

New Bay Area immigrants moving beyond 'melting pot' vs. 'salad bowl' debate

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Body

When she founded the International Institute more than a century ago at a time of increasing anxiety over immigration, social reformer Edith Terry Bremer proposed a novel concept: To be American, you didn't have to forsake everything you left behind.

Bremer has fallen into obscurity, but her philosophy still guides immigrants such as Haile Negussie, who enjoys a comforting support network in the Bay Area's strong Ethiopian community even as he tries to "learn different things" and "meet different people."

His story is common in the Bay Area, where nearly 1 out of every 3 people was born in another country, and where many immigrants have successfully integrated themselves into the region's civic and economic fabric even as they sustain a polyglot web of cultures and languages.

Like generations of immigrants before him, Negussie was still grappling with his new American identity when he took his oath of citizenship last week at a Redwood City ceremony hosted by the International Institute of the Bay Area, one of dozens of organizations descended from Bremer's 1910 community center in Manhattan.

"It means a lot to me, the whole freedom and all that, but I'm still trying to understand what it means," said Negussie, an Ethiopian immigrant and biomedical engineer. "You're giving up your country. I'm still digesting it."

Bremer believed that immigrants did not have to submit to a uniform American identity; they could transition into U.S. society, become citizens and learn English while preserving the values, heritage and languages they brought with them. And they could use some help, she said, preferably from fellow immigrants who could ease them into a new culture and economy.

Immigrants now comprise about 27 percent of California's population and more than 30 percent in the Bay Area's biggest counties, a proportion similar to early 20th century America when Bremer's organization began expanding around the country. In San Francisco and Santa Clara counties, 37 percent of residents are immigrants.

Pundits continue to debate her multicultural vision and the competing idea of melting-pot assimilation, but for most immigrants, the process is more complicated: a personal journey, not an ideological stance.

Negussie, a 32-year-old who designs HIV test kits for a San Francisco firm, has come a long way since he came to the United States a decade ago. On his first trip to McDonald's, he nervously studied the menu and prepared his English words to order.

Then, a cashier asked, "Do you want it here or to go?"

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He stared blankly, not understanding the question. "I don't know," was all he could say.

Thankfully, said Negussie, the fast-food servers and most Americans he's known over the years have supported his adjustment. He improved his English with classes and now speaks fluently and has a diverse group of friends, but it also helps, he said, that the Bay Area has such a tightly knit Ethiopian community. He was among thousands at an Ethiopian New Year celebration on Sept. 15 in North Oakland.

Also straddling two cultures are Peruvian immigrants Jessica Tara and her mother, Luz Castillo, who became citizens at the same ceremony as Negussie.

As a stay-at-home mom of two young children, Belmont resident Tara meets "warm and friendly" non-Peruvians at school and local events, but finds it hard to get to know them.

"We just say hi, and bye, and talk a little bit," Tara said. "I can't say I have a lot of American friends. I just have a lot of Latin friends from different countries who speak Spanish, just like me."

Tara said she is proud to be an American citizen now and excited to vote for the first time, while she also values the rich culture and family values of her Peruvian upbringing. "You can still live in your culture here," Tara said. "We're trying to educate our kids in the same way we were educated. They love Peruvian music, they love Peruvian food. We're trying to go to Peru once a year."

In an increasingly connected world, few immigrant-service organizations talk of "assimilation" as a goal. They instead emphasize how well immigrants integrate into the economic, social and civic fabric of American life.

By those measures, the Bay Area performs remarkably well, especially in Silicon Valley and the East Bay, according to an "Immigrant Integration Scorecard" released earlier this month by the University of Southern California.

Compared with other parts of California, the report found that most immigrants in the South Bay and East Bay are doing relatively well economically and have seen improvements in their lifetimes and have high rates of citizenship. Part of the reason, the report said, was the warm welcome they get from local organizations and agencies, such as those that offer English-language classes.

"The more you feel part of a community, the more likely you're going to want to fully participate," said Ellen Dumesnil, director of the International Institute of the Bay Area.

"And part of feeling like part of a community is being welcomed by the people already there."

Graphic

New U.S. Citizens recite the oath of allegiance during a swearing-in ceremony held in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

New U.S. Citizens Luz Castillo and daughter Jessica Tara, from left, both of Belmont and originally from Peru, embrace following a swearing-in ceremony held in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath of allegiance to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

New U.S. Citizen Maria Garcia, of Redwood City and originally from Mexico, attends a swearing-in ceremony held in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath of allegiance to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

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Robert Looney the San Francisco district director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers the oath of allegiance at a swearing-in ceremony for new U.S. Citizens in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. 20 new citizens were sworn-in at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

New U.S. Citizens Olga Gallegos and Maria Garcia, from left, both of Redwood City and originally from Mexico, await the start of a swearing-in ceremony held in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath of allegiance to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

Redwood City Mayor Alicia Aguirre gives the keynote address at a swearing-in ceremony for new U.S. Citizens in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath of allegiance to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

A video message from President Barack Obama is played during a swearing-in ceremony for new U.S. Citizens in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administered the oath of allegiance to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

The Song Birds from the Redwood City Veterans Memorial senior center perform the national anthem at a swearing-in ceremony for new U.S. Citizens in Redwood City, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services gave the oath of citizenship to 20 new citizens at the Fair Oaks Community Center. (Anda Chu/Staff)

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