

For immigrant, a long and stressful journey to citizenship

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The night before the test, Ivone Moreno could hardly sleep.

She lay in bed tossing and turning, as questions she might be asked raced through her head. Three times she woke up telling herself not to worry. She was prepared.

At 5:30 a.m., Moreno got up. It was April 16. For nearly 20 years, she had dreamed of this day.

Passing a citizenship test would be the last step in a journey that began in 1993, when Moreno illegally entered the U.S. from Mexico as a teenager, jumping over a fence in Agua Prieta, Sonora, and landing on the other side in Douglas.

She became a legal permanent resident in 2002. But the citizenship test had long intimidated her. Her English was not that good. Having grown up in Mexico, she also didn't have a good grasp of American history or government. She put off applying for years.

There are millions of other legal immigrants in the U.S. like her, who are eligible to become citizens but for one reason or another haven't. For many, the process remains a daunting barrier in a country that is still not quite their own.

For those who struggle to make a living, or struggle to learn English, the application fees and paperwork can be dizzying.

Then there is the test. The process is brief but is rarely seen by people born here. The questions would stump even many natural-born citizens who studied American history and social studies in high school.

In December, Moreno decided the time was right. She filled out the paperwork and enrolled in a citizenship class. She felt confident she was ready.

Inside her small apartment on 48th Street on the east side of Phoenix, Moreno put on a brand-new gray suit. She had bought the outfit at a Macy's in Scottsdale the week before, just for this occasion. Her four young children were still asleep when Moreno left the apartment. Her husband, Oscar, was at the door to wish her good luck.

She drove to a glass office building on 16th Street and Buckeye Road south of downtown.

The single-story building used to be a Smitty's grocery store. Last year, it was renovated into the Phoenix offices of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The old Smitty's sign above the entrance is gone. Instead, a 20-foot-high cutout of the Statue of Liberty hangs near the doorway.

Moreno arrived 45 minutes early for her 7:15 a.m. appointment. The parking lot was nearly empty. For a moment Moreno sat in her car and took a deep breath.

Although she has lived in the U.S. for more than half her life, she still has trouble viewing herself as an American.

She reached inside her purse and pulled out her Bible, the red cover worn bare in spots. She leafed through the pages until she found the verse she was looking for: Psalms 24:1. She traced the words written in Spanish with her fingertip: “The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord.”

Moreno put the Bible back in her bag and took out her appointment notice. After passing through a metal detector and checking in at one of the counters, she took a seat in the waiting room.

Moreno sat there for almost half an hour, one leg crossed over the other, her foot shaking with nerves.

Then she heard a door open behind her. A man’s voice called out, “Ivone Moreno.”

Moreno widened her eyes. “Oh my God,” she whispered under her breath.

David Pierce, the immigration officer giving Moreno her citizenship test, escorted her to a small office.

He asked Moreno to raise her right hand, and then swore her in.

The test was about to begin.

The test would be in two parts. The first would gauge her English proficiency. Next she would be given 10 questions about the United States. She would need to answer six correctly.

Moreno sat in the chair with her back straight, her hands folded tightly in her lap. Pierce showed Moreno a piece of paper and asked her to read the sentence.

She read it slowly, pronouncing each word with a Spanish accent, her voice barely above a whisper: When. Is. Columbus Day.

Next Pierce handed Moreno a separate piece of paper and a pen. Write this sentence, he told her: “Columbus Day is in October.”

Moreno couldn’t remember. Was Columbus spelled with an “o” or a “u”? She decided to write the word with an o, like this: Colombus Day is in October.

Moreno, 37, has lived in the U.S. for nearly 20 years, but still struggles with English.

She is originally from Namiquipa, a mining town in Chihuahua. Before coming to the U.S., she worked as a cashier at a seafood restaurant. She earned 150 pesos a week, less than \$50. Moreno saw no future in Mexico. When she turned 18, she decided to sneak into the United States.

She and an aunt rode a bus from Chihuahua to Agua Prieta, across the border from Douglas. She paid a smuggler \$200 to help her get across.

The chain-link fence she jumped only came up to her chest, nothing like the giant fortifications the government has erected since then.

Moreno said she and her aunt crossed near the Douglas port of entry in plain sight of U.S. border officers. She is pretty sure they saw her and others jumping the fence but no one tried to stop them.

In Douglas, Moreno cleaned houses for a month to earn money before heading to Phoenix, where she knew relatives.

In Phoenix, Moreno worked as a nanny taking care of three children for an American couple who worked during the day.

Moreno met her husband while he was a DJ at a Spanish Christian radio station. She used to call him at night to request songs. After a while he told her they should meet.

He showed up the next Saturday with flowers while she was babysitting.

Oscar also was an illegal immigrant. He crossed the border two years before Ivone.

They married in June 1997.

The same year, with help from the owner of the Christian radio station, Oscar and Ivone applied for employment-based green cards as a couple through a program that allowed illegal immigrants to legalize their status. The process took more than three years. Each had to pay a \$1,000 fine for entering the country illegally. In all, Oscar said they spent \$10,000 on attorney costs, application fees and fines.

The program no longer exists. Today, immigrants in a similar situation have almost no chance to become legal residents.

In 2002, the couple got their permanent-residency green cards. They waited five years to become eligible to apply for citizenship.

Oscar applied right away. He wanted to become a citizen in time to vote for president in 2008. He passed the test and became a U.S. citizen in May 2008. That November he voted for John McCain.

But Ivone didn't think she was ready.

After finishing the reading and writing portion of the test, Pierce moved on to the civics questions.

The first question was open-ended. What does the president's Cabinet do? Pierce asked.

Moreno thought for a moment.

"Advise the president?" she said, phrasing her answer like a question.

Pierce scribbled some notes on a paper. He did not let on whether Moreno was right or wrong.

Next question: How many justices are on the Supreme Court?

Moreno answered right away. "Nine."

As the nation's immigrant population has grown, so too has the number of legal permanent residents eligible to become citizens. As of January 2011, there were 8.5 million, up from 7.9 million in 2009, according to a July 2012 Department of Homeland Security report. About 170,000 of them lived in Arizona.

Overall, about one-third of all eligible immigrants are from Mexico.

There are many reasons why eligible immigrants don't naturalize, says Alejandro Mayorkas, director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Some are unaware of the benefits of becoming a citizen, he says — the most important being the right to vote.

Others are intimidated by the process. Coming up with the \$680 application fee also can be a challenge.

But the growing population of non-citizens is a big concern, Mayorkas said. They are living in a sort of "second-class status" that is "antithetical to our proud traditions" as a nation, he said.

Because they can't vote, Mayorkas added, "they don't have a voice in defining the future of this country."

Over the last decade, the government has placed more emphasis on helping them become citizens.

Under former President George W. Bush, the government created a new citizenship test. The test added open-ended questions designed to emphasize understanding, not just memorizing facts and dates.

To pass, immigrants must know the principles of American democracy, how the government works, the rights and responsibilities of citizens as well as key historical events, geography and national holidays.

Under President Barack Obama, the government has continued to try to integrate immigrants.

Since 2009, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has given \$23.2 million in grants to community organizations to offer citizenship classes to immigrants.

The non-profit International Rescue Committee in Phoenix received a \$200,000 grant last year and has held several citizenship classes. Hundreds of immigrants have taken the classes. One of them was Moreno.

Next question. What did the Declaration of Independence do?

“It announced our freedom from Great Britain,” Moreno answered.

Next question. We elect a U.S. senator for how many years?

“Every six years,” Moreno said.

Moreno seemed to be gaining confidence.

By nature Moreno is a timid person, the opposite of her husband. When the two are together, she usually lets Oscar do the talking.

Her lack of confidence kept her from applying for citizenship. Twice she filled out the application but then didn't mail it in. Mostly she was worried about her English.

“It's not very good,” Moreno said.

Her husband, who works in the produce section at a Sprouts grocery store in Phoenix and talks to customers and co-workers all day, speaks English fluently.

But as a stay-at-home mom, Moreno has little opportunity to practice. When given the choice to speak English or Spanish, she will pick Spanish.

The cost of applying was another factor. In 2007, the government raised the citizenship application fee from \$400 to \$680. Coming up with the cash would not be easy. The family lives on the money her husband makes at the store. They also rely on some public benefits to make ends meet.

In December 2011, however, Moreno saw a segment on Spanish television news about a government program that allowed low-income immigrants to apply for citizenship for free. She made an appointment with the non-profit community group Chicanos por la Causa to learn more.

By then she already had taken some classes to improve her English. Her green card was up for renewal in 2012, and she thought it would be great if she could vote in the November 2012 presidential election. On Dec. 26, Moreno drove to the post office and mailed the applications for citizenship and a fee waiver.

At Chicanos por la Causa, Moreno learned about the citizenship class at the International Rescue Committee.

She arrived for her first class at 8 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 14.

There were 28 students. Moreno sat at a table next to a man from Liberia, West Africa. Immigrants from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Ethiopia sat at other tables along with immigrants from Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Uzbekistan and Russia.

They were all adults. But to make sure she was understood, instructor Joanie Calder, a former elementary-school teacher, spoke to them slowly and clearly, as if they were children.

Calder started with the basics. There are 100 possible questions. They are going to ask you 10. Is that a lot? No. Out of 10 you have to get six right. Now here is the problem. What 10 are they going to ask you? We don't know.

The class lasted eight weeks, four hours a day. Moreno attended all but one.

Each week Calder reviewed a new set of questions and had the students practice reading and writing vocabulary words. On the last day, Calder called Moreno up for a practice run in front of the class.

Calder asked Moreno seven questions. Moreno answered all of them correctly except one. She could not remember the year the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

It was in 1776, Calder told her.

Moreno tried to study on her own. At home, she raises four children. The oldest, Isaac, is 14, followed by Jazmine, 9; Daisey, 2, and Isaias, who turns 2 in November.

One afternoon she had Jazmine quiz her with a set of citizenship flashcards. But every few minutes they were interrupted by the two toddlers. After about half an hour, Moreno gave up.

Next question: If both the president and the vice president can't serve who takes over?

The speaker of the House, Moreno answered.

She felt pretty sure she was doing well. But she didn't know whether she was getting each question right or wrong.

Name one branch or part of the government, Pierce asked.

Navigating the federal bureaucracy to become a citizen is almost like a test in itself.

The letters Moreno received in the mail from the government often were filled with bureaucratic jargon. That made them extra hard for Moreno to understand.

The citizenship application, for example, is called an N-400.

Moreno received a letter dated Jan. 10, 2012, informing her that her "N-400 application for naturalization" had been received and "the request to waive the fee has been approved."

Moreno wasn't sure what the letter meant. Not until she noticed a line that said "Total Balance Due: \$0.0" did she realize that she didn't owe anything.

Most Americans have no experience with the immigration system because they have never been through it. Immigrants like Moreno often rely on other immigrants to help navigate the red tape.

Moreno received a second letter dated Jan. 13, 2012, telling her that "to process your application USCIS must capture your biometrics and have your fingerprints cleared by the FBI."

Moreno's husband was at work the day the letter arrived. So she showed it to her apartment manager, an immigrant who went through the citizenship process several years ago. He explained it: She needed to be photographed and fingerprinted.

Moreno's biometrics appointment was on Feb. 8 at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services offices on 16th Street. The government conducts a background check to make sure immigrants applying for citizenship don't have a criminal record.

Moreno thought she would be in and out in less than half an hour. But the appointment turned into another bureaucratic hurdle.

Daniel Collazo, a biometrics technician, snapped Moreno's photo with a digital camera. But he couldn't get a machine to scan a good set of her fingerprints. Finally he told Moreno he would have to take her fingerprints the old-fashioned way, with ink and paper.

Collazo told Moreno he would send the fingerprints to the FBI.

Moreno thought she was done.

But about a week later, she received another letter from the government with more instructions.

Since her fingerprints were still unreadable, she had to go to the Phoenix Police Department's headquarters to get a document certifying she didn't have a criminal record or outstanding warrants.

That meant arranging another day for her husband to be home from work to watch the kids.

Moreno waited more than a month to find out she passed the background checks. The same letter told her to show up on April 16 for her citizenship test.

Pierce waited for Moreno to name a branch or part of the government.

"The Senate," she finally said.

Pierce put the papers he was holding down on the desk and smiled. "That is six questions," he said. "You have passed all of them. Congratulations. You have passed your test."

Moreno threw her hands up in the air and yelled. In the parking lot, Moreno called her husband on her cellphone. The call went to his voice mail. "Hello. Oscar," Moreno said, nearly screaming into the phone. "I passed my test."

Passing the citizenship test was the hard part. But Moreno still had to take an oath at a naturalization ceremony to officially become a citizen. The ceremony took place on June 1 at the Sandra Day O'Connor Federal Courthouse in Phoenix.

Moreno barely arrived on time.

That morning, she had gone to a beauty shop in Scottsdale with Jazmine to have their hair and nails done. The appointment took longer than she expected.

Wearing a new dark-blue dress, her high heels clicked on the polished floor as she ran through the building's six-story atrium toward the courtroom.

Moreno was one of 99 candidates from 40 countries.

U.S. District Court Judge David Campbell, in a black robe, led the candidates in the citizenship oath.

Moreno stood next to a woman from Russia and a man from Bangladesh. They raised their right hands as they renounced “all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty” and promised to “defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

“It is my privilege to grant citizenship to each and every one of you,” Campbell said.

The courtroom erupted in applause. The new citizens yelled and waved miniature American flags over their heads.

Moreno had done it. She was now a U.S. citizen. She was one of 676,396 immigrants nationally who became U.S. citizens through August of this fiscal year; more than 13,000 of them were from Arizona.

Before leaving the courthouse, Moreno stopped at a table and filled out a voter-registration form. She checked the box to receive a mail-in ballot. She did not choose a political party. The ballot arrived Oct. 13.

On Monday afternoon, Moreno sat at her dining-room table and opened the ballot. She ripped the envelope open with her hands like it was a gift on Christmas. She removed the ballot from the envelope and unfolded it.

“I don’t know where to start,” she said, looking at the long list of candidates.

She studied the ballot for several minutes and read the directions to herself. Earlier this month, she had watched the first presidential debate on television with her husband. Afterward, she decided she would vote for Mitt Romney.

“I am hoping he can make the economy better again, like it was before,” Moreno said.

She found Romney’s name on the ballot. With a black pen, she connected the arrow next to his name, then went down through the list of other candidates, picking the ones she liked. After about 10 minutes she was done. She signed and dated the envelope and drove to a post office a few blocks from her home. She walked over to a mailbox and proudly dropped her ballot in.

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/20121023long-stressful-journey-citizenship.html>