

English Helps Pave Path to Citizenship

Irish Immigration Center

Founded in 1989 to meet the needs of the Irish immigrant population of Massachusetts, the Irish Immigration Center (IIC) now serves immigrant communities from across the globe through its work in advocacy and policy, education and training, and a variety of other programs and services, including ESOL and citizenship classes, as well as immigration, employment, and housing.

ESOL Classes

IIC provided ESOL services to more than 100 English language learners in 2007, through three sessions of classes offered at different times and for different proficiency levels. Working closely with the Immigration and Citizenship programs, IIC's experienced ESOL teachers provide instruction in speaking, reading, and writing English. Classes are designed to give immigrants the ability and confidence to use English effectively at work, in the home, and in the community.

Citizenship Classes

IIC offers free citizenship classes to individuals who have already applied for U.S. citizenship. Classes meet for 12.5 hours over five weeks and cover a range of citizenship-related topics, including information on the application process, interview preparation, voter education, the swearing-in ceremony, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

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The Irish Immigration Center's ESOL program helps immigrants from across the globe improve their English skills while serving as a gateway to other programs and resources, including citizenship.

On March 24, 2008 Eunice Laboy, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, became a U.S. citizen. "I feel good for having obtained my citizenship certificate," she said moments after the ceremony. "I am thankful for being able to study, and would like to thank my teacher Diana and the whole group from my classes."

Along her path to citizenship, Eunice was supported by a dedicated group of staff, teachers, and students at the Irish Immigration Center (IIC), a non-profit organization dedicated to serving the needs of immigrant communities throughout Massachusetts. IIC helped Eunice achieve her dream through its English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and Citizenship

program.

Eunice's first step toward citizenship was through IIC's ESOL program. Because English is a requirement of U.S. citizenship, many immigrant-serving organizations like IIC provide immigrants with an opportunity to learn the language and improve

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- Moira Lucey, ESOL Director at IIC

literacy skills, including the ability to read, write, and speak in English, all of which are tested during the citizenship exam.

Once students' language skills improve, they can concentrate on developing and practicing skills specific to the exam. During the five classes and over 12 hours of instruction in each Citizenship class

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cycle, students take part in a number of activities, including watching a video of a citizenship interview and critiquing the interviewee's response to various questions, reviewing and practicing U.S. history and government questions, and covering topics such as voting and voter registration.

English is an important prerequisite to the citizenship classes, particularly since some of the students in Citizenship classes are native English speakers. "One of

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the biggest barriers for many immigrants who want to become citizens is their proficiency in English—not their interest in becoming a U.S. citizen," says Moira Lucey, ESOL Director at IIC. "We have students in our ESOL classes who are there because they want to improve their English to become citizens."

In addition to the English language skills they acquire in ESOL classes, Eunice and other students also gain connections and links into U.S. society through their interaction with teachers, students, and other programs.

Roselia Quiceño, who immigrated to the U.S. 12 years ago to escape dangerous conditions in her native Colombia, shares Eunice's dream of becoming a U.S. citizen. Her ESOL class has brought her closer to achieving that goal by helping to improve her English skills and connecting her with other students and the Citizenship program at IIC.

"I heard about the citizenship classes in my English class," says Quiceño, who is currently enrolled in English and citizenship classes at IIC. She has spoken to classmate Eunice about her experience taking the citizenship exam and looks forward to joining her as a naturalized citizen. "I want to become a citizen because I want a good job," she explains. "I want to vote and I want to travel with a U.S. passport."

Citizenship is not the only benefit of ESOL classes, of course. Improved English skills have helped Roselia, a mother of five, at work and in her interactions with her 11-year-old daughter's school. "Most important is for work, because I lost a couple jobs because I didn't understand English. Some places you need to speak English to work." English language skills also help

immigrants to participate in their communities and access vital resources.

Eunice and Roselia's English and citizenship teacher, Diana Crane, is deliberate about "demystifying" the naturalization process for immigrants and making the jump from one program to the other an easy one. "ESOL and citizenship are very closely linked," she says. "Most of the students who go through ESOL want to become citizens, but they're not sure how to do it before attending ESOL classes."

Crane also sees great value in the client-centered approach of IIC and how it translates in the classroom. "The Irish Immigration Center has a special commitment to students, it's a very client- and student-centered organization," she explains. "They are very supportive of students and have a real desire to see them succeed."

Eunice has experienced this support and success first hand with her improved English skills and recent naturalization. Roselia is headed down the same path and looks forward to the day when she too can recite the pledge of allegiance and enjoy the rights of a U.S. citizen. "I will celebrate with my family and buy dinner," she says of the day she gets her citizenship. "Then, I will go visit my father for one week in Colombia and then find a good job. I will also register to vote. The day of the ceremony, outside, I will register to vote."

Presiding over a bustling naturalization ceremony at Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, much like the one Roselia dreams of, U.S. District Court Judge Richard G. Stearns spoke of the diverse paths that immigrants have traveled on the path to citizenship through the nation's history, many of which are similar to those taken by Roselia and Eunice: "Our founding fathers envisioned a citizenry bound together not because we are the same, but because we are united despite our differences."



Roselia Quiceño's passed the citizenship exam on May 28, 2008.

English for New Bostonians (ENB) is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians committed to expanding the city's long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

Learn more about ENB:

Mayor's Office of New Bostonians: 617-635-2980, cheng.tan@cityofboston.gov

First Literacy Boston Adult Literacy Fund: 617-482-3336, balf@balf.net

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition: 617-350-5480 x 203, cgreen@miracoalition.org