

NEWS

Day of welcome for over 50 new US citizens at naturalization ceremony at Tower Hill garden



Veer Mudambi

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BOYLSTON - As a gateway city, Worcester embraces people from around the world among its residents. A key part of Worcester's cultural identity has always been its diverse immigrant communities.

On Wednesday, the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill helped celebrate members of these communities, hosting a naturalization ceremony as over 50 newly minted American citizens from 26 different countries were sworn in at the NEBG's lawn garden event space.

"Naturalized citizens make contributions everyday that strengthen and enrich our society and our democracy," said Magistrate Katherine Robertson, who presided over the ceremony. "Now you have the chance, opportunity and the right to participate fully in the civic and cultural life in America," she said, "with the most important new right you gain today being the right to vote."

For Sophie Dicks of Haverhill, that right was a major part of her decision. Political drama of the last several years, culminating in the 2020 presidential election, galvanized her to start the process that year. Having emigrated from England when she was 4, this was "definitely a long time coming, becoming a citizen. This is home for me," said Dicks, and "I wanted to be able to vote."

Immigrants who have been lawful residents of the United States for three to five years can apply for naturalized citizenship. "It's been a long road for them to get here," said Grace Elton, the CEO at NEBG. Events of the last couple of years made that road even longer. A common refrain from the newly sworn-in Americans was the extended wait due to COVID.

“We applied in May 2020, but everything came to a stop during the pandemic,” said Benjamin Brewer, who came to Worcester from Ghana with his wife, Janet. The couple had to wait almost a year for an interview date but now, more than two years later, they stood at Tower Hill as citizens. “The location is beautiful,” said Brewer, pausing to enjoy a cooling breeze, “everything here is natural in its beauty.”

For Cristina Pereira of Shrewsbury, the wait was worth it, she said. “I waited a long time for this, and when I was taking the oath, I had an elated feeling,” said Pereira, who came here from India in 2005.

This is the second time a naturalization ceremony has been held at the garden, said Elton, and the NEBG plans for it to be an annual event. “We weren’t sure how much we could add in because it is an official court proceeding,” she said, “but I was really pleased that we could have speakers and music while having this court held in our garden outdoors.”

Last year a Marine Corps band played the national anthem, but this year, Ryan Shannon of Juventas New Music Ensemble, a nonprofit that the garden has partnered with previously, provided musical accompaniment on his violin. “It’s really beautiful to see so many people starting a new life in America,” said Shannon, “and to be able to play music for them, it’s a huge honor.”