

A HEARTY WELCOME 18 COUPLES GET ULTIMATE VALENTINE'S DAY GIFT - AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

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Byline: BY EDGAR SANDOVAL DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Body

THE U.S. government gave 18 New York couples something to really love yesterday: their new country.

Couples from 14 different nations attended the first Valentine's Day U.S. naturalization ceremony in lower Manhattan.

"It's a blend of civics and romance," said Ronald Benjamin, 54, who became a U.S. citizen alongside his wife, Patricia, 52, both originally from Jamaica.

"It's exciting. I'm just waking up to reality," echoed Lucia Popian, who, like her husband, came to New York from Romania.

In the past 10 years, more than 6.8 million people have become U.S. citizens, and about 85,000 immigrants get sworn in as new citizens in New York every year.

But few get to make it a romantic date, like Jefferson Vieira, 38, and Vainia Backes, 36.

The couple, who have two small children, moved to the area from Brazil about 10 years ago and settled in upstate Poughkeepsie, where they both work at Dunkin' Donuts.

"For us, it was a long process. We never thought we'd be here today on the same day," Vieira said. "We're going to a special Valentine's dinner tonight to celebrate this."

Katie Tichacek Kaplan of the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services said many couples apply together, but that doesn't mean they will get the same ceremony date.

"It's Valentine's Day. We wanted to make it special," Kaplan said.

After the couples sang the national anthem and were sworn in, they enjoyed a romantic snack - a Valentine-themed cake and coffee.

Sitting in one of the back rows, Florence Naci, 24, said the ceremony was bittersweet for him, as he watched the loving couples exchange glances and affection.

He married a year ago, but his wife, Zerima, 24, still lives in Albania, where they met and wed.

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"It's hard. I wish she was here with me, too," Naci said. "I'm a citizen now, and it will be easier to bring her with me. But it makes for a sad ***Valentine's Day***."

esandoval@nydailynews.com

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