

American dream becomes reality for new citizens - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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American dream becomes reality for new citizens

About 100 people from all over the world pledge their allegiance to the United States

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HOLDING her naturalization certificate delicately with both hands, Dr. Sujata Bhatia couldn't hold back the tears Tuesday.

"I just feel overwhelmed," said Bhatia, who is originally from Chan-di-garh, India.

Bhatia was among nearly 100 people who received their naturalization certificates during a ceremony aboard the USS Missouri in conjunction with Constitution Day and

Citizenship Day, recognizing the 1787 signing of the Constitution.

Citizenship Day and Constitution Day have been celebrated simultaneously since 1952. More than 18,000 people will become citizens in naturalization ceremonies planned across the country through Monday.

Family and friends of Hawaii's newest citizens gathered under a large canopy on the fantail of the USS Missouri to support their loved ones as they were sworn in.

The decommissioned battleship, now a memorial and museum, is moored near the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. On Sept. 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay, Japan formally surrendered on the deck of the Missouri, ending World War II.

The American melting pot was represented on board Tuesday with new citizens originally from countries such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Benin, Germany, Kuwait, Russia, South Korea, Jamaica and Switzerland. Ten military personnel were also part of the large group.

U.S. District Judge J. Michael Seabright, who presided over the ceremony, congratulated the new citizens along with guests Rear Adm. Richard Williams Jr., commander of the Navy Region Hawaii, and Lt. Gov. Shan Tsu-tsui.

After the ceremony, Bha-tia, an orthodontist who has a private practice in Kihei, kissed the ground at the walkway entrance of the Missouri.

It was something she said she had dreamed of doing after becoming a citizen.

Afterward she purchased an American flag from the memorial gift shop, raising it over the battleship with the help of staffer Reggie Johnson.

Bhatia arrived in the U.S. in 1988 and attended Louisiana State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she studied to become an orthodontist.

She said she wanted to gain a sense of belonging in the U.S. and had long desired to become a citizen.

"I realized a wonderful dream here, and now I can finally say I belong to the country that gave me all my opportunities," she said.

As a naturalized citizen, Bhatia said she looks forward to elections, when she always felt like an outsider because she couldn't vote. "I finally can express my opinion and have my opinion count," she said.

Kaneohe Marine Cpl. Seung Lee, 22, originally of South Korea, said he was grateful to be a citizen in a country where dreams are possible.

"There is no impossible," Lee said.

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