

Norma Ferriz passes citizenship test



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She may have been born in Mexico City, but through her work with the St. Helena Family Center and local Girl Scouts, the effervescent Norma Ferriz has embraced the St. Helena community.

And now, 18 years after first moving to the United States to go to college, her adopted country is ready to return the favor.

Ferriz passed her citizenship test Sept. 9. Within the next month, she'll receive a letter telling her when and where she'll be sworn in as a U.S. citizen.

Ferriz will earn the right to vote, which she's thrilled about, and to run for office, which she hasn't ruled out. But she said the symbolic significance is more important.

"I live here and this is my country," said Ferriz, who originally came to America in 1995 thanks to a Fulbright-Garcia Robles scholarship jointly

awarded by the U.S. and Mexican governments. "I already felt a strong sense of belonging here ... but this is a way of giving back."

The scholarship allowed her to attend the University of Washington and earn her master's degree in public administration with special focus on nonprofit management.

She returned to Mexico, where she worked for nonprofits for 12 years, before moving to St. Helena in 2007. She got a job as site operations manager at the St. Helena Family Center, got involved in Girl Scouts, and married Evan Massaro, a longtime St. Helena resident and, like Ferriz, an avid bicyclist and traveler.

She could have gotten her citizenship at the time, but instead she stayed in the country as a legal resident, in part because applying for citizenship would have involved listing every international trip she'd made, which would have been a daunting task for a world traveler like Ferriz.

In the meantime, Ferriz watched her family center co-worker Blanca Tellerico guide a steady stream of immigrants through the citizenship process. Ferriz also learned about the Napa Valley Community Foundation's One Napa Valley Initiative Fund, which supports the efforts of legal permanent residents to gain citizenship. Ferriz enthusiastically endorsed and supported the

effort, but still held off on pursuing her own citizenship.

Nevertheless, her love for America grew stronger. She wanted to visit all 50 states by the time she turns 50 in November, and she accomplished her goal in late 2012, when she and Massaro visited Delaware — which was incidentally the first state to ratify the Constitution, Ferriz added.

The highlight of the Delaware trip was when she and Massaro entered the state and, in a moment Ferriz described as “magical,” immediately saw a bald eagle flying overhead.

About four months ago, she gave in to her patriotic impulses, sat down with Tellerico and filled out the necessary paperwork, including that dreaded travel history. Ferriz paid a fee of about \$600, got fingerprinted in Santa Rosa and started studying the 100 possible questions on the mandatory civics test.

Aspiring citizens must correctly answer six of 10 randomly selected questions, which involve U.S. history and government. Expecting a written test, Ferriz memorized the answers to all 100 questions.

She got a letter telling her to be at the Department of Homeland Security office in San Francisco at 7:30 a.m. Monday, Sept. 9 — which happens to be the date in 1850 when California joined the Union, noted Ferriz, who’s become quite the U.S. history buff.

She and Massaro spent Sunday night in the city, where, in another inspiring twist of fate, they caught a big-screen showing of “Mary Poppins.” Ferriz said the film’s themes of “following your dreams and making positive things happen” resonated with her, even as she got more and more nervous about the upcoming test.

When Ferriz arrived at the DHS office Monday morning, there were hundreds of people seeking citizenship. Ferriz could tell that they, like her, took the idea of citizenship very seriously.

“Each person feels like they’re doing something special and taking an important step in their life,” she said. “People come here, and the U.S. becomes their nation. It’s a quote-unquote ‘normal’ thing for the immigration officers, but for us it’s a big deal.”

When Ferriz’s turn arrived, she was asked some basic questions — no, she’s not a card-carrying Communist; yes, she’s prepared to pledge her loyalty to the U.S.; no, she’s never been involved in drug smuggling — before the friendly immigration officer launched into the civics test.

Ferriz, who’d been expecting a written exam, was taken aback when she realized it would be oral. The first question was “When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?” which Ferriz had been dreading because she kept mixing up the famous 1776 date with the adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. Ferriz answered, “The Fourth of July, 1976.”

“What year?” the immigration officer asked. Happy to have avoided the 1787 trap, Ferriz stuck with her answer, and the test moved on.

The other nine questions were a cinch: What’s the name of the National Anthem? Why does the flag have 13 stripes? Who’s the current speaker of the House?

When the test concluded, Ferriz was shocked to learn she’d missed the first one. “What? Wasn’t

it the Fourth of July, 1776?" she asked the immigration officer.

Yes it was, the officer replied, but Ferriz had mistakenly said 1976. Ferriz sheepishly chalked it up to being so nervous.

Fortunately she'd only needed to get six out of 10, so nine was still a passing grade. The first thing she did when she got home Tuesday was buy tickets to see the musical "1776" in San Francisco.

Ferriz's advice for people thinking about getting their citizenship: "Just do it."

"You will have the support of all the people around you," she said. "The outpouring of love I got was so awesome. Friends, acquaintances, family, people from here, from Mexico, from other countries — everybody told me congratulations and wished me the best. So just do it. You won't be alone."

Sample questions from U.S. civics test

1. What is the name of the vice president of the United States now?
2. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
3. Who was president during World War I?
4. What is the economic system in the United States?
5. Name one U.S. territory.
6. What ocean is on the East Coast of the United States?
7. The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.

Answers: 1) Joe Biden; 2) 27; 3) Woodrow Wilson; 4) Capitalist economy; 5) Guam, Puerto Rico, etc.; 6) Atlantic Ocean; 7) Alexander Hamilton, James Madison or John Jay.