

https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/city-of-bowling-green-celebrates-178-newly-naturalized-citizens/article_7b1ef05b-c35f-5412-b407-44ff5326b547.html

City of Bowling Green celebrates 178 newly naturalized citizens

JAKE MOORE jake.moore@bgdailynews.com

Sep 16, 2023

1 of 16



Over 170 newly naturalized U.S. citizens stand and wave flags as the Bow and Rosa Hawm Nu sings the National Anthem during the City of Bowlin Convention Center on Thursday evening, Sept. 14, 2023. (Grace Ramey/g:gramey)

Mercedes Lopez feels her family’s opportunities have expanded thanks to their newfound citizenship.

“And that’s a blessing for our lives,” she told the Daily News after she and dozens of Bowling Green’s newest Americans were recognized at the Sloan Convention Center on Thursday night.

The City of Bowling Green's seventh annual Reception for New Americans honored 178 people who had been naturalized since June 2022, an event that saw representation from at least 10 countries.



“I feel a bit more empowered and grounded in the rights that I now have,” said Lopez, who became a citizen in March. “Whatever (my kids) decide to do with their lives, I feel like they are grounded in this country.”

Lopez and her family relocated to Bowling Green from Honduras in 2014 for her position with Fruit of the Loom. Her children, Daniel and Alessa, became citizens last November.

Mercedes Lopez shared that the family’s faith fostered deep roots in Living Hope Baptist Church, a congregation they joined the same year they arrived in America.

“It’s the reason why we’re here to begin with,” Alessa Lopez said about their faith. “It’s what keeps us going through every single step.”

Mercedes Lopez said a desire to give back to the community, city and country that has “embraced us so well” is one of the things that motivated the family to “embrace the citizenship” in return.

Daniel Lopez, a graduate of Western Kentucky University, said he is excited to vote for the first time this November and feels a “bigger sense of pride” for the U.S.

Alessa Lopez, a junior at WKU, said it was nice to finally change her status at her university.

“We get to say that we’re citizens now, more than just residents,” she said. “I got to share that and it was just kind of cool.”

Sebastián López, a junior at Warren East High School, received his citizenship this summer. He came to the U.S. as a young child when his family moved from Tijuana, Mexico, for his father’s job with Holley, settling in Bowling Green when he was in middle school.

Besides having to deal with less paperwork, López said you “feel more secure” as a citizen.

“It feels nice that now you’re part of the community that you were living in your entire life,” he said. “You feel like you’re part of it.”

Speaker Daniel Tarnagda, a new citizen from Burkina Faso and the founder of Refuge BG, reminded the packed convention hall that the path for success has not been easy.

“Nor has it been short,” he said, encouraging the Americans to take pride in what they have done.

“You have to find a way to learn the language, adapt to a job market, be able to learn how to drive and adapt to this culture. It was difficult.”

Dr. Dominique Gumirakiza, associate professor of agricultural economics at Western Kentucky University, arrived in the U.S. from Rwanda in 2008 on a Fulbright

scholarship. He earned a master's and a doctorate from Utah State University.

It took him about 15 years in total to become a citizen, going from a student visa to a work visa to living as a lawful permanent resident, a status one has to hold for a minimum of five years before a person can apply for citizenship.

“People come here on different visas and purposes, so each one tends to have its own path,” Gumirakiza said.

He moved to Bowling Green nearly 10 years ago, adding that it's the “No. 1 place” where he'd like to live, something he attributed to its good people and good geographical location.

Faris Al Khshali had similar feelings about the city.

Originally from Iraq, he had worked alongside American forces and even interpreted for former CIA director and retired U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus. He said his “jolly personality,” good English and helpful nature endeared him to commanders.

Al Khshali said his services came to an end following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011. He applied for a Special Immigrant Visa, arriving stateside by the end of 2016.

He said he was nervous to go, but once he settled in Bowling Green he found people who were “loving and inviting.”

“Honestly it’s a very big thing,” Al Khshali said. “I found some bad, but the majority are loving.”

He added that he felt like a guest the last time he traveled to Iraq.

“Now here is my country,” Al Khshali said. “I’m proud to be a U.S. citizen. The No. 1 country in the world.”

Tarnagda closed his remarks by presenting a challenge to the room of fresh Americans: it was now time for them to show others the way to citizenship “so that we will be able to take care of this great country,” starting with their Bowling Green home.