

Plainfield plays host to ceremony granting citizenship to three dozen

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Pollinna Williams, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, sits with her son Tristin, 4, as she participates in a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization ceremony on Wednesday at Plainfield Public Library.

Pollinna Williams, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, sits with her son Tristin, 4, as she participates in a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization ceremony on Wednesday at Plainfield Public Library. / Kathy Johnson/Staff Photographer

PLAINFIELD — Priya Raghavan planned to pick up her parents at the airport and go sightseeing with them in and around New York City.

Pollinna Williams was getting ready to travel to the Jersey Shore for a long weekend of fun with her 4-year-old son, Tristin.

Andres Forero simply expected to fire up the grill and spend time with a few relatives at home.

For many Central Jersey residents, the Fourth of July will be marked by a much-welcomed day off, fun in the sun, and maybe a fireworks display in the evening. But for Raghavan, Williams and Forero — natives of India, Trinidad and Tobago, and Colombia, respectively — it'll also mark their first full day as American citizens. They were joined by nearly three dozen other new citizens at a naturalization ceremony conducted Wednesday morning by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials at the Plainfield Public Library.

"It's a special day," Forero said.

It seemed fitting that the local residents taking a sworn oath of allegiance and receiving their citizenship papers Wednesday came from a diverse range of backgrounds — nearly 20 countries of origin, including Belize, China, Colombia, Ecuador, Greece, India, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Poland, Russia, and others. Yet many of those seated in the first three rows at the library's Anne Louise Davis Room shared common sentiments regarding the reasons they came to America and why they decided to stay.

"I live in this country. I should be able to participate in voting," Raghavan explained, her 7-year-old daughter, Shreya, smiling in the seat next to her.

Raghavan, a software programmer, emigrated here in 1998 and traveled across the country for work, living in Georgia, Texas and other states before settling in Fanwood.

"I like New Jersey best," she said. "You see four seasons in New Jersey."

Williams, a Plainfield resident who works as a respiratory therapist in Monmouth County, said her mother moved to the U.S. seeking a better life in 1989.

A decade later, she followed.

“It was touching,” Williams said, of hearing her name called Wednesday. “I’m finally an American citizen.”

That means she can vote and serve on a jury — one thing many native-born Americans dread, but not Williams.

“It’s a new experience,” she said. “I’m excited about it.”

Forero also arrived here about a decade ago. He and others said the process through which a certificate of permanent residence (known colloquially as a “green card”) can be tough, but earning citizenship was easier.

'Easy and fast'

“It only took three months,” said the 37-year-old, a worker at a Branchburg munitions company. “Everything was easy. Easy and fast.”

It’s not always easy for everyone, though. John Thompson, New Jersey district director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, noted that most applicants need to prove their familiarity with the English language, illustrate they are of sound character and pass a history and civics test — a test, Thompson noted, that one-third of native-born Americans failed in a recent poll.

“I’m confident,” Thompson told the audience Wednesday, “that you will carry on the same spirit as the others who came before you.”

Keynote speaker Adrian Mapp, a two-term city councilman who recently won the Democratic mayoral primary, echoed those sentiments.

“This is a nation of immigrants,” said Mapp, a native of Barbados. “And this is a tradition that goes way back. It didn’t start with you, and it won’t end with you.”

Wednesday’s ceremony was by no means the only one of its kind; more than 100 others were scheduled nationwide from July 1 through July 5, with nearly 8,000 residents becoming citizens. Last year, the agency naturalized more than 675,000 applicants in all.

Some applicants were moved to tears Wednesday. Others were jubilant, holding up their certificates and grinning for photos. Still others just seemed relieved and deeply reflective.

“I’m more at peace,” said Tuan Ngo, a 57-year-old native of Vietnam.

The machine operator, a resident of the Avenel section of Woodbridge, recalled being forced to move from province to province as a child growing up in South Vietnam, his family reacting to terrifying developments in the Vietnam War.

Starting this week for the first time. USCIS is encouraging new citizens and their friends and family members to share their experiences and photos through social media using the hashtag #July4natz on Twitter. Follow Mark Spivey at @mark_spivey to view photos of some of the local residents who became

citizens Wednesday.