

## **New citizens leave past behind: 300 recite pledge 1st time as Americans**

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**News Staff Reporters**

Relishing new experiences isn't exactly what you would expect at age 87, but Neel Bhavnani of Ann Arbor hung on every word Monday as she recited the Pledge of Allegiance for the first time as an American citizen during a ceremony in Howell.

Bhavnani, a native of India, was the oldest woman among 300 new Americans to take the oath of citizenship at a ceremony administered by U.S. Magistrate Judge Steven D. Pepe in Howell Monday.

The immigrants from 52 countries share common stories of hardship and the need for fresh starts in a land of opportunity, but for Bhavnani and her family, Monday's ceremony was the culmination of what has amounted to a rebirth of sorts.

"The past is the past, and I want to live in the present," she said when asked why she would seek citizenship after holding a green card for 15 years. "I admire that I can do things on my own here and don't have to wait for others. I want to be an American because it's a good thing."

Bhavnani, a widow and mother of three, first came to America to live with her son, Suresh, who worked as a computer programmer in Alabama. The two moved to Ann Arbor in 2000 when he joined the faculty in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Both began the naturalization process earlier this year due to concerns over changing immigration policy.

The decision to become citizens came after a 2004 visit to their homeland, which has become a center of global commerce with increased overcrowding and pollution. The impetus for a lasting change in citizenship stemmed from her own personal evolution from a conservative, old-world mindset to one that embraces modern society, Suresh Bhavnani said.

"When she came here, it was with the impression that she was reaching the end of her life," he said. "But when she arrived, I saw a completely different person. She became more and more independent and it was like a second life for her."

"The more she tasted that freedom the more impossible it was for her to go back, and naturalization became the natural thing to do."

Suresh Bhavnani, whose citizenship is still pending, helped tutor his mother while polishing his own knowledge of civics and history. They were both proud to note Monday that she missed only one question, that one concerning the number of U.S. Supreme Court justices, in the 100-question citizenship exam.

"This is a joyous occasion," announced Carol Jennifer, district director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. "Give a hand to all of those family members who held your hands and asked you those 100 questions over and over again."

The new citizens had their first opportunity to recite the Pledge of Allegiance as Americans following the ceremony, which was held at the Howell High School Freshman Campus.

For Vera Pecaj, who was born and raised in France by Albanian parents, it was a memorable day.

"My son was born in America four years ago, and he is a U.S. citizen," said Pecaj. "I wanted to be a U.S. citizen as well. I have lived here for six years, and what I like best about the United States is that it is easier to make enough money to buy a home and a car faster than you can in other places. And you have all the conveniences."

Pecaj, 31, lives in Brighton with her son and husband, who is of Albanian origin and became a U.S. citizen more than 20 years ago. Pecaj first came to Michigan to visit an uncle who lives here. She studied English and Italian in college in France and already was fluent in French and Albanian. She worked at the American Embassy in Paris.

After moving to Brighton, she taught English as a second language to Albanian students in Hartland and now works at Lingua Technics in Ann Arbor as a foreign language instructor. In addition, she works at Brighton's Miller preschool as an assistant teacher.

"I also wanted to get my citizenship because I would like to work for the FBI as a French specialist," says Pecaj. "I like the life here. Brighton is a nice place to live with a good quality of life."

U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Brighton, addressed the new Americans and talked about what one of the people taking the oath had said to him.

"He told me, 'The president of the U.S. is called mister, and after today, I'll be called mister, too,'" said Rogers. "Our country is great because of the people who are here. We all believe in liberty, democracy and equality. You can talk about your ethnic pride and the countries that gave you birth. America is the country that will give you life."

Immediately following the ceremony, the new American citizens had the opportunity to register to vote, and apply for U.S. passports and Social Security numbers for the first time.

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