

STAR-SPANGLED NEW CITIZENS Stout-hearted, strong-minded immigrants commit to America

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Body

They came for different reasons.

A Bangladeshi accountant who was weary of his country's politics. A Jamaican woman who has been in this country for 18 years, made a life for herself and decided that it was time. And a Filipino mechanical engineer who has dreamed of being here since he was a teenager.

They were among 200 people who came to Manhattan Federal Court one day this month to take an oath of allegiance as **new** Americans.

Naturalization ceremonies are a weekly occurrence in federal courtrooms in Brooklyn and Manhattan, where **immigrant** dreams are realized and **American** determinations are made.

Their stories are filled with longings for a better life, only to be met with hardships of working at fast-food restaurants, supporting relatives on different shores and going to school.

Some **immigrants** take the step for patriotic reasons, and others are doing it because they fear that their rights are eroding around them. All have kept tight bonds with their homelands.

Mark Thorn, a **New** York spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, said 94,746 people were naturalized in fiscal 2002, down from 97,953 the previous year.

The terrorist attacks in 2001 created an unprecedented surge of U.S. citizenship applications, forming an even greater backlog for immigration officials, who now must perform tighter security checks.

Regardless, **New** York continues to naturalize more **immigrants** each year than any other city. Here's a look at a few of our **newest** Americans.

Reared on **American** TV

Niaz Khan grew up in Pathan Bari, a small Bangladeshi village, but was reared on **American** television, mesmerized by the NBC series "Knight Rider."

He came to **New** York in 1997 because he didn't see a future in his homeland, where the politics were shaky and family members were constantly being harassed by police.

Khan worked double shifts at Roy Rogers, among other jobs, and at night attended Baruch College, where he majored in accounting.

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Part of his earnings went to his mother, who wanted to join the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. He was able to eke out \$1,500 for her trip on his fast-food wages.

"I'm real proud of that," he said. "I wouldn't have been able to come up with that kind of money in Bangladesh."

The 24-year-old auditor now works at Ernst & Young and lives in the Throgs Neck section of the Bronx.

On the day he became a **citizen**, INS officials lost his photo, so he had to run and get his picture taken again. But he didn't care.

"There is a good system here. People can vote, publish their own opinions," he said, smiling. "So many opportunities."

Heartbreak & survival

It was 1981 when Theresa Gordon fell in love.

He was of Jamaican descent, spending his vacation in Kingston, Jamaica. They got married.

He wanted her to come back to **America**, but Gordon declined.

"I thought **New** York was too big a place, that I would get lost every day. But in the back of my mind, I heard that the U.S. is a bed of roses and everything is good - money, education."

So she agreed and waited three years for her immigration papers, reuniting with her husband in 1984. But when she arrived in **New** York, she found a stranger and heartbreak.

"He had abandoned me," she said. "I didn't know that life would be so hard."

She settled in the Belmont section of the Bronx, forced to rely on the kindness of friends who took her in. She took a nursing course and found two jobs - one as a home health attendant, the other as a nurse's aide.

Over the years, Gordon has made the best of it. She worked hard and has been able to buy a two-family home, renting out the other half for extra cash.

She also has managed to bring from Jamaica three of her four children from a previous relationship - one of her biggest accomplishments.

"I wanted to help my kids," she said. "I am a tough woman."

Becoming a **citizen** after 18 years of a hard, productive life here was the right thing to do, she figured.

"I decided I'd go for it," Gordon said.

So on her 58th birthday, she became a **citizen**.

Dreams of **America**

Carlos and Emma Polet have been searching for a better life outside the Philippines for more than 20 years. They found it in **New** York, when Carlos Polet's mother sponsored them in 1996.

Before that, the 65-year-old mechanical engineer worked for a Japanese company in Saudi Arabia for 15 years, but he couldn't get **America** out of his mind.

He had dreamed of this place ever since he was a teenager growing up in the U.S.-occupied Philippines after World War II.

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"My mother took me to a Fourth of July function and I thought the fireworks were exciting," recalled the 65-year-old, who works and lives on 23rd St. as an apartment maintenance supervisor.

He has paid a steep price for his absence, missing children and grandchildren birthdays, Christmas dinners and First Communions.

"I thought giving my five children comfort and an education was important, and I think I was able to do that," Polet said. "Now that I am a **citizen**, I will see if there is a way to sponsor all of them."

Graphic

DAVID HANDSCHUH DAILY NEWS ' . . . I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND . . . ' Carlos (l.) and Emma Polet and Niaz Khan (r.) take citizenship oath yesterday at Manhattan Federal Court ceremony. DAVID HANDSCHUH DAILY NEWS Theresa Gordon of Jamaica overcame many obstacles to become **American citizen**.

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