

Citizens share 'Coming to America' stories with ethnic harmony alliance

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By Amanda Greenman

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HOLLAND -- Blanca Mara had her share of trials -- 42 years worth -- before she became a U.S. citizen.

"When I first came here, I did not know any English," said Mara, who moved to Holland from Monterrey, Mexico, after marrying her husband in 1956.

She remembers the days when there were no Mexican grocery stores in Holland, and she had to shop in Grand Rapids or Chicago for familiar foods. Businesses rarely had bilingual staff. So, she relied on other Spanish-speaking individuals in the area for help.

After more than four decades of living in Holland and learning English, Mara became a U.S. citizen in 1995.

On Friday, she shared her story of "Coming to America" along with two others -- Steve Cheung and Ursula Boersma -- in a program by the Alliance for Cultural and Ethnic Harmony.

The hardest part of becoming an American, Mara said, was she worried about the difficulty of the questions on the mandatory citizenship test.

"There are so many questions. I thought they would ask too many, but it was not too bad," she recalls.

Mara does not want others to wait as long as she did to become naturalized. That is why she keeps a stack of immigration documents handy at her house and is willing to help others with the process of becoming an American citizen, including filling out the paperwork, taking trips to consulates and preparing for the citizenship test. To date, she has helped more than 200 others.

"They come to my house, and I try to help as much as I can," she said.

Cambodian connection

Cheung knows the value of being an American.

He grew up in Cambodia, and had planned to become a doctor. However, his dreams were destroyed in 1975, when extremist leader Pol Pot overthrew the government and forced Cambodians into virtual slavery, resulting in the deaths of 2 million people.

"I cannot find out why they hate people so much. Cambodians killed Cambodians," Cheung said. "We didn't have food."

In 1979, Cheung escaped from Cambodia's chaos into Thailand, leaving his family behind. He still does not know what happened to his father, brother or several other family members.

"I could not stand Cambodia," he said. "The government had killed all of the people."

In Thailand, Cheung found a U.S. embassy. He knew just enough English to communicate.

After they found him a sponsor in California, Cheung made his way to the United States. He met his wife in Holland, and they now have four children.

"I think the U.S. is a lot better than Cambodia," said Cheung, who has visited his home country since moving to America. "Cambodia has changed a lot, but it is still not comparable to the U.S. government."

Cheung said there is an obvious gap in the standard of living in Cambodia.

"The president of Cambodia is so rich, and then I saw somebody so poor they have no food to eat. Some people live in boats. They have no land," he said.

Peruvian origins

Boersma, originally from Lima, Peru, first came to Holland on an exchange trip.

In Holland, she met the man who would become her husband. They kept in touch for several years. After marrying in Peru, they moved to Holland.

"It was difficult to leave my family and friends," Boersma said. But "I decided to become a citizen because this feels like home; it was more of a feeling of belonging.

"I love my country, where I come from. I like everything I learned there. But what I do love here is the freedom, security, the safety, the many opportunities."

She said, "One of the things that impressed me most was how people respect each other.

"In Peru, it depends what your work position is. You'd be treated different. But here, everyone is equal."

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