

An immigrant judge's ode to naturalization ceremonies

COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of life, including our courts. Courts across the country have modified practices and courtrooms (read: Plexiglass) to protect public health while meeting our constitutional duties. But I am Plexiglassed-out and Zoomed-out, and I miss having people in my courtroom.

Of all my duties as a federal magistrate judge, I especially miss presiding over naturalization ceremonies of new U.S. citizens. As a naturalized citizen myself, I have always held these ceremonies in a special place. They are reminders of my own family's journey and the promise that this country offers to people around the world.

In the before-time, the Eastern District of Wisconsin, where I sit, conducted six naturalization ceremonies per month; each ceremony averaged 70 new citizens representing approximately 30 nationalities. In the time of COVID-19, however, with the exception of some small, socially distanced ceremonies at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office, naturalization ceremonies have been suspended in my courthouse. Other courts have also suspended their ceremonies. Some are conducting smaller, socially distanced ceremonies. Still others have innovated creative ways to keep these important ceremonies going. The Eastern District of Michigan, for example, has done drive-through naturalization ceremonies, while the Eastern District of Missouri has conducted ceremonies at a drive-in theater.

I appreciate the ingenuity of these innovations. But I look forward to our new normal, when naturalization ceremonies can return to our courthouse and to courthouses across the country.

Nothing quite compares to the joy and excitement that naturalization



ceremony days bring to our beautiful but monastic federal courthouse. I miss antsy children in their Sunday best, nervous parents sometimes adorned in beautiful traditional garb from their homelands, flags, tears of joy, picture-taking, and hugs. (It is true. We used to hug strangers.) Students regularly visited on naturalization ceremony days. I miss the awe on their faces as the roll call revealed the diversity of countries — from Albania to Zimbabwe. A stand-out element of those ceremonies was a rendition of the Preamble and Constitution songs from “School House Rock,” performed by raucous third graders who visited me each year.

I miss the privilege of witnessing and playing a small part in the participants' journey to citizenship. I miss the collective audible gasp from the new citizens when I reveal my own journey to citizenship, which began with my parents' arrival to this country from Haiti with nothing but their hopes and dreams of building a better life in the United States for themselves and their children. I share how my parents made the journey; first my father, and later my mother, each traveling alone, leaving behind eight children in Haiti. I was 10 months old when my father left and 17 months old when my mother left. I did not join them in the United States until I was 8 years old.

At this point in the ceremony, I always seem to make eye contact with the citizen who, like my parents, has made the journey alone and knows the pain and sacrifice of separating from children, parents, or a spouse.

I miss the knowing nods as I describe my own experience as a college student filling out the multitude of government forms, studying for the civics exam, nervously attending the interview with the immigration official, and finally, standing before a federal judge to take the oath. Too, I miss what I read in the new citizens' eyes as sparkles of hope for their own children as I recount my journey to the federal bench, a journey that has led me to administer their oath that day. I miss sharing how I look forward to reading the next chapter in our American story that they and their children will surely write. Will their daughter be a judge, a teacher, or perhaps a life-saving epidemiologist?

I miss the cheers when I tell them that I had the privilege of administering the oath of citizenship to my 92-year-old adoptive mother, who raised me in Haiti before I joined my parents in the States. But most of all, I miss the important ritual at the core of the naturalization ceremony — a remembrance of our immigrant past, present, and future and a celebration of our aspirations as a multicultural democracy.

I look forward to naturalization ceremonies returning to our courthouse. I will return to them with renewed appreciation for the special place that they occupy in my heart, our courts, and our country.

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