

OLDER IMMIGRANTS ALSO HAIL PROUDLY

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

October 7, 2002 Monday Five Star Lift Edition

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Section: SOUTH POST ; Pg. 1

Length: 538 words

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Body

They stood ramrod straight, hands on hearts, more than a dozen people singing the national anthem. Most were **older** than 70. They sang "Oh say, can you see" with a polyglot of accents: Bosnian, Vietnamese, Spanish.

What they could see was American citizenship. Most of the class members will become citizens within a year.

The singers were students in the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis' citizenship preparation class for **older** people. The institute is at 3654 South Grand Boulevard.

The students were learning English and about the American government to pass the citizenship test.

As for their motivations for learning another language and culture late in life, they all said about the same thing, but in different words.

"I want to be a citizen of the U.S.; I see the need to change cultures," said Shyris de la Torre, 70, formerly of Colombia, now of Overland. De la Torre, a bursar in her original country, uses a pocket-size computer to help her communicate in English, even though glaucoma can make her eyes milky.

Thuan Nguyen had a similar outlook. "Citizenship is a good thing; this is my country now," he said.

Thuan, 74, began his life in Vietnam and worked as a civil servant for the United States in the Vietnam War. After the war, he couldn't get a job. He now lives in the 4100 block of Potomac Street in St. Louis. His lessons are at the stage where he has greater fluency writing than speaking.

Halil Ramadani is looking forward to voting. "I want to be a citizen, to learn to vote," he said. "America is my country."

Ramadani, 71, lives in University City and came from Bosnia. His complexion is ruddy. He wears jeans and a baseball cap.

The fact that they must be citizens to get benefits such as Medicare sometimes fuels the desire for citizenship.

Their teacher, Marjie Brammeier, 52, lives in the Central West End. She teaches them things many Americans no longer know. Who was the third president of the United States? Who was the 16th president?

On a recent day, she was teaching them the words of the national anthem and their meaning. She showed them two cards: One said "rampart," and the other gave the word's meaning, "defensive wall."

She teaches them by sight and repetition. She is lively, acting out words. There are no tests here, only comfort and further instruction. No unruly or sleepy students, either.

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Brammeier holds up the words "bombs bursting in air." She then holds up the definition: "explode."

Spontaneously, Vahida Cekic, 57, of the 4900 block of South Broadway in St. Louis, states one of the reasons behind her quest for citizenship. "When I was in Bosnia, they bombed my house three times."

The International Institute

The International Institute of Metropolian St. Louis offers translation and other services that help refugees settle in this country, including classes in English and U.S. citizenship, and employment, social, health and mental services, plus economic development. It also has cultural programs, a community outreach program and a speakers bureau. Some services are free. The Institute is based at 3654 South Grand in the Gravois Park neighborhood. For information, call 314-773-9090 or go to www.intlinst.org.

Notes

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Graphic

PHOTO; (1) COLOR PHOTO BY TRISHA L. SIDDENS - Ngoc Doan (left), 66, a case worker for the International Institute, helps Dang Don, 71, find his way around a sample ballot in a voting booth at an event the Institute held at Tower Grove Park. Doan lives in Webster Groves; Don lives in St. Louis.; (2) COLOR PHOTO BY TRISHA L. SIDDENS - Hinh The Nguyen (center), 64, of St. Louis, studies his ballot Tuesday as Fadumo Sheikh Adan (right), 74, of St. Louis, looks away. They wait their turn to practice voting at the citizenship event sponsored by the International Institute. The event allowed elderly ***immigrants*** to meet and celebrate their citizenship, learn how to use voting machines and register to vote. Nguyen, who is originally from Vietnam, has lived in the United States for seven years; he became a citizen six months ago. Adan, who is from Somalia, has lived here for eight years and is studying to become a citizen.; (3) PHOTO BY TRISHA L. SIDDENS - ABOVE LEFT: Marjie Brammeier, 52, of St. Louis, teaches a 10-week citizenship class at the International Institute, in the 3600 block of South Grand Boulevard. Here she shows her students important words and phrases.; (4) PHOTO BY TRISHA L. SIDDENS - ABOVE RIGHT: Shyris de la Torre, 70, listens intently as Brammeier speaks. De la Torre, formerly of Colombia, lives in Overland; she uses a pocket-size computer to help her communicate in English.; (5) PHOTO BY TRISHA L. SIDDENS - Hap Dinh of Affton, a case worker at the International Institute and a voting registrar, swears in Marie M. Fortulis Juste, 80, of St. Louis, at the institute's citizenship event. Fortulis Juste, who is originally from Haiti, has lived in the United States for nine years and became a citizen almost a year ago. Dinh was born in Vietnam and has lived here for eight years.; Charles Bryson of the office of St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay congratulates Huong Thi Vo, 66, of St. Louis as she receives a certificate. Vo, from Vietnam, recently became a U.S. citizen after living here for seven years.

Classification

Language: English

Subject: CITIZENSHIP (91%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (90%); MEDICARE (74%); MULTILINGUALISM (73%); VIETNAM WAR (73%); SENIOR CITIZENS (69%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (69%); CIVIL SERVICES (66%); GLAUCOMA (63%)

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Company: METROPOLITAN-SAINT LOUIS SEWER DISTRICT INC (57%); METROPOLITAN-SAINT LOUIS SEWER DISTRICT INC (57%)

Industry: MEDICARE (74%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (69%)

Geographic: SAINT LOUIS, MO, USA (92%); MISSOURI, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (96%); VIET NAM (87%)

Load-Date: October 7, 2002

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