

For a New U.S. Citizen, Long-Awaited Relief; Disabled Afghan Refugee Fought for Years to Be Exempted From Civics Test - Correction Appended

The Washington Post

June 25, 2005 Saturday, Final Edition

 **Correction Appended**

Copyright 2005 The Washington Post

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: Metro; B03

Length: 683 words

Byline: Sandhya Somashekhar, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

With a simple nod of his head, followed by a wide grin that lasted all morning, Salam Reangber became a **U.S. citizen** yesterday.

It was the culmination of seven years of persistence on the part of Reangber, 40, a deaf, illiterate **Afghan refugee** who lives in Alexandria and had been told by immigration officials years ago that being deaf didn't excuse him from a written English **civics test** requirement to be naturalized.

With the help of his younger sister, Najia Hayat, and a social worker from the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Reangber was finally **exempted** from the **test** and took his citizenship oath at the Fairfax office of Citizenship and Immigration Services yesterday.

"He's really happy," said Hayat, 37, translating the few Dari words her brother can speak and the perma-smile on his face. "We are all very happy and relieved."

Most of Reangber's family -- including his mother, four brothers and one of his two sisters -- immigrated to the United States in the mid-1980s, seeking refuge from the Soviet invasion that was devastating Afghanistan. They live in several locations around Northern Virginia. Reangber is about to move with his mother and a brother to a **new** house in Springfield.

Immediately after immigrating, Reangber and one of his brothers, Satar, who also is deaf, got jobs as tailors, the trade they learned in Afghanistan instead of going to school to learn how to read and write. Today, Salam Reangber still works in the business as a steamer at Nordstrom.

The two brothers first applied for citizenship in 1998. But what should have been routine became a nightmare, said Lisa Burdick, the social worker handling their cases. Immigration officials lost Satar's papers, then denied Salam because deafness was not considered a disability that warranted waiving the **testing** requirement.

For a New U.S. Citizen, Long-Awaited Relief; Disabled Afghan Refugee Fought for Years to Be Exempted
From Civics Test - Correction Appended

But what immigration officials didn't recognize was that the brothers were illiterate in both English and Dari, and that they had no formal training in sign language, Burdick said. Their communication was comprised of crude hand gestures and some spoken Dari.

"Over and over again, we've explained to them, 'Look, he's never been able to read or write or learned any formal system of communication,' " said Burdick, who took on the Reangber brothers' cases almost three years ago.

Since then, the brothers also have been diagnosed with mental retardation, a diagnosis that led to their exemption from the civics test, Burdick said.

The family reapplied for citizenship for Satar and appealed Salam's denial. Last year, six years after filing the original paperwork, Satar finally got citizenship. Salam, however, could only look on and wait his turn.

"It was hard for him to watch," Hayat said. "He was happy for Satar, but he was unhappy for himself."

Yesterday, dressed in a suit and tie and wearing a U.S. flag lapel pin, Salam joined his brother as a new American.

It's bittersweet for Burdick, who said the seven years of waiting were an injustice.

"It should not have taken so long," she said. "I really feel bad about that."

In recent years, it has gotten more difficult to get disability waivers, Burdick said, adding that her agency recently reported that it files about 15 waiver requests annually. In the past two years, only two have been approved, she said.

Officials from CIS weren't able to provide information yesterday about how often disability waivers are granted.

Chris Bentley, a spokesman for CIS, confirmed that Satar's file was lost years ago. He also explained that delays such as the ones experienced by the Reangber brothers often occur because FBI background checks can take a long time to complete.

"Once it passes out of our hands and goes to [the FBI], we can't proceed until it gets back," he said. "We can't push it, we can't expedite it, we can't touch it."

For the Reangber brothers, citizenship is bringing pride and security -- and for Satar, a wife. He was engaged to a woman in Afghanistan in 1997, but he was unable to bring her to the United States until he became a citizen. He expects her to join him this summer.

Correction

A June 25 Metro article about a deaf Afghan refugee becoming a U.S. citizen misidentified a social worker for Catholic Legal Immigration Network. She is Laura Burdick, not Lisa Burdick.

Correction-Date: June 28, 2005

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

For a New U.S. Citizen, Long-Awaited Relief; Disabled Afghan Refugee Fought for Years to Be Exempted
From Civics Test - Correction Appended

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); CITIZENSHIP (91%); DEAFNESS (89%); NATURALIZATION (78%); LITERACY & ILLITERACY (77%); **DISABLED** PERSONS (77%); **REFUGEES** (72%); MENTAL RETARDATION (70%)

Industry: TRANSLATORS & INTERPRETERS (75%)

Geographic: VIRGINIA, USA (78%); AFGHANISTAN (90%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: June 25, 2005

End of Document