

No Book for This Immigrant Story; Class Observes Politics And Path to Citizenship

The Washington Post

December 5, 2008 Friday, Met 2 Edition

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Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 764 words

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Body

For a political science **class** this fall, Herndon High School students immersed themselves in the national immigration debate that played out in their hometown 7-Eleven parking lot. They quizzed a lawmaker on Capitol Hill about border security and yesterday took part in a ceremony in Fairfax County to welcome more than 40 new U.S. citizens.

The event at a government building in Merrifield was a capstone to a series of lively discussions in teacher Douglas Graney's **class** on an issue that has shaped its town's **politics** and, for many students, personal histories. The **class** learned about the complexities of immigration **politics** and the drama of the journey to **citizenship**.

"It was inspiring," Jhoanne Montano, 18, said after the ceremony. Her parents, Bolivian **immigrants**, have spent years building a successful business in the United States but have not yet applied to become citizens. "I want them to experience that moment, too," Montano said.

Herndon drew national attention in 2005 when local officials approved spending public money to build a job center for day laborers. Widespread protests ensued as critics said the money would be spent to help illegal **immigrants**. The mayor and town council members who supported the center were ousted in the next election, and the new town leaders closed the center.

What the Herndon High **class** witnessed yesterday was a daily routine. From October 2007 through September, more than 1 million people nationwide became naturalized citizens. About 26,000 of them processed their applications at the Washington District office for U.S. **Citizenship** and Immigration Services, based in Fairfax. The office holds three ceremonies a day, sometimes more.

The **class** added elements to a well-rehearsed program, an experience immigration officials said could benefit more students. The soon-to-be new citizens filled rows of black plastic chairs. While their relatives clicked cameras, they

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repeated an oath, pledged allegiance to the flag and watched a video with a message from President Bush and images of national monuments, shorelines and hard-hat workers.

They also heard two students perform "America the Beautiful" on flute and guitar as well as a lilting, a cappella version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and a student gave a speech about America's motto.

"We all have a story. It's a story of immigration to a great land, whether it be us directly or our ancestors. . . . Even though we come from different places, look different and have different faiths, we are now all Americans, and America's first motto was 'E pluribus unum' -- out of many, one," Samantha Shortt, 17, told the audience. She also talked about her mother's pursuit of citizenship after emigrating from Panama many years ago.

Sarah Taylor, district director for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said she hopes to welcome more student groups to watch or participate in a naturalization ceremony. She has already reached out to her daughter's school, Robert Frost Middle in Fairfax, and some students are scheduled to give speeches during ceremonies next week.

"Many of us who were born here take our citizenship for granted," Taylor said. "But you get a special perspective" by witnessing the moment another person becomes a citizen, she added.

"We didn't have to do anything to become a citizen. We were just born here," agreed student Carrie Kurtz, 17. The lengthy process of applying for citizenship "says a lot about their dedication," she said, and their "love of country."

"It actually gave me goose bumps," student Hilary Lesnoski, 17, said. She charted her family's journey from Poland to the United States, tracing back to her great-grandparents. She said she had not thought much about immigration until she moved to Herndon from Pittsburgh two years ago.

News reports have showcased turmoil over the day-labor center, but several students said that until now they had few opportunities in school to reflect on what was happening and to hear each other's views.

The class also debated related issues considered in Congress in recent years, including whether to build a fence on the border with Mexico and whether English should be the country's official language. The class visited Rep. Jose E. Serrano (D-N.Y.) and asked him about his positions.

They also prepared for the naturalization ceremony by taking their own practice citizenship tests. After the ceremony, Graney's course will move on to lessons on patriotism, he said. Now that they have covered "who gets to be an American," the teacher said he wants to talk about what "it means to be an American."

Graphic

IMAGE; Photos By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post; During a federal citizenship ceremony, Fairuz Maggio, left, a student at Herndon High School, leads a group in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

IMAGE; Dozens recite an oath on their way to becoming U.S. citizens at a federal government building in Merrifield in Fairfax County. The office holds three ceremonies a day, sometimes more.

IMAGE; Herndon High School student Jennifer Chuon, 17, sings "The Star-Spangled Banner."

IMAGE; Photos By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post; Douglas Graney, right, a political science teacher at Herndon High, takes a photo as the newly minted citizens recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Classification

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Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **CITIZENSHIP** (93%); IMMIGRATION (92%); CITY GOVERNMENT (90%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (90%); NATURALIZATION (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (89%); **POLITICS** (89%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (78%); EMIGRATION (78%); US CONGRESS (77%); CITIES (75%); MAYORS (75%); NATIONAL SECURITY (73%); POLITICAL SCIENCE (73%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%); HIGH SCHOOLS (73%); BORDER CONTROL (72%); APPROVALS (67%)

Company: 7-ELEVEN INC (58%)

Industry: HIGH SCHOOLS (73%); PARKING SPACES & FACILITIES (58%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (96%)

Load-Date: December 5, 2008

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