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Meehan Citizenship Institute helps immigrants become active citizens

By Mark Higgs

When the John A. Meehan Citizenship Institute launched its inaugural program last month, it continued its namesake's legacy of welcoming immigrants to America and encouraging them to become active members of society.

Created by a generous donation from ACBA member Attorney Jacqueline Martinez to honor the memory of her late husband, the named fund was established to help low-income immigrants apply for citizenship and to inspire them to become active and knowledgeable participants in the American political process. More than mere preparation for a citizenship exam, the institute empowers new U.S. citizens and those seeking citizenship by exposing them to a comprehensive curriculum that incorporates practical exercises and skills into a civic education.

Martinez, a naturalized U.S. citizen, immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador when she was 6. She said her parents were lucky in that they were able to find jobs and bring all six of their children here legally. An attorney who practices immigration law, she notes that what her parents accomplished is no longer possible, thanks to current immigration laws.

The reasons why Martinez created the fund go much deeper than her route to citizenship. By establishing the fund, she is fulfilling her late husband's desire to see more immigrants become U.S. citizens and ensure they stay involved in their communities and government.

"My husband was an advocate of education and felt that it was our responsibility to educate people and keep them engaged in the political process," Martinez said.

Meehan was a 20-year veteran of the Coast Guard. After he retired, Martinez encouraged him to apply for a position as an immigration officer. She said he loved working for the INS and later the USCIS, and she recalls how he would come home from work and tell her about new citizens, where they came from and their path to immigration.

"He enjoyed meeting immigrants and talking to immigrants, especially when applying for naturalization," Martinez said. "We often talked about how many immigrants needed legal counsel but were not able to hire an attorney; how they were often taken advantage of and that to become a fully-engaged, educated new citizen was the catalyst for change."

"He believed in the 'American immigrant dream.' He also believed that people were good, and he treated everyone with respect and dignity."



PHOTO BY MARK HIGGS

Anthony Kuzma, ACBF development assistant; Barbara Griffin, ACBF Pro Bono director; and Jacqueline Martinez, owner of JBM Legal; represent the John A. Meehan Citizenship Institute – a program designed to teach immigrants how to be active U.S. citizens. Kuzma developed the program's curriculum, Griffin handles its legal aspects, while Martinez donated the funds to make it all possible.

Meehan was diagnosed with stage-4 cancer in 2011 and died in August 2015.

"John literally worked until the day he died," Martinez said. "He was a dedicated man to his family, work and friends. We chose to set up the named fund because we wanted to honor him in a way that the funds could reach the most people and help those in need."

Anthony Kuzma, Allegheny County Bar Foundation development assistant, developed the institute's curriculum. Having taught courses on U.S. civics and government for two



PHOTO BY KRISTINA WINTERMYER

Students at the John A. Meehan Institute pilot class included – front, from left – Cherry Sung and Kyaw Nyut Tharsein and, in back, Hari Prasad Sharma and Ma Myint. Classes are held twice a week in Baldwin at Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council’s Families for Learning Center.

semesters in Bulgaria last year, Kuzma was able to identify essential lessons for foreign-born students.

The curriculum is so comprehensive it could even benefit native citizens. Some of its practical aspects include teaching people seeking citizenship how to renew their driver’s license, get a flu shot for a child, register to vote, obtain a birth certificate, pay a traffic ticket and talk to a police officer. One particular lesson requires students to identify an issue in the local community and an appropriate representative to contact. They then practice writing a brief letter that explains the problem and offers a solution.

“The institute is not only a preparation course to pass the citizenship exam, but also preparation for life as a U.S. citizen,” Kuzma said. “The course is intended to teach an understanding of the United States government through practice rather than memorization of facts. We want new citizens to volunteer in their communities, attend their local school board meetings, engage with local representatives and run for office.”

Sixteen students were invited to attend the first class at the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council’s Families for Learning Center in Baldwin Borough. After the pilot program concludes in October, the GPLC could begin offering registration for additional classes beginning in January. During the pilot program, there are two two-hour classes each week.

There are plenty of programs that prepare immigrants for the citizenship test by focusing primarily on English-as-a-second-language skills. What sets the Meehan Citizenship Institute apart is an emphasis on encouraging participants to become active citizens.

“There are no other programs like our program,” Kuzma said. “Ours is suited for immigrants who have developed their English-speaking skills and who are able to comprehend and understand more difficult concepts. The program’s value is largely centered on how to be an active citizen in other ways besides simply voting. We don’t want citizens to blend into their communities or exclusively interact with only those of the same ethnicity.”

Immigrants who want to become American citizens often need help with the naturalization application and may face other legal issues without the ability to afford an attorney. That’s why it’s vital to have attorneys such as ACBF Pro Bono Center Director Barbara Griffin and other ACBA members lending their expertise to the Institute. Griffin will recruit and train volunteer lawyers to represent low-income immigrants and refugees who are applying to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

With Pittsburgh’s immigrant population increasing, Kuzma said it’s critical to offer such classes to as many people as possible to ensure they are informed on how to become active and engaged citizens. He stresses that the Institute will help people become citizens, but that it will, in turn, benefit the nation as a whole.

“Immigrants have and always will make this country great,” he said. “We want to encourage them to be leaders in the community and take an active role in showing what it means to be an American, no matter who you are or what you look like or where you came from.”

Martinez brought her idea for the named fund to the bar foundation because of its track record of productive work in the local community, particularly legal assistance for low-income residents. After researching other foundations and organizations, Martinez chose the ACBF to receive her donation. “As an attorney, I believe we all have an obligation to provide pro bono legal services to those who need it.” ■