecuted because she tried to express her beliefs. Coming to the U.S. wasn't really as much of a choice as it was a method of survival.

She wanted to help other African immigrants have an open mind. She gave the example of being open to LGBTQ individuals and that being involved in civic life is about respecting the choices of others, being willing to

share space, and just being together. Sharing space also means being patient, and Lucie joked about how frustrated she was when she recently went to renew her vehicle registration. She still gets frustrated waiting in line, but knows it's all part of the process.

Lucie mentioned that she listens to Fox News even though she doesn't agree with it because she wants to understand. "I want to understand Trump's personality and those who support him."

When it comes to community, Lucie describes getting to know her neighbors and recalls cleaning the neighborhood around her home when she first moved to Detroit. This neighborhood means a lot to her, and even though she doesn't live there anymore, she often goes back for certain things. The Secretary of State's office on Bagley in Southwest Detroit, for example, is her favorite because she feels they all know her there.

Language

Lucie explained that people who come here don't always have the opportunity to learn English, and that it's easy to feel shy and intimidated. This feeling leads to feeling left out and excluded. She explained that the way people pronounce English is often overlooked and that even if you come from an English-speaking country it's always mixed with your accent and another language.

She shared the story of finally getting her asylum interview after waiting so long. She felt uncomfortable with her understanding of English at the time, and the interpreter who was supposed to be there suddenly wasn't able to make it. Her lawyer explained that they could postpone the interview, but she didn't want to wait. Nervously, she went ahead with the interview. She began using gestures to explain what she was trying to say when she couldn't find the words, and the interviewer began to help her out by asking the same question in different ways until she could understand it.

Lucie explained that this patience allowed her to feel like she would be able to speak English, and that this feeling served as motivation for her to finally do so.

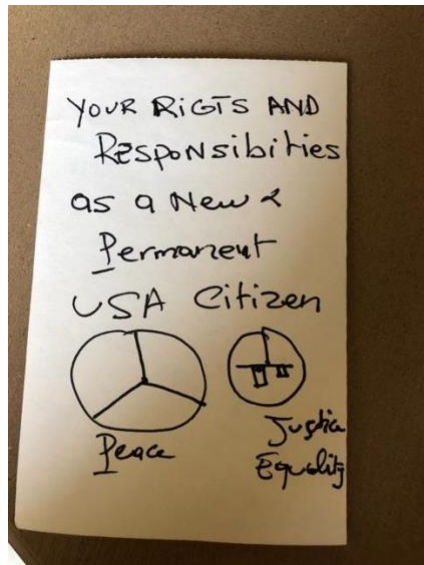
Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Because Lucie had been silenced as an activist in Cameroon, she felt that being a citizen in the U.S. gave her a place where she could speak and be an activist. Lucie first moved to Detroit to seek asylum status. She heard of it through a friend. Here, she can help others understand the injustice in Cameroon, but she explained that others don't feel that sense of freedom.

Many families fear that even if they speak out against the government in Cameroon from the U.S., the government in Cameroon will seek out any remaining family or friends still there and harm them.

Life as an American

Lucie explained that because she speaks differently than most people and has dark skin, people often ask her where she's from. She loves being able to say, "I'm from here!" in response to this question. She says she feels empowered now that she's a citizen, and that she never could have predicted the feeling you get when you're a citizen. It was hard for her to find the words to explain the feeling, but repeated that the feeling was "so great, it's just beautiful," and that it was very much a surprise.



Lucie created a "Rights and Responsibilities Guide" as part of our interview. She talked about her responsibility to help others be more open minded. She emphasized the word "permanent" because dedicating her life to this new country is important. She included a peace symbol to explain how connected peace is to understand your responsibilities. Later, she added the balance scale for justice and equality.

Sardou: Having an interpreter isn't always enough

Cameroon

Sardou arrived at a coffee shop in Detroit after finishing work at Freedom House, the non-profit where he first lived when he came to the city. The job was new for him, having started just two months ago.



Civic life

He got his citizenship in December and is continuing a chemistry degree at Wayne State University. Before this job, he was working at a factory and trying to balance long hours with school. He needed the money, but sometimes wouldn't get to leave the factory until 3 in the morning. His classes started at 7 and, as one would expect, he failed those classes because he was exhausted.

When asked about what words like “community” and “civic life” meant to him, he hesitated, then spoke about general concepts like voting and the ability to be a part of a decision that impacts a larger community. He said “I’m working hard to have a better life in the U.S.” He explained that these are new concepts for him and he’s still figuring out what it all means. He was on his own to figure it all out. His friends from Freedom House have moved, and his best friend moved to China. His sister lives in Washington, D.C.

Sardou shared that he was an activist against the government in power in his home country of Cameroon. He protested, got in trouble, and said his life was at risk. He had no choice but to leave. Now, being a U.S. citizen means that he can participate. He talked about how great it is not just to be a

bystander and mentioned that being a citizen unlocks the opportunity to work in government. “You can even be a judge!”

Language

Sardou didn’t speak English when he arrived in the U.S. and described many situations in which he struggled riding buses or navigating airports. He said “it’s a lot harder to learn a language as an adult than if you’re a kid.”

For his asylum interview, he said it was very important that he spoke English. He felt that many interpreters the government uses may speak the language you requested, but don’t know how to understand particular accents or other country-specific colloquialisms that one might try to express. That makes it likely that information is mistranslated by the interpreter and that the person could be denied their asylum. He explained that this is really stressful. “My accent in French is not their accent in French!”

He also explained that when he’s working with an interpreter, he feels he has to “work double” to not only think about what he wants to say, but then check to make sure it’s being translated correctly and that the response from whoever is listening conveys that they understand.

When going to the Secretary of State’s branch office (DMV) to get a driver’s license, he explains that there is never an interpreter there. It requires him to have to prepare everything he needs to say before he arrives and anticipate the outcomes.

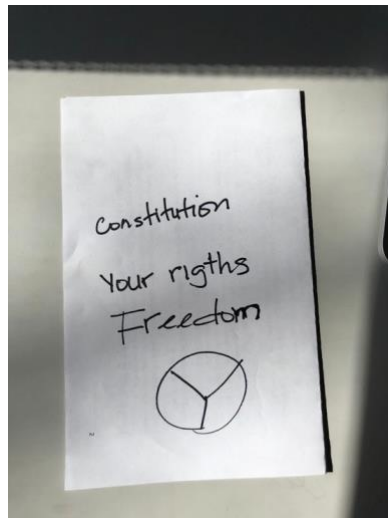
He also talked about how his accent is perceived by others, particularly those who aren’t used to hearing one. He described one of his neighbors calling the police because they thought he was arguing and making too much noise. He said that these confrontations with neighbors happen often.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Sardou talked about how important it was for him to be able to bring his mother to the U.S. They haven’t seen each other in the 10 years since he’s been here. Now that he’s a citizen, he can make this happen.

He also emphasized that he felt more protected now that he had his citizenship than he did when he had asylum. Specifically, he means feeling protected by the U.S. and that when he leaves the country, he will be entitled to that protection even though he's away. He said, "I feel safe" and this clearly was very important to him.

Life as an American



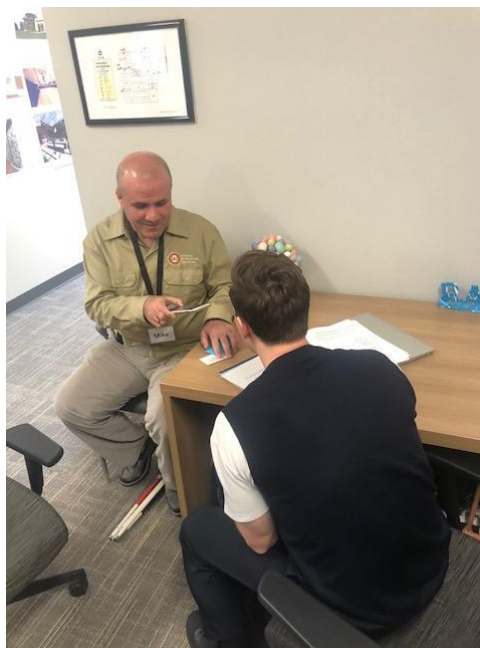
When we asked Sardou what was different now that he is an American citizen, he talked again about being protected and that he was relieved he'd finally be able to see his mother. Financially, he indicated that things were still tough and that he hoped that after he finished school, he would be able to make more money.

For Sardou's guide to being an American, he immediately placed "constitution" at the top, explaining he felt it was important to know it exists and what's in it. Later, he wrote "your rights" and "freedom" below that. I asked him what the graphic might be on it and he said a peace symbol but that he couldn't draw (so we drew it, upside down).

Mike: After the naturalization ceremony, what's next?

Iraq

Mike arrived with a group of BEAM (Braille, ESL, Acculturation, Mobility) students that come to the Chaldean Community Foundation every Wednesday morning at 10. The class offers the opportunity to practice English and learn about how to use assistive technology.



Civic life

But the real reason people attend BEAM is for the feeling of community they get when they arrive. This idea of support and a group of friends reappeared throughout our conversation. Finding the BEAM program meant that Mike could get connected with a group of blind Iraqi immigrants who shared so many of the same struggles. Being together meant they could share opportunities and resources that no person could find alone.

When asked about civic engagement, friends, and neighborhood, Mike was quick to convey that his world revolved around school, BEAM, and his church. He was a voter and said that it mattered very much to him because he felt he could express his opinion.

Language

Mike talked about first arriving in the U.S. and that it was nearly impossible to figure out where he could find an ESL class that could accommodate blind students. He relied on the local bus to get around and found it so frustrating

that he became depressed and stayed at home for a year and a half. “I didn’t like staying home, I was sad.”

Mike described having to wait for a few minutes before he could use the voting machine as his polling place. The assistive device was not set up when arrived. He described having a translator as “double work” because it took more time and you are always a little unsure of what the other side is hearing/saying. He said everything would have been easier in Arabic.

When talked about his interactions with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), he described them as really accommodating and that “everyone was nice, no hard times.”

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Mike left Iraq in 2007 because he couldn’t express his religious views and didn’t feel he was safe. His parents already lived in the United States, and a cousin was here too. He first went to Syria and then arrived in the U.S. in 2009.

When asked why he decided to naturalize, Mike said it was because he wanted to vote. But he grimaced when I asked what he thought about politics, saying “I don’t like politics! Confusing!”

Life as a new American

Mike described a certain feeling of happiness that comes with being naturalized and that it allows him to vote and travel when he needs to. He mentioned his passport and that he was proud to be American. He talked about how people are happy for him when they hear he’s American, and he feels proud because he earned it through a lot of hard work.

He said he thought that some people don’t become naturalized because they’re afraid that somehow they’ll get in trouble. But he felt these people didn’t understand the protection that becoming a citizen gave them. He added that “people need to be encouraged to vote, some people are lazy!”

Mike described the stark difference between being blind in Iraq and the US. He said that here he has a future and dreams, and that that wasn't the case in Iraq. "I can do everything here, I can work! I have more goals, more dreams."

When we interviewed him, Mike was on the waiting list to get into a residential training center for the blind in Kalamazoo, which will get him placed in a job after he completes his time there.

Mike couldn't draw his own guide to being an American, but we talked about what it would have in it. He said it would say "Congratulations, you passed the test!" but later he said it should be a book about "Being blind in the U.S.: What your future can look like, how you can get to learn." He also said it should include some history about America.

Sarhado: Civic life happens once you find community



Sarhado

Civic life

Sarhado loves to talk about learning. He said that if he lives to be 100, he hopes he never stops learning.

In his home country of Iraq, Sarhado had a career as a geologist. He lost his vision in 1997. When things became dangerous there, his daughters moved away and soon he knew he had to get out, too. He and his wife moved to Syria for 6 years and eventually came to the US.

It wasn't easy at first. Transportation was extremely hard because even though his wife could see, she couldn't drive. Even though he lived in a building with some of the same friends he had when he was in Iraq, he didn't feel a strong sense of community. Upon finding the BEAM program at the Chaldean Community Foundation, though, he felt he found community and, in turn, civic life.

When he mentioned voting, he quickly talked about voting for Trump in 2016 and that he and his wife planned to do so in 2020.

Language

Because of his work as a scientist, Sarhado says he understood about 50% of the English spoken here when he arrived. He makes an effort to read news in Arabic and often has his daughter translate things for him. In fact, he often described having his niece there to help with many of his day to day activities.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Quickly becoming blind and the war that broke out in his country forced him to leave. Specifically, because he was blind, he talked about not being able to “protect” his daughters when he was in Iraq and that he felt the need to change that.

Life as a new American

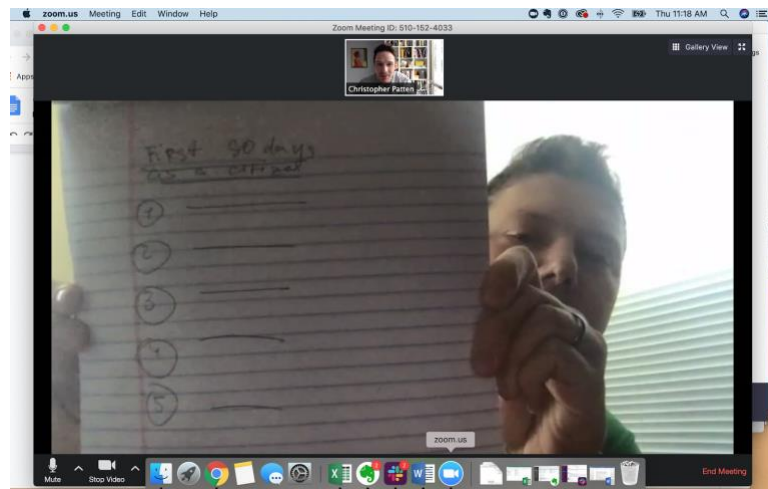
Sarhado describes having a strong community around him at home, and cherishes his days visiting the Chaldean Community Foundation every Wednesday. He described that becoming a citizen gave him a sense of freedom to “do whatever he wants, within the law.” He’s also free to visit his family, who lives all over the world. He is very proud that he has over 250 friends on Facebook who live all over the world.

Sahardo said his guide to being an American should include American history but said there should be information on how to navigate becoming a citizen as a blind person. He mentioned he dealt with depression when he first arrived because he didn’t know where to turn.

Kit: At some point to have you give something up

Ukraine

Kit is the head of design for a company called Optimal IT, and he loves riding his motorcycle. He is married and has a daughter. His wife reminds him to speak Russian to her, though he explained a little bit about why that's a touchy subject.



Kit

Civic life

Kit talked about fellow immigrants who came with him to the US, part of the post-soviet Russian-Ukrainian immigrant community. Kit described how people stick together and can create worlds in which they are deeply disconnected from civic life and being American. He mentioned his father, who strongly dislikes America and only watches Russian news. He said that 5 years ago he would totally agree with the idea of speaking Russian to his daughter, but now it's complicated.

For Kit, a large part of deciding to be American meant being able to disconnect from this world. Part of this seemed to come from his frustration that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

Kit's wife is very involved with their daughter's school (he said it might be the school board but he couldn't remember). Specifically, she works to head a welcoming group of parents that provide support to Russian and Ukrainian kids. He described her as a "cultural ambassador." Besides this, voting is really important to Kit and his wife and they pay close attention to the news.

Language

Kit explained that he had a good command of English before coming here so it was not -- and has not -- been a problem. He mentioned that when he was going through the naturalization process, he was aware translation services were available and that he was happy to see that.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

"I made a conscious decision that I wanted more order and civility in my life. I had to ask myself the question if Ukraine was going to become a better place to live in my lifetime." He was sponsored by his company to work and eventually they sponsored his Green Card (allowing him to stay in the U.S. as a Lawful Permanent Resident). He talked about how now there are "Trump-like" people running for office in Ukraine and that things are generally corrupt. He also talked about how if he went back the government might force him into military service.

Life as a new American

Kit went through a very complicated process of becoming a citizen, mainly due to a mistake made in his name and a very slow process in getting his passport. He expressed a desire for these complications to be over.

He said he was now relieved he could vote, and that he really wanted to in 2016. He isn't sure how to register to vote and said that it's confusing. He's also confused about where to get information about elections and what other elections are important besides the presidential.

For his guide to being an American, Kit designed a checklist of the most important things to accomplish during your first 90 days, and then first year

after becoming a citizen. He also would include a section about your responsibility as a neighbor. When he talked about “neighbor” he explained that back home in Ukraine the lack of basic protections for citizens required you to put yourself first, but that here in the U.S. people need to flip that mental model. According to him, there is enough protection around you here that you can afford some space in your life to look out for others.

Sachini: "I'm sorry you became a citizen"

Sri Lanka

Sachini met me on Zoom in her office, a company that works to help design better government services. She said it was similar to 18F (a department within the federal government's General Services Administration).



Sachini

Civic life

She recently moved to Virginia after living in New York for 5 years. There, she didn't really feel she knew any of her neighbors. Her life focused mostly on work and the friends she had where she had lived in other parts of the city. They moved because New York was getting too expensive (even in Queens) and she and her husband were having a child.

She talked about how neighbors in her new neighborhood look out for each other a bit and she likes this. She sees herself living there for a while.

Sachini explained that back home in Sri Lanka, talking about politics was taboo, especially in "good company." She said that obviously isn't the case here but that it took some getting used to.

Language

Sachini talked about how she was an introvert, and that that was a big deal when talking about language and new citizens. Coming here, even if you have a good command of the language, requires you to ask when you don't understand something. When she came she had a lot of trouble with the American accent and felt that her introvertedness prevented her from asking for help. She even mentioned that she thought she became more introverted because of this.

Sachini said that, in her mind, she didn't want to ask for help because it would annoy people. She said, "Culture shock is a real thing. I didn't know how to ask for help because I was so afraid they wouldn't understand my questions."

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Sachini said her main reason for moving to the U.S. was because she fell in love. And if she wanted to work in the U.S., an American education would be the one most valued by American companies. She also said she was motivated to become a citizen because it was annoying to have to get visas every time she left the country. When we talked later about what she would say to someone who's thinking about becoming a citizen, she said "If I was talking to someone, it really depends on where they're coming from. If they're from a first world country they need to consider their political situation and think about where it's going. If you're from a place where you can't live anymore, then take it. Is it a step up or are you doing it because you can?"

Life as a new American

Sachini said that "inside my head now that I'm a citizen I feel like I have a responsibility and I want to make things better." She explained that because of the corruption and widespread mistrust that exists in Sri Lanka people feel that they must protect their families first. The idea of taking care of community is different and largely limited to financial donations.

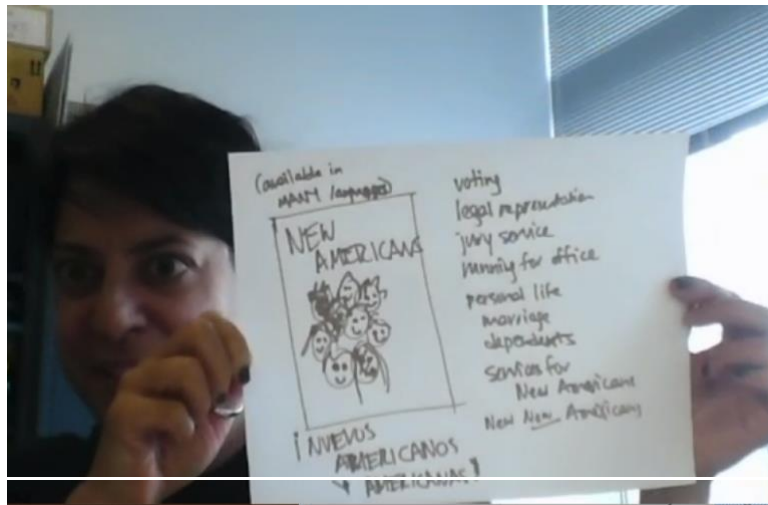
Now that she's in a place where things like volunteering, neighbors, and community are valued Sachini wants to participate in that. She's talked about getting involved with an organization that focuses on kids.

To create her guide to being an American, Sachini grabbed a sketchbook, Sharpie marker, and the American flag she said she had on her desk from her naturalization ceremony. She said her guide would include a little history, but mainly talked about the idea that being a citizen meant that you now had to embrace a new way to "get involved." She wrote this below "responsibilities" and talked about how these things changed when she came to the U.S. and how they're different in America—from a singular sense of community to a collective one.

Debbie: Becoming a citizen allowed me to become an activist

Canada

Debbie is a college professor near Boston and teaches engineering. She met me on Zoom from her office. She was quick to acknowledge that she's probably not the person who I need to talk to, explaining that as a Canadian and an educated woman she is privileged and doesn't represent who I am trying to research.



Civic life

Moving to the U.S. from Toronto, Debbie said she'd been a Green Card holder for 15 years before she decided to naturalize. As an activist, she said

that "being a U.S. citizen means I will take on my bit of responsibility for making sure I am paving the way for others and taking care of them." By others, she means those who are less privileged. She said she got some flak from her Canadian friends who didn't understand why she wanted to become American.

Language

This wasn't an issue because Debbie was Canadian but acknowledged it would be an issue for those who aren't comfortable with English.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Debbie moved to the U.S. for school and stayed. Her main motivation for naturalizing was because she wanted to be a vocal activist. “I used to avoid protesting and politics. I was afraid that if I was arrested it could revoke my Green Card. I wanted to go to protests and not lose my Green Card. I wanted to be sure I have the rights of a citizen. I wanted to stand in solidarity with others that didn’t have the privileges.”

Life as a new American

Debbie described a lot of fear that came along with entering and exiting the U.S. during her trips to visit family in Canada. She also said that “I grew up in Canada, so I already understood the U.S. and how it worked. All the things I knew were going to be problematic were true. Now I have the opportunity to take a stand.”

She remarked that it’s nice to hear people say “welcome home” when she comes back to the U.S. She had advice for people thinking of becoming a citizen: “If you’re insecure here and you can get secure, do it. If you’ve been here, citizenship can open new doors for you.”

For Debbie’s guide to being an American, she got a piece of paper and a Sharpie and began drawing a bunch of faces, explaining that to her the diversity of people is what makes this country great—not the American flag. She says she would want to know that there are many different ways to become a new American, and that the guide should recognize there are those who will be culturally familiar with the U.S. and those who will not be. She described a section called “here’s what’s going to be different now that you’re a citizen.” She also included sections like how to get involved politically, how to run for office, what jury duty means, and what happens if you have kids.

Steve: I didn't want to stop being Canadian

Canada

Civic life

Steve met me in Zoom from his office near San Francisco. He didn't talk much about being involved in civic life other than his immediate neighborhood. For him, his real community exists on social media and is tied to work.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

"I cautiously contacted my family, who still lives in Canada. I was concerned that they would be skeptical or disappointed or something. My family is Jewish and if I had announced I was going to become Christian that would be very stressing. I saw this as a parallel."

It was clear that becoming American was hard for Steve. Most people don't realize, he said, that you can't have dual citizenship. He described growing up Canadian and viewing the U.S. as "the bully next door."

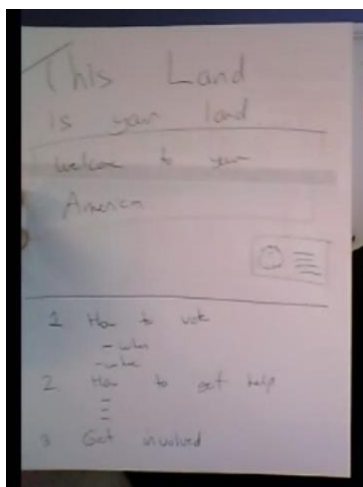
Eventually, he felt that because he owned a home and had been here a long time without "participating," that it was time to commit. An officemate who was becoming a citizen served as a motivator and gave him a person to ask questions to as he went through the process. He was clear that it was helpful to have someone he could watch first.

Like many others, Steve had experienced issues traveling with a Green Card and was tired of being afraid each time he crossed the border.

Life as a new American

Because of Steve's extensive social media life, making his citizenship known there was most important to him. Before becoming a citizen he described himself on Twitter as an "expat Canadian" or a "Canadian living in Silicon

Valley.” Now, he said, he has an American flag, which he said was a big deal to change his status to. He uses the American flag emoji.



Steve titled his guide to being an American, “This land is your land” and said that the table of contents should be on the cover. He explained that this guide would very clearly offer guidance on “how to get help” explaining that it would be open-ended but convey that there are ways to get assistance. (We assumed that he meant you aren’t on your own or alone in your new country.) He also said voting should be prominent, as it had come across as an obligation rather than a right when he had to study for the test.

Ben: Having a child connects you to community

United Kingdom



Ben

Civic life

Ben spent most of his professional life working from place to place and from project to project. During that time, community was something that didn't extend very deep because you were always going to leave at some point. Having a child, he explained, causes you to build lots of relationships with others that begin to build a sense of community he hadn't had before.

He described his previous involvement with politics as a “spectator sport.”

Language

Language wasn't an issue for Ben since he grew up in the U.K. and was familiar with American culture.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

After Ben and his wife had a child, they had to decide where they'd like to raise her. As a couple that had the means and flexibility to move wherever

they wanted, they chose Los Angeles (although he explained that they were soon moving to Brooklyn).

Ben also indicated that events in the U.K. had underscored the importance of having an opinion and getting involved. He said “the above-it-all’ attitude that we’ve had the past couple of decades has been shown to be a really bad idea.

Life as a new American

Ben had become a citizen the day before we spoke, and said that the experience was far more emotional than he had expected. Like many others, he described the feeling of being protected and feeling safe now that he was a citizen. As a cyclist, he described not being able to confront drivers that were careless on the roads for fear of confrontation and getting the police involved.

He also said “It opens up more opportunities, many more jobs and work opportunities I can take part in now that I can. I wanted to join the Malibu Search and Rescue Team where there are volunteers who go and rescue people. I was trained as a medic, but I couldn’t do that because you have to be a citizen.”

“There’s also this romantic thing about American citizenship that’s different from anywhere else. The U.S. is completely different everywhere you go. What keeps the U.S. united? It’s because it has a strong inbuilt myth-making capability that keeps this going. So, if you subscribe to these ideas (working hard, remaking yourself, the *Hamilton* cast album) there is this romantic idea you subscribe to when you apply for American citizenship that you don’t get when you apply for French or Italian citizenship. The use of the adjective “American” is used way more than the equivalent anywhere else. This is the constant reinforcing of mythical values.

At the naturalization ceremony in Los Angeles, there were well over 3,000 people sworn in. Ben said, “You’re joining a tradition of people who are moving here to start a new life. Whatever that looks like, it’s still part of that

American dream thing. It's easy to be cynical about it or overly forthcoming about the problematic nature of this stuff. But at the same time, it's really true. You can acknowledge the gross inequalities that exist in this country but still exist in the country's idea. It's problematic, but it's pretty fucking cool to be a member. And it's taken forever! The amount of hoops you have to jump through even as a reasonably well off husband of an American is.....all the forms and medical exams and money I've spent."

Ben's guide to being an American was titled, "How to be the best American." He explained this by saying "Others are American because they lacked the imagination to be anywhere else, but I'm an American because I wanted to be one. Being an American by being born here doesn't require any effort whatsoever. So now that we've let you in, you must be awesome. Here's the user guide to America for people like you."

He continued: "The guide would start with telling you to go to the Social Security office in 10 days' time to update your status and end with running for office. If it concluded with that it would be powerful in terms of a welcome because it means you have the power to change something. Run for the board of education, be a sheriff. Or here are some links to how to do that. "

Eric and Antonia: "I don't want to look like a criminal anymore"

Mexico

Antonia and Eric met me in Southwest Detroit at one of the Ford Community Centers. Eric had been Antonia's student in her citizenship class, and she picked him to share his story for our project. They were both naturalized citizens, but most of the story is about Eric's life. Antonia naturalized a while ago.



Eric and Antonia

Civic life

Eric owns two restaurants in Detroit. One is downriver, and the other is inside a new arena that was just constructed. He talked about his employees and how much he cares about them. He said "you need to know your neighbors, people have to know you." When asked about civic engagement, he described an event he was having involving one of his food trucks collaborating with an animal shelter to raise funds. He said they were planning to donate part of the profit to the shelter.

Language

Eric said not speaking English was just another way that made him stand out. He talked about times that he felt humiliated because of his lack of English.

He also talked about how this makes you want to stay in a neighborhood or living situation in which you don't have to deal with these constant reminders that you're an "other."

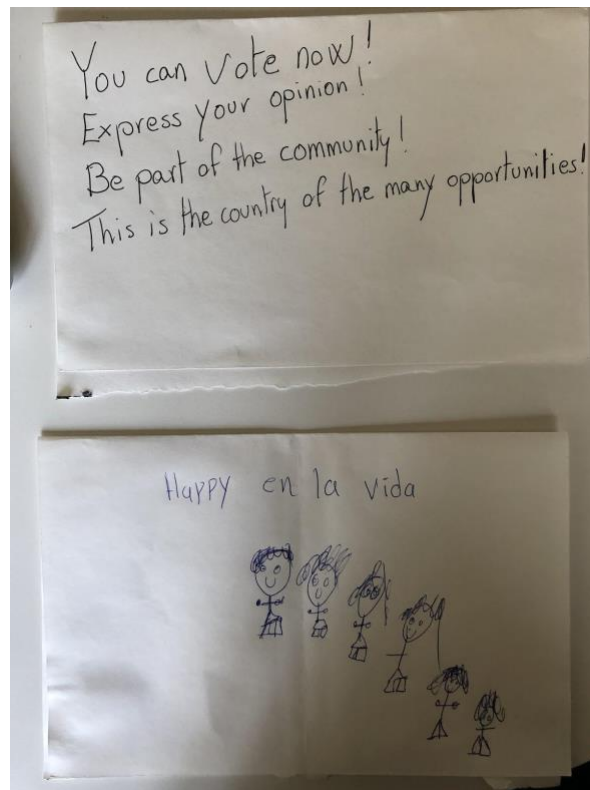
Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Eric said he grew up always thinking the U.S. was a better place to be. His brother lived in California. He said he arrived when he was 15 years old, and that he's been in the U.S. for 20 years. He mentioned that at one point he was sent back to Mexico. This experience, combined with others that he mentioned, instilled a fear in him of never being safe when he crossed the border. He described the feeling that everything could suddenly be taken away—his kids, his restaurants, his whole life. Naturalization for him was a way to make him feel safe. He said "now I feel like they can't take me away from all that I built here." He talked about how his employees sometimes get stopped by police when driving. They don't have licenses, he said, and they're immediately arrested by ICE. He said it wasn't that way when Obama was president.

Life as a new American

Above all, Eric feels safe. He said he feels empowered now that he can vote and exercise his freedom of speech. Eric's new feeling of safety is strongly tied to his freedom to travel. He described being questioned by immigration officials as to why he was flying first class. He said that people looked at him differently just because he had an accent. He also talked about the "self doubt" that comes along with all of this. Antonia also agreed that she feels safer being a citizen.

Eric talked about his business plans for the future. Now that he is safe he can think about what's next for him, which he thinks includes a high-end restaurant in downtown Detroit.



Guides created by Eric and Antonia.

For his guide to being an American, Eric drew six people on his paper, adding "Happy en la vida" as the title. This signified his family and how he now knows he won't be taken away from them. Now it was safe to move forward with his life. He also said that the people represent those he works with. He talked about how in his restaurants there are such diverse people all working hard and getting along.

Antonia also made a guide, which she said would include information about voting, the importance of expressing your opinion, being part of the community, and that "this is the country of many opportunities."

Rosa: Watching what other people had to go through was awful

Spain

Civic life

Rosa talked about her responsibility as an immigrant to tell their story to Americans and “whoever has a dream.” She was a journalism student in college and believes this instilled in her an understanding of how institutions and systems work, and that change happens at a local level.

“As an immigrant I understand the opportunities you’re given and how hard it is to get through it. I was fortunate because I have the resources. I feel I have a responsibility to explain to people how things work and what it means to be an immigrant. I want to help others be more engaged. As an immigrant you see “different sides.”

Language

While Rosa was extremely comfortable using English, she said that it doesn’t always mean she’d be comfortable navigating things like government forms or other processes that are intimidating and confusing. “It’s about making you comfortable. How to do it, what to expect, how much time it will take, more community outreach. It’s about long before you get to the election.”

She also noted that some of the translations she saw in the last elections in Spanish were really bad.

She spoke at length about how hard it is to watch others get stopped at borders, be harassed, or just suffer because they’re immigrants. She admitted that she was way more privileged than others. “I have a lot of memories with the government and most of them are bad. I have to say that it isn’t until the end when you’re about to become a citizen that it becomes beautiful.”

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Rosa came to the U.S. for school and then stayed. As with many others we've talked to, Rosa described a sense of uncertainty in traveling in and out of the country that was unsettling.

"Watching what other people had to go through was awful. I had bad experiences (like being told to go into a room and being asked questions). Being in that room with fluorescent light where someone is deciding your destiny. The inequality that exists is so upsetting. I lost track of how many background checks and fingerprints I had to give. Or that I had a 10:00 appointment and it's now 2:00."

While she was in a privileged position, watching others go through worse experiences than she did was traumatic. Rosa was also extremely driven to do all the work on the application herself because she didn't trust lawyers. She mentioned that in speaking with some of her friends who are immigration lawyers, she felt she knew more than they did.

Life as a new American

Rosa says she makes a great salary, lives in Brooklyn, and generally has a great life. In reflecting on the entire naturalization process, she said, "I would tell people that every circumstance is different, and some people need more hand holding than others. Becoming naturalized is the easiest part of the process. Every visa I had to apply for previously was so hard. It's worth it. It's a few painless interviews and then you get your award. I would tell Americans to see a naturalization ceremony, because it's as American as it gets."

She encouraged Americans to visit naturalization ceremonies because of how "American" the experience is. She spoke about this experience with a great deal of enthusiasm.

For her guide to being an American, Rosa was quick to say that she was tired of the image of the American flag on immigration materials, and that it didn't mean much to her. What she really wanted to see were stories of how people

came here and what helped them establish a life in the U.S. She talked about storytelling as a really powerful tool, and it should explain “what they did and what you need to do.”

She also said, “It should convey all the power you have now that you’re a citizen. The general sense that you belong to something else. You are unique, you are different. Show how many people became citizens this year. Who to reach out to for help, like connecting to the others who’ve gone through the process.”

Mona: “Even though I understand English, when I listen to the news, I can't understand it”

Egypt

Civic life

When we asked Mona about community and civic life, she spoke of her church, and defined community as “a group of people working together on something.” But she also talked about how community and building it takes “years and years and years.” She’s very involved in her church but also said she likes to attend different churches and said that she’s not a “fanatic.”

Mona attends ESL classes at her local library and has met some friends here. But she’s frustrated with the classes because she doesn’t get to practice English with an American so that she can master the American accent and way of speaking. She does not watch the news here because she cannot understand what people are saying.

Mona admitted that she lives in a gated community and doesn’t know her neighbors. She is 73-years-old and has tried multiple times to get a job as a receptionist but keeps finding jobs where she has to lift heavy items or do heavy cleaning work. She’s too old and doesn’t want to do that, but she’d like to have more income.

When speaking about civic life, Mona talked about how she loves that people smile on the street and say hello. She also kept talking about how much she appreciates that people obey the law here and that she loves it when a school bus stops and the entire street stops!

Language

Mona mentioned several times throughout the interview that she believes immigrants need to learn English if they want to come here. She doesn’t believe everyone needs access to translators.

At one point, she mentioned going to take the driver's license test with her son, and that he helped her navigate most of it. Her son, however, had gotten a driver's license in Virginia and thought his mother, in Maryland, would undergo exactly the same process. They were a bit annoyed to find that Mona had to take a drug test and that this was a bit confusing. They didn't know that the process varies from state to state. Most of all, she felt the tests were humiliating because she was an old lady. She had driven in chaotic, complex situations before: Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Paris, and was a great driver. Why did she have to go through all of this?

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Mona came to the U.S. because of her son, and because she was attacked during the Egyptian revolution. She described going to her car and that she had just withdrawn money from her bank account when someone violently attacked her. She didn't exactly describe how but said that she used to be a painter and that she couldn't now because of that attack.

She kept mentioning how important it was for her to be near her son when she died, and that this was the main reason she wanted to be in the U.S.

Life as a new American

Mona said that when she first came to the U.S. it was really hard. She missed her friends. She was sad that she wasn't able to paint anymore and have exhibitions of her paintings like she did in Egypt.

Mona said she cares deeply about access to healthcare, and now she has better options. She also cares a lot about access to employment, but she hasn't really found a job yet. She provides interpreter services every once in a while, but said it doesn't bring in much money.

Carmen: Leave it to the rich to change things. And it probably won't happen

Venezuela

Civic life

Carmen was quick to point out that “civic engagement” isn’t a term that lower to middle class new citizens are going to understand.

According to her, the lower- and middle-class Latin American immigrants are used to highly corrupt politicians that are part of the upper class. She said that civic engagement “is more about helping others rather than working upward in or with politics. This is specific to low-middle income people, this is civic engagement. It’s not running for office. People don’t see registering to vote as a way to improve their own lives. This is the job of people that are of a higher socioeconomic level. The middle class in Latin America is different than the middle class here.”

Carmen explained that she did not have any expectations that things would get better because of the trauma she’s experienced in the country she came from.

Language

According to Carmen, having information available in language isn’t really enough. She saw many instances where basic information wasn’t available, like wayfinding and messaging that helped people set expectations in stressful environments like government offices.

Beyond this, though, she didn’t think it would motivate people to get involved in something like voting. “Even if the information is accessible in their language it’s not going to motivate people to vote. It needs to be more about how it’s going to touch them and improve their lives...because people don’t understand this.”

Carmen also made the observation that a lot of second and third generation immigrants who work in government jobs can be really rude to new immigrants.

It's not about translating, it's about what's the motivation that my life is going to change?

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Carmen came to the U.S. for a Masters' degree at The New School, then stayed, got married, and now works for the City of New York. She naturalized for several reasons, citing the end of the Obama administration as one. She also explained that because of the extreme corruption in her home country of Venezuela, she was expecting to bring her mother to the US. The only way she could do this would be to become a citizen.

Life as a new American

Carmen didn't think anything was different. She said she gets excited for elections but that she doesn't have real expectations about things changing, and that she thinks this is the case for others. "People get excited about participating in the process but they're more skeptical."

She said that "I don't have expectations that things are going to get better. If I'm that way, imagine others in worse conditions or who are poor."

Carmen also said, "[people] that I worked with became citizens because they were afraid they'd be kicked out."

Chunmiao: Community is a process

China

Civic life

Chunmiao was from China, and when asked about community, he talked about how it was a process. At first, he talked about New York, its melting pot metaphor, and how community meant figuring out how to fit into all of that. But he was quick to point out that he couldn't do that until he learned English. The process of learning English became the process of finding community and being involved in it. He wasn't able to become part of New York's melting pot until he embraced English.

He talked about the high value placed on hard work in China, and how that was his motivation for finding any way possible to study English. In high school, he studied after school and took weekend classes. Chunmaio repeatedly talked about how hard it was.

Language

When Chunmaio got off the plane, he said, he could shake his head yes and shake his head no. According to him, learning English was the single most important factor in being "civically engaged." He said, "I couldn't express myself because I felt so isolated."

This was a choice, he said. While he could have hung out with people who spoke Chinese only, he said he had to make the choice not to. He described how hard it was to make friends the first few years living here. Everyone in his neighborhood spoke Spanish.

When he finally was able to hold a conversation, he said it totally changed how he interacted with the city and became involved. Doors opened. He also explained how long and arduous the process of learning English was. Once, when he was on the bus, a woman asked if he was a student and he couldn't respond. He said it was humiliating.

For some of his friends, it was too hard. People talked about learning English, he said, but they didn't take any action. His worst option was to not learn English and become an Uber driver.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Chunmaio said there wasn't any point in going back to China. He explained that his Chinese passport was about to expire and that he wasn't going to be able to keep it. In high school, his classmates said that having a Green Card and becoming a citizen were pretty much the same thing.

Life as a new American

When describing what it's like to become a citizen, Chunmaio said there was a change that occurred overnight. He said that he felt safe and protected. He also described a feeling of being proud, that he'd decided to start his life over again – and that was a huge accomplishment in itself. He talked about the idea of a stable future and the ability to obtain a government job that had good benefits. He said that the educational opportunities available to him after becoming a citizen were greater.

For his guide to being an American, Chunmaio started with the image of a door opening as a cover for the guide, but later shifted to a road that came out of steps. He explained there were steps first, and then the road. Above the road was a sun. He wrote two words on the road, "Process" and "Learning." He said that "process" meant that one had to get started.

Joanne: “I had higher expectations”

Philippines

Civic life

Joanne described her community as different pockets. People connected to her family, people with similar interests. She said community was relationships.

When asked about civic engagement, she said that she has a responsibility here to give back. Giving back meant using her strengths. She was quick to point out that this didn't mean she had a moral responsibility to do these things. She said, “as a person, I just think it's important.”

She also said that after you become a citizen you have a lot of logistics to figure out and that voting or participating in politics might not be the first thing on someone's mind.

Language

Joanne didn't have any issues since she spoke English when she arrived. She said that many immigrants she knows “get caught up in their lives” and learning English isn't the first priority. She said that for recent immigrants it can be hard to see the purpose, and that it doesn't affect their day-to-day.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Joanne moved to the U.S. for undergrad and stayed. She had always intended to go back to the Philippines, but then she met her husband and stayed after finishing her masters. She explained that “Going back became less of a thing.” She follows politics back home closely, and watches the news in the US. She's very concerned about the current state of things.

Life as a new American

Joanne said that traveling is the biggest change. She and her husband have had second thoughts about raising a family here since the 2016 election. She

believes many of the freedoms the country offers are slowly eroding, and they weren't sure if it was a good idea to stay here.

Personally, she feels safer now that she's a citizen, knowing that a small misdemeanor could be a big problem before gaining citizenship. For a long time, she felt complacent with how things were and didn't feel the need to get involved, express her opinion, and vote. But now that's changed.

She also expressed disappointment with how democracy works in the US. As a child growing up in the Philippines, she saw democracy at work and had the idea that in the U.S. it must be so much better. She said "I expected the U.S. to be tenfold that. That hasn't been the case."

Joanne's guide to being an American was all about being practical. She said it should contain the most important things you need to know about becoming a citizen, like how to get a credit score (and why that is important), how to buy a car, how to enroll a kid in school, where to find work, and how to open bank accounts. It would be like a checklist.

On the cover, she said "a formal seal would be nice. Not a cartoon. Needs to look authentic and that there's gravitas."

Yayi Su: I have to pay, shouldn't they?

Taiwan

Civic life

For Yayi Su, she immediately talked about how community meant the organizations who provide support to people in the neighborhood that lack access to basic needs. She is dedicated to being a part of many support groups, working with the board of elections as an interpreter. She said that many of the people she works with are motivated by something like a presidential election because it's a big deal. But local elections are not that important. She believes that currently people are afraid of issues concerning immigration and that people are motivated to vote because of that.

Yayi Su works with many Chinese immigrants and believes that people tell fake stories of being abused in order to stay in the country and get Green Cards. She believes that many people then work for businesses and don't fully pay tax on their earnings, which makes her angry. A friend of hers makes more money than she does and pays less tax.

Language

Yayi Su was a teacher back in Taiwan and knew English well. She said she didn't have any trouble navigating language when she arrived, and that the naturalization process was pretty smooth.

She said that one of her friends, though, took the citizenship test 8 times. According to Yayi Su, the way people manage to answer questions on the test if they don't know English is by memorizing each question and answer.

As a translator during elections, she says that many times she ends up having to answer questions she doesn't necessarily know the answer to. People end up at the wrong polling place or want to ask her who to vote for. She can't answer that and feels frustrated because she didn't get any training on what to do in those situations.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Yayi Su was from Taiwan, and she is able to have dual citizenship, which was really important to her. She said it's also very important to others she knows. She is interested in working as a teacher because of her background in education and experience as a teacher in Taiwan.

Life as a new American

Often, Yayi Su spoke about the importance of planning for retirement, which she said she'd be able to do now that she's a citizen. She also felt comfort knowing that her retirement would also be available in Taiwan. It seemed that her future seemed more secure financially.

Yayi Su designed a guide called "What you need to know to be an American." She spoke about the guide rather than drawing it. For her, the guide would focus on knowing who your local representatives are. In her experience, people didn't know how helpful it was to build relationships with their representatives, explaining how a friend of hers got a landlord problem sorted out by having their local rep write a letter.

Rosalba: “I was yelled at and told to go home”

Columbia



Rosalba

Civic life

Rosalba works in a retirement home and helps others, but said that she always feels the need to help. She said it shouldn't matter if you're paid or not. She said it was important for her to vote because it was how she could help others who don't get to have a say. She explained that because she had the opportunity to come here and become a citizen, it's now her job to help others.

Language

For Rosalba, this means everything. Despite the fact that she came here 10 years ago, she has a very difficult time with English. It impacts every area of her life. She uses a translator at school so she can talk to her teacher, watches the news in Spanish (but also watches the news in English on NY1).

Her struggle with the language has also been stressful. Rosalba said she had to take the citizenship exam 3 times before she passed it. She said that the

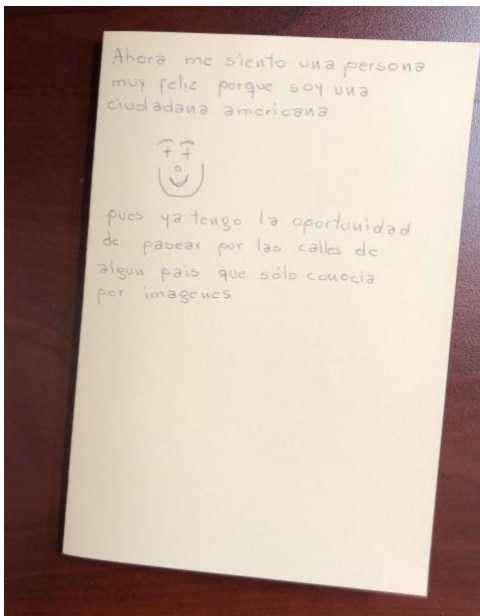
second time she took the test she asked the officer to slow down, as she knew she'd have a better chance of catching the questions. The officer, who she described as an American woman, waved her hand and yelled at her to "go home." The third time she took the test, a woman who has an immigrant herself had more patience. This officer slowed down and hugged her when she passed the test. Even the security officers cheered, and she said she cried she was so happy.

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Rosalba became a citizen because she had been here 10 years and wanted her children to become citizens. She was undocumented for a number of years and while she felt relatively okay here in New York City, she said that at any moment she knew she could get into trouble with the police.

When she came here the first years were extremely hard for her. She didn't specifically explain why, but just said it was really difficult. Life in Columbia was also really dangerous. When talking about better work opportunities for her it meant being able to walk home from work late at night and feel safe.

Life as a new American



Before she became a citizen, she didn't feel she was part of the group. She said that the feeling of being an American was very happy, and that now she feels accepted. She also described the joy that comes along with seeing your children become citizens.

Rosalba designed her guide to being an American that described "the happiness you feel after becoming a citizen" on the cover. She also wrote a sentence on the cover that explained how "now it's time to live the life you've only seen in pictures."

Inside, she said the guide would include practical advice. Like how to get a passport, and how to do the same for your kids.

Amadou: Just because it's translated doesn't mean you can read it

Nigeria

Civic life

Adamou was from Niger but grew up in Nigeria, so he always thought of himself as an immigrant. He remembered his father taking in other immigrants from Niger and helping them find their way when they arrived in Nigeria. So, for him, civic engagement has been about welcoming and enabling.

The experience of leaving one's home is something every immigrant can bond over, he said, as well as being seen as "others." "We are all trying to figure out the American system. The issues we face are similar" he said.

Language

Adamou's English is strong, but he said that even when he went to the DMV to get his driver's license he was nervous. He was trying to get a "Real ID" and he had heard that the process for doing so was very complicated.

When voting, he explained that just having materials translated doesn't mean that people can read them. Many older voters he has worked with don't know how to read. While election officials think they've done their job by translating materials, they actually haven't helped anyone.

Nonetheless, he said that when candidates and election officials go the extra mile to make sure materials are available in language, it means a lot and makes people feel like someone cares about them. He said this goes a long way.

Adamou also described that the voting culture is completely different here. He said that in Nigeria people go to vote in groups and it's a fun thing. Here it's more formal and it looks like a serious exercise that is overwhelming and

stressful. People also aren't used to using the machines because they used only paper and simple marks where they came from."

Reasons for immigrating to the U.S.

Adamou came to the U.S. for school in 2001, but soon after that his father had a stroke. He had to go back to Nigeria to care for him, and in that process lost his student visa because he couldn't keep the number of required credit hours. For several years he said he was undocumented. After his father died, he was able to go back to school, get a degree in International Relations, and become a citizen.

Life as a new American

On his way to take the oath to become a citizen, Adamou said he had a flat tire. Afterwards, he said he felt like a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulder, and that finally he could freely express himself and his opinions. He said it felt "like the beginning of a new chapter."

He said that "the freedom and rights we enjoy didn't come free, and if you become a citizen you can play an important role in shaping the decisions that are made for you. If you aren't a citizen, then you can't influence. Becoming a citizen allows you to make sure your voice is heard. Voting is most important. I tell people that if they don't vote, they can't complain."

Adamou said the title of his guide to being an American would be, "Pursuing your dreams as an American."

The image would be bubbles of different opportunities. And there is someone with a U.S. flag in their hand, this person is thinking about all the opportunities that citizenship brings, like voting, becoming an elected official.

Darma: I'm motivated to help because I'm tired of being misunderstood

Sudan

Civic life

Darma said she was inspired to get involved in civic life because she didn't want to be misunderstood. She explained that this came not only from personal experiences, but also from watching others be misunderstood. She told a story about waving to a classmate from her ESL course and realizing that the motion she made with her hand was misinterpreted to mean "go away." She used this story to illustrate her motivation to be understood.

She said she always sees groups of the same immigrant community sitting together and wants them to mix and sit together. Darma believes the problem of being misunderstood stems from the lack of cross-cultural experiences.

Her sense of community is formed by helping others, and she gets involved through the connections provided to her at the mosque. With her other Muslim sisters, she's opened a school.

Language

Darma's experience of struggling with English when she came here also serves as a motivator. Even before she came here, her father studied in Europe and exposed her to the importance of understanding language.

In dealing with the government, she explained that sometimes it isn't so much about having materials translated as it is about clearly explaining a process. She had to take the driving test 3 times because the instructions were confusing, and she wasn't familiar with American DMVs and how everything worked. Nobody told her from the beginning what the process would be.

Chaldean Community Foundation

On April 17, 2019, we met with about 35 people who had naturalized through the Chaldean Community Foundation. Christopher had spent considerable time and effort to develop relationships with people who run the CCF, and they were kind and generous about making the event happen. CCF invited participants to take part in the event as a celebration of this group of people becoming U.S. citizens.



We had 3 story tellers—including one set of sisters—telling their story at two tables back-to-back. Other attendees gathered around the tables, and after being instructed by Christopher and Said (one of our interpreters), attendees chose themes to take notes on as they listened to the stories.

Motivations for Involvement (or not being involved) in community and civic life

We learned more about the motivations for naturalizing than why people are (or are not) involved in the community. But the ideas are related. The key points from the summaries presented were that in the old country, they saw and felt “death and destruction everywhere,” and they encountered religious

persecution. In the U.S., they have freedom, safety, security, and they feel the respect for the rights of all people of all religions.



Influence of community

There was consensus that they needed to practice English everywhere, all the time. From the summary: "How do we learn if we don't have places to try it out?... It's our responsibility to [learn English]."

Myths and assumptions

Attendees had heard how hard it would be to leave home and to come to the U.S. The language is different, the food would be different, the rules would be different. But over time, they agreed, the difficulties become less. Life was hard in the country they came from. Everything was easier here, better, and more secure.



How does the culture of origin matter?

In the old country, they were constantly threatened, and lacked security. The government did not respect people, and people didn't respect one another. Cruelty was persistent, especially in political life. One participant said, "I felt like a foreigner in my own country." They were told to expect culture shock when they came to the U.S., that

they wouldn't know what to do, where to go, how to behave.

But by being part of the Chaldean community, they were encouraged to participate and practice communicating. One group concluded, "Once you learn the language, everything will be easy for you." But there was at least one person in the group who said her work was in the Chaldean church and she didn't have time or opportunity to learn English. She asked, "If you don't have time to learn English, what do you do?"

We all experienced an emotional moment when one presenter closed by saying, "When you get citizenship, the feeling of freedom is unimaginable."

Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #1

On May 31, 2019, we met on Zoom with 4 staff members who work at the Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center in Montgomery County, Maryland. We had planned the event in collaboration with Kaori Hirakawa as a dress rehearsal for two events we would hold in person the following week. The 4 participants were Kaori's team, and while some of them had naturalized more than 3 years ago, we all agreed the discussion would be a great chance to practice for the upcoming week.

The 4 participants, who came from Latin America and Asia, had agreed to tell their story of life after naturalization. Kaori was in meetings but was also able to pop in and out of the discussion and contribute.

Motivations for Involvement (or not being involved) in community and civic life

Multiple storytellers from Latin America talked about not really feeling like they had a sense of belonging here in the US, and that they didn't really feel welcome. One storyteller even said that even though he had a U.S. passport he was still pulled aside at immigration. He said "If you're white, you are in one level of society. If you aren't and you come from a different country, you're in a different level." He spoke about not having a good understanding of what it was like to live in the US, and that now they felt stuck. At the same time, another storyteller talked about coming here very young and growing up without knowing much about Mexico. When she and her family finally went, the experience was "eye opening" and they couldn't believe all of the corruption. There seemed to be a fluctuation between not feeling welcome but also feeling like she was safe here.

One storyteller talked about civic engagement as helping others or helping the environment, like planting trees in a group. All of the storytellers worked for the local government and saw their civic life as letting people know what resources the Gilchrist Center had available. The storyteller from Cambodia

talked about this several times, mentioning that she lets everyone know at the temple she goes to.

Influence of community

The storyteller from Cambodia talked about how coming to the U.S. and becoming a citizen caused her to realize that she suddenly had no community, and that she needed one. This realization motivated her to get involved, but she also spoke about a sense of responsibility. Kaori also talked about her sense of responsibility after she became a citizen. No longer was she just watching the news, but now she had a sense of duty.

We talked about trust, and trusted spaces. Everyone agreed that trust was more about something that happened between friends and by word of mouth. They agreed they would not really listen to government announcements. One person mentioned the Japanese school she takes her son to as a trusted place where she would listen to what other parents had to say.

The storytellers also talked about how crises can lead to people building trust and community.

We talked about language, and how having materials translated may or may not make a difference. Some storytellers were the interpreters for their parents. One person said that “learning English is the first step to creating community.” We talked about how it helped you build connections with others.

Others talked about a special sense of connection that occurs with people who speak their native language, and that “even though they speak a little bit of English, they want to speak with someone who speaks their language. They feel more secure and more confident.”

Myths and assumptions

The storytellers talked about the usual myths they hear about a better life in the US. The storytellers from Latin America expressed a strong sense of

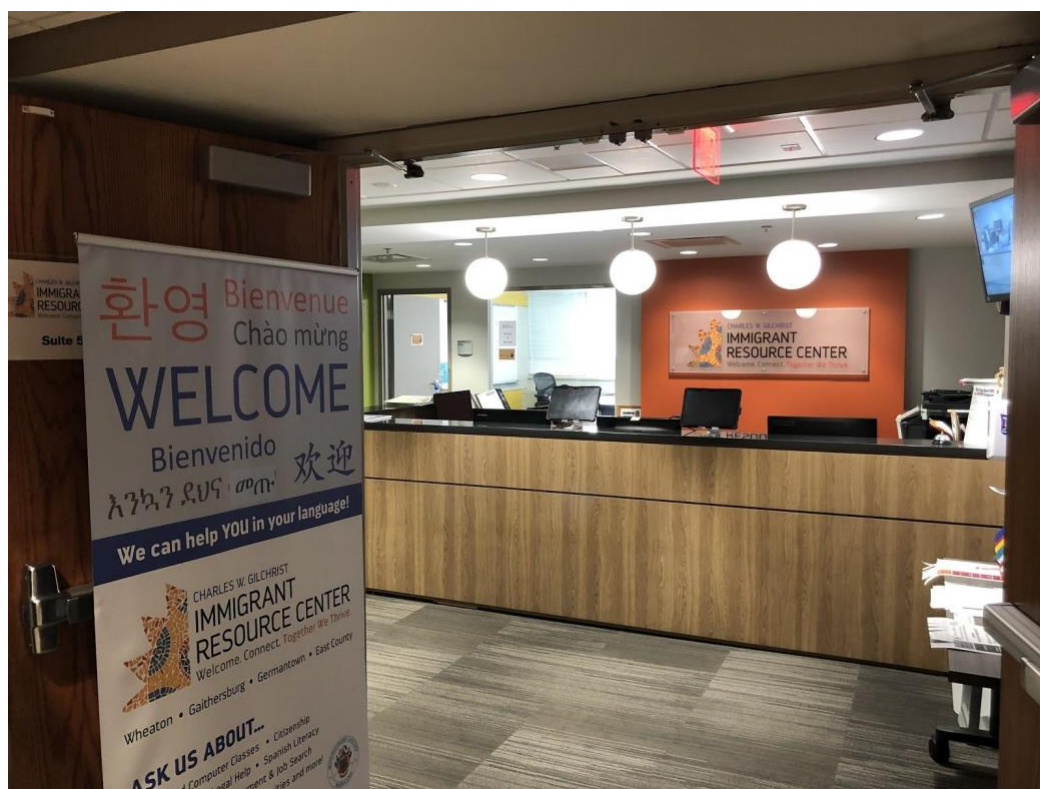
distrust that corruption could be dealt with. They had experienced deep corruption in the countries they came from, and in some cases had experience tragic deaths of family members. They did not feel welcome, didn't think that America wanted them here, and were highly skeptical of things getting better.

How does the culture of origin matter?

The storytellers who came from Latin America all agreed that they were frustrated by the lack of feeling welcome, along with their experiences of structural racism and classism in the U.S. While they cared about civic life and responsibility, they disagreed with the storytellers from Asia. They talked to each other about how that might be a cultural difference around this and everyone agreed it was probably the case.

Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #2

On June 6, 2019, we held a storytelling session with 6 new citizens that had participated in the Gilchrist Center's citizenship or ESL classes. Three of the citizens came from El Salvador, one came from India, one from Mexico, and one from Bolivia. At least half of them had been in the United States for more than 20 years. They all were retired, although some volunteered in hospitals and at the Gilchrist Center.



The entrance to the Gilchrist Center in Silver Springs, Maryland.

Motivations for Involvement (or not being involved) in community and civic life

A married couple (one from El Salvador, one from Mexico) talked about the initial experience of coming to the U.S. and focusing on work alone. They described their community as the people they worked with, who spoke

Spanish. They said their bosses spoke Spanglish and that it was enough to get by. One person even remembered telling his boss “he was sick” as a catch all for whatever reason he couldn’t show up at work because that’s all he knew how to say. They said their working schedules didn’t allow them time to study to learn English. Now that they’re retired and citizens, they have time to practice English and also feel different about how important it is to learn it. Everyone in the room from El Salvador said they became citizens to feel safe and secure.

Some people said that the idea of getting involved and caring for others was different. They said the idea of following the law was different too. Even the concept of not littering was something they had to get used to. Learning to be quiet and where to be quiet was different, too.

Everyone in the room voted and felt it was important to do so. One person said, “it was their responsibility to look out for the health of their country. Everyone said they watched the news, and several people said they watch the news on TV in Spanish because they cannot read everything that’s in a newspaper.

There was a divide in the room around one’s sense of responsibility as a citizen. A participant who was educated and a nun said that the U.S. gives you a lot and that you should participate in return. She explained that many people come here and only work to send money back home, which she thought was wrong. Another person spoke up and disagreed, saying that many people come from very poor countries and the only thing on their mind is working when they arrive. The nun said that they should at least go to school and become a better person, but several people said that this is hard to do when you’re very poor. In hindsight, everyone agreed that this “give and take” philosophy makes sense, but only now that they have distance from when they first arrived.

One person described going to get her driver’s license and that they sent her to a computer to complete a task and that she had no idea how to use the computer in this way. She’d used a computer before, but for a specific task.

Outside of that, she didn't know what to do and wasn't able to finish what she needed.



Group of new citizens who participated in the discussion.

Influence of community

Many of the participants in the session admitted that they didn't know their neighbors and that even after inviting them over they didn't come. Others suggested that they needed to try again and that it took time. There was agreement in the group that learning English was community because it opened so many doors in terms of connecting with others. Some spoke about a sense of embarrassment when asked how long they've lived here and still struggle with English. One person described trying to go to a restaurant with her son and then leaving because they couldn't understand.

The group talked about two types of "community." One was physical space, like the pools or recreation centers in Montgomery County where they meet people -- especially people who are different from them. They said you need to have a space where you can exchange ideas and talk. The other kind of

community was the group of people around you, and each described different ways they look out for each other.

Myths and assumptions

Participants talked about how there were a lot of rules they weren't expecting when they came here. These were a mix of social norms, like knowing when to be quiet in different environments or knowing not to throw trash on the ground.

One person said that everyone told her she would lose the citizenship of her own country if she became a citizen, but that later she learned it wasn't the case. Everyone said that you can't imagine the amount of free resources that are available for people when they come here. In fact, one person said they'd been here for 20 years and didn't know the Gilchrist Center existed.

We talked about the importance of keeping a clean record, and that even if you committed crimes in your home country some people aren't aware of how this can cause issues when you try to become a U.S. citizen.

How does the culture of origin matter?

One person described being in the subway recently and that she saw a man start to run. She immediately started to run too because that's what she did in El Salvador. Her instinct was that something bad was happening, but the man was just trying to catch his train. She had no reason to be afraid, but trauma from the past created fear in the present – even when there was nothing to be afraid of.

Part of the feeling of opportunity here stemmed from the number of job opportunities that, to many in the room, was beyond anything available in their home countries. They said if you want to work, you can find something. They said the economic situation is different here from the countries they came from.

Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center #3



On June 7, 2019, we held a storytelling session with 6 new citizens from South Korea, Nigeria, Vietnam, and El Salvador who participated in the Gilchrist Center's citizenship or ESL classes.

Motivations for Involvement (or not being involved) in community and civic life



Everyone in the room felt it was important to vote, but not everyone said it was their main reason for becoming a citizen and getting involved. A couple of the participants mentioned they were motivated to align themselves with the government for stability. One person from South Korea had joined the U.S. army after arriving here, because it expedited his ability to become a citizen. Another became a citizen mainly for the reason of being able to secure a government job. He said that government jobs might be boring, but he believed it would be a more stable career.

We observed that for this group, it was after finding stability that they felt they could give back to others. One of the participants saw it as his duty to advocate for and inform the South Korean immigrant community. He said that one day he hopes to teach citizenship classes. This participant had the strongest sense

of giving back, bringing with him a binder that included every newspaper article that highlighted community work he had done (see image below).

Gilchrist Center office on the second floor of the library.



Influence of community

The group was really interested in the word “community.” Everyone agreed that getting involved in civic life and community was more like giving back and helping others than it was anything else. People mentioned voting, but there was more discussion around charity. One participant from Nigeria noted that the emphasis on charity really impressed him when he came here, and many at the table agreed. A participant from Vietnam talked for a

while about the idea of “handing out” your spirit to others. Several spoke of a sense of adopting the country, feeling they could be themselves here.

To do this, they agreed, it was essential to learn English to fully participate in the community.

Myths and assumptions

We talked about what they learned in their interactions with the U.S. government, and one person commented that it was important to learn not to change your story. Keep your information consistent. Don’t change your story just to keep people happy. Many agreed it was easy to make stories up to try and please people, but this was a bad idea. It is connected to the myth that many believed: becoming a citizen is difficult, including the fact that you have to take a very hard test. One participant from El Salvador said it was much easier than she expected. Others commented that they suspected some people thought you would lose your home country’s citizenship, which isn’t always the case.

One person mentioned that she had heard many people say that there wasn’t any change from before they were a citizen to after. Another disagreed and described the concept of feeling “at home,” and that she accepted this change in what “home” was because becoming a citizen made it more certain. She said it was a good feeling.

How does the culture of origin matter?

A storyteller from Nigeria had prepared a long list of what, culturally, he found most apparent here in the US. While many of the points were things like clothing and food, he had several other points that tied directly to civic participation. Law and order, he said, was optional in Nigeria and that the payment of officials is commonplace. Events happen on time and people show up on time (he talked about how his naturalization ceremony lasted 90 minutes and started on time). We talked about community spaces. To our Nigerian storyteller, American community spaces were things like churches

and town halls, but in his country his street was the community space. Participation in civic events, especially political ones, was dangerous.

Much of the group seemed to relate. Interestingly, while many of the participants came from countries where it was dangerous to get involved in politics, nobody specifically said they brought those experiences here.



Sharing newspaper clippings from South Korea.

COPING WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SIDES

My name is Ibiyinka Adetunji Roluga. I became an American citizen on May 8th, 2019. The naturalization ceremony started on time and lasted for only 90 minutes. This is a departure from my own country, Nigeria, where ceremonies are carried out late with no sense of time.

LAW & ORDER: Many Nigerians do not obey laid down Principles of Law e.g. Traffic rules and regulations. The security officers who are to enforce the law are so corrupt that if you have money you can get away with crime.

SOCIAL LIFE: Social life in Nigeria is carried out mostly outdoors and you block the public roads and play music loud in the open to disturb the neighborhood. This is a departure from the practice in America where all events are carried out in the halls and event centers.

FAMILY LIFE: The family life in Nigeria is a closed society. It is a taboo for you to take your old ones to homes. Instead there's always a family member to help take care of the old at home, in the comfort of the children and the grandchildren.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES: Political activities in Nigeria are a do or die affairs. If you are not sure of yourself, you dare not get involved in politics or else you can easily lose your life with mafia boys, but here, there is a freedom of speech but you still have to be very careful.

CONCLUSION: It is my pleasure to have had the opportunity to experience the cultural differences between the two countries, but all the same, I am still proud to be an American. Thank you.

GOD BLESS THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Thoughts prepared by participant from Nigeria.

New American Voters' Association

On June 22, 2019, we held a storytelling event for 35 people connected to the New American Voters Association (NAVA) in Jackson Heights, Queens. CCD designed the event in collaboration with NAVA. NAVA recruited the storytellers. We held the event at a neighborhood restaurant called Bamboo House, which made sure people had something delicious to eat at the end of the storytelling session.

We had 7 storytellers—including one set of sisters—telling their story. We set up the room so the storytellers had a kind of stage to speak from while others listened, and then asked questions. The storytellers came from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Guyana.



A storyteller sharing their experiences.

Motivations for Involvement (or not being involved) in community and civic life

All of the storytellers had a strong focus on helping others. Some were involved in community boards or Rotary Clubs, one cashed in recycling and

sent the money back home, and another volunteered to fight domestic violence. One even worked for the Mayor's office. We wondered what motivated people to help others. In fact, one of the audience members wrote down the question "How does your cultural/national background circumstance help shape your commitment to social change?" We asked a similar question at the end, and one of the storytellers answered that she had seen her father reach out during a war in Bangladesh to help children. This, she said, inspired her to this day.

One person described getting a job with Medicaid after becoming a citizen. She said that this experience really opened her eyes, and that she sometimes felt helpless because she wanted to help people that she couldn't. This motivated her to help others get health insurance.

Influence of community

Some of the storytellers we spoke to talked about how hard it was to find community and settle in a place. One spoke of first arriving in New York City, then moving to Dallas, and then back to New York because they were happier there. Another described the long process of arriving with her daughter and struggling for a few years until she gained footing. One storyteller described working 80- to 90-hour weeks so they didn't have time to look beyond work.

Above all, it was clear that finding community and the time to get involved in civic life (such as joining NAVA) didn't happen as soon as they became citizens. It took time for people to build stability. Stability was financial in some cases, but also meant meeting a spouse or getting an education. These seemed to happen before community and civic engagement.

Myths and assumptions

Many of the storytellers spoke about how they were confused about the loss of their home country's citizenship after becoming American. There were decisions to make about what you might be giving up or gaining. For this

group, the loss of their home country didn't seem to be a deterrent from becoming a citizen, however.



Storytellers

One of the storytellers talked about how being brown still makes people look at her even though she's a citizen. She talked about the racism that she's experienced here but didn't indicate whether or not she expected it.



Education also was an issue. One person thought their degree from Bangladesh, which was from a good school, would transfer here. She was frustrated that she had to go back to school and spend more money just to get a degree in the US.

How does the culture of origin matter?

Many of the storytellers came to the U.S. to escape wars and economic hardship, but others admitted that despite this they never had plans to leave their countries. One person said she was never planning to leave Bangladesh forever, but came to New York City after visiting her sister, who had urged her to come.

NAVA attracts politically-energized individuals for whom privilege and access to education made a difference in their lives as new Americans.