

New U.S. citizen to be teaching assistant

BY JOE SIESS
CO Media Group

When Celia Leonard first came to the United States from Mexico City in 1991, she never imagined she would be working the night shift at a dairy farm in rural Washington state.

The job was hard, and different from the life she knew amid the concrete, and hustle and bustle of Mexico City. For starters, she had never seen a cow in real life. It was on those mornings after work, when she saw the vastness of the skies and the movements of the clouds, that she was reminded of the dreams that first brought her to America.

Those dreams included one day becoming a U.S. citizen, and getting an education, perhaps a college degree.

"My dream was always, 'when I grow up, I want to go to the United States,'" Leonard said recently. "I tell my husband, before I die, I want to be somebody."

It took her more than three decades, but in August, the 53-year-old mother of three became a naturalized U.S. citizen. Such an important milestone was possible with help from the Latino Community Association, an organization in Central Oregon dedicated to empowering the region's Latino and immigrant population.

Leonard, who moved to Redmond in 2005 where she now cleans houses for a living, was able to access essential resources from the association, took a 10-week preparation course for her citizenship exam, and received free legal counseling and application assistance from the association's Immigration Services Manager, Oscar Gonzalez.

Gonzalez was able to help guide Leonard, but it really was her unyielding commitment that got her to this point.

"I never lost my hope," Leonard said of her journey toward citizenship. "I feel a release. Everything is legal. Now, everything is right...Something in my heart was released...Now I do not have any worries."

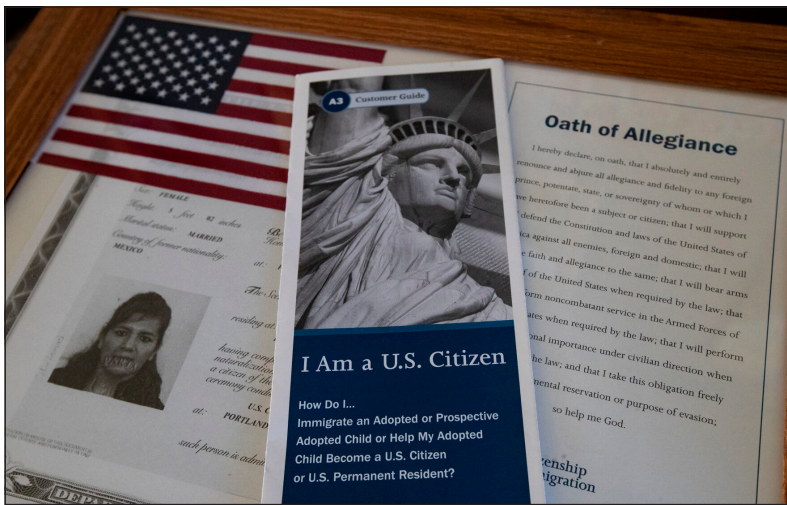
Leonard's path to citizenship included many disappointing meetings with lawyers, and countless rejections. Her first step was getting a work permit, which was not easy, she said.

"Since I came to the United States I had been applying for a work per-



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Celia Leonard sits in her living room in Redmond while holding a framed copy of her naturalization certificate, flag and an oath of allegiance she received when becoming a United States citizen this summer.



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

A framed copy of Celia Leonard's naturalization certificate, flag and an oath of allegiance she received after becoming a United States citizen this summer.

mit, and they always denied it. I was talking to lawyers, and they said there are no laws that can support you, there is nothing we can do to help you," she said. "Every year, we tried to apply and we tried to apply, and every time you

apply you have to pay...it is really expensive."

It wasn't until March of 2013 that Leonard received a work visa. She was granted three years, and as long as she didn't break the law, she could apply

Services, a nonprofit immigration law firm.

Leonard was one of the first clients to utilize the association's services, Gonzalez said.

"I let it be known to all our students that we are not immigration attorneys, but we do this work to support you in your efforts to complete the process," Gonzalez said. "Filling out the paperwork, and reviewing it, and signing off on it, and now that we are an accredited rep, we can let USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) know who we are so we can also be updated on what is going on with your case."

Gonzalez said getting legal help is difficult for a lot of folks who come to the country undocumented, and that federal immigration law desperately needs reform in order to give immigrants a chance and to help alleviate the nation's growing labor shortage. Making it easier to get a green card is one solution, he said.

"Having that green card is huge, because it gives you that foot in the door," Gonzalez said. "But it is a huge hurdle that honestly is so unobtainable for the vast majority of the 11 million undocumented people in the U.S."

Gonzalez said since 2016 up until recently, many immigrants have been wary about coming out of the shadows to start the process toward getting documented, but things have changed and more people feel comfortable making the move. Part of his job is to motivate immigrants to take that next step.

"I stay positive because it is important for me to encourage and try to get people to come out and get this ball rolling. Because it takes a while, but I try to explain to them that it is worth their while," Gonzalez added.

Leonard's case is an example of how putting in the time and effort is worth it in the end, and she said she would encourage others like her not to give up, and said it is never too late.

Now that the hardest part of her journey is behind her, Leonard plans to continue her education, first earning her GED, and then eventually earning a degree. She plans to pursue a career in education and will soon work as a teaching assistant in Redmond.

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