

A Privilege of League Membership: Witnessing the Solemn and Joyful Rite of Becoming a U.S. Citizen

How does it feel to touch exuberant joy, to embrace pride? My recent experience is one I'd like to share with you.

Every few years it is my privilege to represent the League of Women voters at Naturalization Court, to watch as people from all corners of the globe magically become part of the diverse fabric which makes up the citizenry of the United States.

On December 7th, a wet and very windy day which was the 70th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Adelaide DiGiorgi and I entered the ceremonial courtroom of the Westchester County courthouse in White Plains and were immediately engulfed by the excitement and anticipation of those occupying almost every seat -- people of all generations several who were about to become citizens, many of whom were accompanied by friends and family.



We were joined in our reserved front row seats by representatives of the Daughters of the American Revolution, including Barbara Brunner, a Rye LWV member, and also by Florence Glazer, representing the Jewish War Veterans. Although some of us had been here before, we all were struck by the impressive milestone which was to occur momentarily.

And then the Court opened by proclamation and the ceremony began with Deputy County Clerk Susan Kiernan announcing to Supreme Court Justice Gerald Loehr, **“Your Honor, I would like to introduce 121 new citizens who have been examined by the Immigration Services and have been found to comply with all the regulations.”**

We all stood and watched as County Clerk Timothy Idoni administered the Oath of Allegiance, and then we joined the new citizens in the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag -- ***now also their flag!***

And it is at this moment that we felt the transcendent joy and pride surrounding everyone in the courtroom and, also, deep inside ourselves.

Both Tim Idoni and Judge Loehr spoke movingly to the audience, welcoming them to “our democracy.” The Judge referred to the history of the day, and to the responsibility of those who enjoy liberty, freedom and equality and how “we must not take these privileges lightly.”

The new citizens came to the podium and received their certification, and then the four of us greeted and congratulated each of the 121 new Americans, giving them first voters' guides, flag pins and small U.S. flags. They could now go into the entrance hall and apply for passports and register to vote -- and most did so!



They came from every continent, and from so many countries: from Canada and Mexico; from Jamaica, Haiti, Guyana and Latin America; from eastern Europe, Belgium and the U.K.; from Morocco, Pakistan and India; and from the far East and the Phillipines.

As Tim Idoni said, “America is the sum total of all her people and the object of our government is the well-being of all the people.” An idealistic statement, perhaps, but one that we still believe after 235 years.

Representing the LWV at this ceremony was a wonderful experience and I urge you to go if you have a chance. It is here that one can feel the optimism for our future. How precious is this thing called “citizenship,” and how special that each of us can use it to make our democracy stronger for everyone!

--- Susan Weisfeld