

Commentary... Becoming a U.S. citizen

By **Liam Hughes**
Guest Columnist

Wednesday, June 7, 2017 was a milestone day in my life.

It was the day I officially became a U.S. citizen. Unofficially, I became a U.S. citizen at heart about 10 years ago when I decided that America was where my heart was, and where I wanted to spend the rest of my days. On that day 10 years ago I made a conscious effort to cast off many of my attachments to my homeland and embrace the culture of my new home.

However, on this past Wednesday, America officially made me one of its own.

Now, this day was not all smooth sailing. I was informed by mail that I needed to be in Portland at 8:30 a.m. to take the citizenship tests — including reading and writing English, and a civics test. So I got up at a time of day that I am not sure is best described as morning or night, and was on the road by 4:45 a.m.

I got to the office about 30 minutes early for my interview, still in my walking boot from a recent basketball injury. The office facility had a TSA-style security checkpoint with X-Ray machine and all. So after about five minutes of them scanning my walking boot for bombs and patting me down, I was allowed through. I figured I had time to head to the bathroom before heading up the stairs for my interview. Once in the bathroom I had a horrible sinking feeling as I felt the fly on my pants completely break. After five minutes of trying to get it to go back together it became immediately apparent that the damage was irreparable. What's worse is this particular pair of dress pants were not the kind where the fly stays nicely together when not zipped. No, it was one of those that when not zipped forms a gaping hole of fabric and puts your undergarments on display for the whole room.

So I gingerly made my

way out to the security checkpoint using my file of immigration paperwork to cover myself. I proceeded to explain to the security guards my predicament, and asked if they have any safety pins. Of course, they did not, and after a couple of minutes of deliberation the best option we could come up with was a stapler. So I took the stapler back into the rest room and proceeded to staple my fly shut. Unfortunately it was not possible to staple it on the inside where it was invisible. No... the only way it would work was to staple straight through from front to back.

I must have looked like quite the madman, feverishly pounding staples into my crotch in the men's restroom. Thankfully though, this worked, but now I had a crotch full of staples.

Having an interview of this magnitude is pretty stressful at the best of times, but try doing it when you are the slightly insane-looking guy with their fly stapled together.

Those of you that know me, understand that I am very rarely serious, and I would rather talk about humorous topics that ones of a deep emotional nature, but for a moment I feel I need to step into that realm. I was actually very disappointed with the rest of the process. I had to pass an English reading test, which consisted of reading one single question: "Who can vote?" and the English writing test was simply me penning the answer to the question that the interviewer provided me. Which was "A citizen." (Thankfully I didn't study for that particular part of the test.)

Then came the civics test, which I thought was appropriate, followed by the "interview" which consisted of the interviewer asking me about 20 questions that I had already answered on my application, mostly centered around if I was a member of the Communist or Nazi parties, or if I had committed any crimes in the U.S.A. At that point, I

was told I would be sworn-in as a U.S. citizen.

The swearing-in ceremony was where I was truly disappointed though. A few weeks earlier I was at the rodeo in Spray on Memorial Day weekend. The announcer started the rodeo by giving a reminder of the sacrifices made so that we can live in a free country. He gave such a touching account of what America stood for, that it moved half the crowd to tears as the rodeo queen rode around with Old Glory waiving in the summer wind. Now, I am not known for being a person of great emotion, but even I was moved almost to tears, deep in my own thoughts about this country that I love.

Afterwards I wondered how much stronger my emotional reaction would be on the day I could finally call myself an American. However, the swearing in ceremony at the immigration office in Portland was more like something out of a preschool classroom. It focused heavily on the individuals who were immigrating and where they came from. I think I upset one fellow immigrant after the ceremony when he asked what country I was from and I gave him the response "It really doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

The ceremony finished with a very underwhelming recital of the Pledge of Allegiance, and a room full



PHOTO BY JEFF OMODT

Liam Hughes gets into the spirit at the Rodeo Parade.

of people doing a halfhearted rendition of the national anthem. (I am sure half of them did not even know the words.)

Having no family here, I left the ceremony that should have been one of the most significant in my life, alone and totally unmoved. It left me thinking, are we really doing this the right way? On my drive home I thought more about how little the ceremony talked about what it meant to be an American, and how no guidance or expectations were laid before us as immigrants.

The happy ending to this story is that I did finally find my moment of emotional reflection at becoming a citizen of the greatest nation in the world.

Having started my day at 4:45 a.m., I contemplated

just relaxing and not attending the rodeo that night as I had planned. But thankfully I did go, and as I watched the whole crowd of thousands stand and remove their hats I felt a stir of emotion deep inside that I should have felt earlier that day. The American pride in the faces of thousands was so genuine, not lackluster like it was in the faces of those in the swearing-in ceremony with me. As I stood at the edge of that arena, with my hat pressed to my chest, and my heart filled with pride and reverence, I was deeply moved by Peggy Tehan's voice filling the arena with our national anthem, and my day finished the way it should have begun.

So I guess the moral of this story is this country needs a little more rodeo.

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