

Passage into citizenship

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Through hardship, with diligence, a native of Colombia embraces America

PORTLAND - Gustavo Jimenez waited in a nondescript room deep inside the imposing stone and marble Federal Building for his dream to come true. A quiet man with gray-green eyes and a rare yet genuine smile, he hadn't slept the night before. First because of the last-minute studying and then because of the anxiety. Would he pass the test? Would the interview go well?

Like hundreds of thousands of others who each year petition the government to become citizens, Jimenez, a 50-year-old immigrant from Colombia, had jumped through all but the last two hoops. He came across the border illegally decades ago, but became a legal permanent resident during the Reagan-era amnesty of the 1980s. A short history-civics test and an interview were the final steps for him on Thursday.

A restaurant worker in Springfield who speaks little English, Jimenez has followed the nation's wrangling over what to do with its estimated 12 million illegal immigrants.

Arrest them all and send them packing? Throw up a big fence at the border? Crack down on employers? Give illegals amnesty? Offer a limited number of temporary work visas? Screen immigrants for technical skills?

As he waited to take the test in Portland, sitting next to his good friend and teacher Carlos Santana, Jimenez brushed aside the arguments.

The real problem is wages, he said. In many Central and South American countries, the lowest-paid workers can't survive on their income, he said. You simply can't pay for rent, utilities, food and clothes on the \$5 a day that menial labor jobs pay. Forget being able to support a family. Forget being able to give your kids a better life than you had, he said. The rewards of crossing the border far outweigh the risks.

If people got paid a living wage, they wouldn't cross, so governments need to work together to solve that problem, he said.

Jimenez grew up in Cali, the third-largest city in Colombia, the northwestern-most country in South America. His family was poor, his father a violent drunk who beat his mother and spent what little money they had on alcohol, he said.

Jimenez didn't go to school. He worked, carrying bread from a baker to sell in nearby neighborhoods. He used the money he made to buy food, waiting to purchase fruits and vegetables at outdoor markets during the heat of the afternoon when most shoppers were gone and vendors marked down the prices.

He didn't learn to read and write until he was an adult, taught by his wife and daughter. When he got the chance, he came to the United States, following a brother who found work in New York City. His brother eventually returned to Colombia, but Jimenez stayed, working mostly in restaurants and sending money home to his family - his mother, his wife and his two daughters. They stayed in Colombia. He only saw them on rare visits home every two or three years.

In the United States, he didn't have time for education. He worked as many hours as he could, living modestly, sharing apartments with others so he could send money home.

Ten years ago, he moved from New York City to Springfield, coming here to be near a sister who had married an American. He got work at the Foster Farms chicken processing plant in Creswell. It was good work, he said, with health insurance, although he suffered from repetitive stress injuries in his arms and hands.

Two years ago, he took a second job at a Springfield restaurant, which helped when the chicken processing plant began cutting back hours.

Then last October, the plant closed, and Jimenez got laid off.

A calm, thoughtful man who sees God's hand in the events of his life, Jimenez decided to go to school. He enrolled in Spanish literacy classes at Downtown Languages, a nonprofit agency offering low-cost courses for immigrants and those who want to learn Spanish. And he enrolled in the citizenship class being taught by Santana, a Mexican

immigrant who obtained his citizenship two years ago and graduated this year from the University of Oregon.

Jimenez was respected among the students and staff as a diligent student who rarely missed class, Santana said.

The two became friends, and Santana accompanied Jimenez to Portland, translating during the test and interview. While understanding English is a requirement for citizenship, the government makes an exception for those 50 and older.

Jimenez's life hasn't been easy. It's not a life most people imagine when they talk about "the American dream." But coming to the United States has fulfilled his dream of taking care of his family, of sending his oldest daughter to college and being able to send the younger one, too.

"Valle la pena," he said. "It's worth the suffering."

With citizenship, he would be able to bring his family to the United States. Or he could go back to Colombia without fear of losing his legal status.

In the Federal Building waiting room, his name was called. He and Santana disappeared down the long hallway with its ornate ceiling into an office with an immigration official. Then 20 minutes later he emerged, smiling in the muted light, holding a piece of paper that confirmed the good news.

He'd passed the test and the interview. They told him to come back in a couple of hours for the ceremony.

"Gracias a Dios," he said. "Thanks to God."

And you, too, Santana reminded him. You studied hard, you aced all the questions when you practiced.

After a visit to Powell's Books where Jimenez bought an English- Spanish dictionary, after lunch at a restaurant in Chinatown and a walk in the park, his decades-long wait was over.

Back in the Federal Building, this time in an unassuming meeting room with a modest lectern up front and an American flag on a stand, Jimenez sat with 17 strangers. They came from Brazil and Somalia, from Canada and Korea, from Mexico, Sudan, Poland, India, Russia and Ukraine.

They watched a slide show: black and white images of worried, tired, hopeful faces crowding in some bygone era through the official portals of the United States of America.

They saw a welcoming video from President Bush.

They listened to a brief speech by Barbara Kveton, acting field office director for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

And then they spoke an oath, promising to forsake other nations, promising to serve and defend this one. They received certificates and tiny flags. They were congratulated and applauded by the small audience of family and friends.

On the drive back from Portland, Jimenez got worried. He had surrendered his permanent resident card for the certificate, a piece of paper officials advised he keep in a safety deposit box.

What would he do if immigration agents came to his workplace, he asked Santana.

"Tell them you're a citizen," Santana said in Spanish. "Say it in English: I am a United States citizen."

Jimenez nodded and tried the words on for size: "I am a United States citizen. I am a United States citizen. I am a United States citizen."

NATURALIZATION BY THE NUMBERS

1,040,991 immigrants became U.S. citizens in 1996

604,280 immigrants became U.S. citizens in 2005

254,607 Mexicans became U.S. citizens in 1996

77,089 Mexicans became U.S. citizens in 2005

27,367 Colombians became U.S. citizens in 1996

11,396 Colombians became U.S. citizens in 2005

- Source: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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