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Carver Center citizenship class fosters hope for better life in U.S.

By Jeremiah Hassel





Port Chester resident Deisy Lopez listens raptly to Fabiola Montoya as the latter reads questions in a mock naturalization interview during a citizenship class at the Carver Center on Mar. 27. Jeremiah Hassel|Westmore News

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Rosibel Brambila-Espinoza made the trek to the United States from Mexico more than five years ago with her two young daughters—one of the last in her family to do so.

So far, she said life has been good: She's grown to love American culture and enjoys the life she's building with her now three children.

But "it's a different life" from what the 37-year-old was used to.

In her native country, Brambila-Espinoza was an administrative technician, working in the accounting and bookkeeping industry. She was a professional, establishing her career with family and friends in arm's reach.

Now, the Port Chester resident cleans houses with a Westchester-based company to provide for her children. It's good work, she said, but it's not her chosen career path, the type of professional work she was trained to do.

Brambila-Espinoza wants to reclaim her old career, and she wants to continue building a life that elevates her potential and sets her kids up for success.

Because she's not a U.S. citizen, however, some doors remain closed to her—it's difficult for her to go back to school and re-earn her certifications, and even if she did, she might not be able to get a job in her field without naturalizing.

That's what drew her to Fabiola Montoya's citizenship course at the Carver Center, a "unique adult education program" that helps students prepare for their naturalization exams, according to Daniel Bonnet, the center's chief program officer.

Montoya works with students individually to ensure their paperwork—like proof of tax payments—is submitted on time and they get fingerprinted when they're supposed to. And she goes with them to many of their exam appointments.

"The beautiful part of it is that it's not just an educational program where you come sit in a classroom and learn—there's also a handholding component," Bonnet said.

The main point of the course, however, is to teach students how to properly answer the questions on the test, which demands personal information from applicants and quizzes them on U.S. history, civics and local politics.

The trivia portion can be difficult, Montoya said—even those who grow up in the U.S. struggle to answer some of the questions. That's why she reviews flashcards with her pupils during each class, drilling the answers into them through repetition.

Examples of information the applicants need to memorize include the war during which General Dwight D. Eisenhower served and what the Emancipation Proclamation did.

For the personal information portion, they also need to truthfully tell examiners whether they've been arrested before, have been a member of a militia or guerilla group or have persecuted anyone, among other things. And because the answer to most of the personal questions is "no," they might be asked to explain their responses or to define the terms in the questions.

As such, Montoya also helps non-English speakers learn the language, teaching them pronunciation and phrases they can use to do just that.

Most applicants are required to take the test in English unless they meet certain age and residency requirements—they have to be 50 years old and have had legal permanent residency for 20 years, or 55 years old with legal permanent residency for 15 years to qualify, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

After every Carver Center class, Montoya gives them homework tailored to their individual progress—she notes which questions they missed and the various English phrases that need to practice.

Overall, she said the purpose is to "make sure they understand what it means to be loyal to the United States."

The class meets every weekday from 6:30-8 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on Saturdays. Weekday classes are \$65 for eight sessions, and Saturday lessons are \$100, also for eight classes.

Wednesday evening classes are taught in Spanish.

To qualify for naturalization, an individual must be at least 18 years old and have been a permanent resident for at least five years, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website states.

As of October 2022, Bonnet said there were around 140 students enrolled in the course. Montoya has built a reputation over the 18 years she's taught the class, only one student failed the citizenship exam on the first attempt, she said. And as such, enrollment numbers have grown.

Many of the students come from out of town, but he said a large number hail from Port Chester.

"Port Chester is a gateway—it's a community that has different cultures and ethnicities. A lot of families are coming here," Bonnet said. "Once you see your neighbor, your friends, your family member go through this process, it's really an energizing feeling. You say, 'I want to get there someday and become a U.S. citizen.'"

He said the class is empowering—it shows individuals from all different backgrounds that it's possible to become a citizen even if they don't speak English well. They can still be contributing members of society—cogs in the American machine.

Brambila-Espinoza believes she can do it, too.

She looks forward to being able to vote, something she's always wanted to do. But more importantly, she anticipates the doors citizenship will unlock for her children—if she naturalizes, her daughters automatically will as well since they're under 18. And being citizens will allow them to enjoy better opportunities for higher education and their future careers, she believes.

For some of Montoya's students, however, citizenship hasn't been everything it's cracked up to be.

Carol Phillips-Taylor passed the exam in 2007. The Port Chester resident immigrated in 2022 with her mother from Jamaica, where she was just settling into a career as a schoolteacher.

When she arrived, she struggled to find jobs, working as a substitute teacher for several years. She had hoped that by becoming a citizen, full-time positions would open up for her.

"Children are my life," she said. "I wanted to be able to impart [knowledge and experiences] and work with them and to guide them the best way I could."

But naturalizing didn't magically open up doors for her like she had hoped. She felt the benefits of citizenship were "miscommunicated" because she "didn't find it working out."

"It's like you have to stay at the bottom of the barrel," she said. "They talk about the American dream. I'm kind of still waiting for the dream to become a reality."

In Jamaica, she had worked hard to establish her career, and that hard work had paid off. But in America, she felt her efforts were "not appreciated."

Eventually, she learned that her teaching certifications and degree from Jamaica weren't enough to get her foot in the door—she needed at least a master's degree for most positions, which she said is an "unspoken rule" in the education sector.

So, Phillips-Taylor went back to school and earned a masters in special education from Manhattanville College in 2015, and her patience and perseverance ultimately proved fruitful—she landed a job at the Yonkers City School District as an elementary special education teacher, a position she still holds.

"It's just starting to pay off," she said of her efforts to naturalize. "Now, I'm in a public school. There are benefits. I wouldn't say I'm totally comfortable, but I'm working towards it."

Though citizenship didn't work out the way she initially anticipated, Phillips-Taylor said the class was still instrumental in helping her achieve it.

It eased her nerves about the test, she said, and ensured that she was prepared to take it.

She encourages prospective citizens to take it and pursue their dreams. And taking the course is the first step toward realizing them.