

El Encuentrolero

EDITION 2 * SPRING 2021 * PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP

Letter from our Executive Director



Bienvenid@s a nuestro boletín!

When my parents immigrated to the US in 1967 from Colombia with five children in hand and one on the way, we were blessed to have received visas upon arrival, and one by one eventually became citizens. We were among the lucky migrants because my father's employer was willing to sponsor my family. But the US immigration system has never been just, and the citizenship process has become increasingly difficult.

Think of the vulnerabilities experienced by having to wait for more than 20 years? When you are "in line" and the application fees increase by over 80%? When immigration officers take liberties with examination protocols? It's a challenging and complex journey.

Please join me in thanking Encuentro's teachers, volunteers and partner organizations El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos, NM Immigrant Law Center and Jewish Community Foundation for their deep commitment to ensuring that each of Encuentro's citizenship students maximizes their chances to successfully prepare for and pass their citizenship exam.

In the 2020 elections, six of Encuentro's recent citizenship students voted for the first time! One of them shared that the polling worker led a round of applause when they cast their vote, and for someone else they rang a bell. Another student voted with her 81-year-old mother, who became a citizen a few months before she did. It's powerful.

Congratulations and thank you to ALL of our students! We are a better country because of your leadership and engagement.



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Our Mission

Encuentro's mission is to transform New Mexico into a thriving community for all of its residents by engaging with Latino immigrant families in education and career development opportunities that build skills for economic and social justice.

Your contribution fuels Encuentro's mission and ensures that educational opportunities are available to immigrant parents and workers.

TO GIVE, text "Encuentro" to 505-322-6301 or make your donation at encuentronm.org.



REFLECTIONS FROM A DREAMER

My Dream of Citizenship

BY ILSE GRIJALVA-LASTIRI

When my family and I immigrated from Mexico, I was 15 years old and I had nothing but a backpack full of dreams and desire for a better life. I didn't understand the meaning of being 'undocumented' and that living without status meant living in the shadows, in fear, with little hope for a career. I noticed the unjust system that exploited my hard working parents, forcing them to work in low-wage jobs where they faced workplace abuses, were ineligible for employment benefits and unentitled for federal support even though they paid taxes. My life changed and the world opened to me after receiving Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a policy under Obama's administration granting deferred action from deportation and eligibility for a work

permit in the US. I got a better job with benefits, more hope for the future and learned that I... WE have rights.

I am a resident, thanks to my husband, and in 2022 will be eligible to become a US citizen. I feel motivated to participate in elections and ensure fair representation. Voting and civic participation, are two of the most direct ways I can contribute and have my voice heard in policy and politics. The dream of becoming a citizen has a significance far deeper than legal permission to live in this country. It is the desire to live with dignity and without fear... the thirst to visit our home country and reunite with our relatives after so many years... the chance to have a career or better paying job... and most importantly, the ability to contribute to making this country more inclusive, fair and equitable for ourselves and future generations.

THE PATHWAY IN ACTION

Photos of Encuentro's Students Journey



Learning and Preparation

Encuentro Citizenship Students engage with teachers Pat Beres and Amy Scott during the fall 2020 online course.



Interview and Exam

Luz Mery Jaramillo celebrates with her teachers, tutor and family after successfully passing her interview.



Celebration

Although the formal Naturalization ceremony is not occurring during COVID, Romely Mares celebrated her success on the day she became a citizen.

Civic Engagement

With pride, Sandra Salvidez voted for the first time in the 2020 elections, exercising her right as a new citizen.



About ESL for Citizenship

Demand for Encuentro's Citizenship classes continues to increase as students submit their applications and prepare for their Naturalization interview and English language exam.

Currently, two online classes are offered over 14-weeks to beginner and intermediate ESL speakers. Participants engage in synchronous learning twice per week, complete two hours of independent study and are connected with tutors to support exam preparation, build interview skills and practice English. Open enrollment allows Encuentro to better meet individual learning needs. Recently, all of Encuentro's classes began integrating digital literacy components to equip students with the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

As students build essential English language skills and vocabulary, Encuentro teachers deliver a tailored curriculum including US history, civics and geography. The NM Immigrant Law Center and El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos orient students to the citizenship process and application, community organizing, civic responsibilities and engagement. In 2020, 35 students completed the course and 12 became citizens.

Encuentro's approach encourages students to be self-directed in their learning and understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This enables them to act as leaders who amplify their perspectives, engage in decision making and strengthen the immigrant community.

TEACHERS' SPOTLIGHT

Amy Scott and Bill Ancker

Encuentro's Citizenship teachers, Amy Scott and Bill Ancker, are skilled educators who understand the plight of immigrants seeking citizenship and the importance of language, literacy and technology skills to succeed. Their commitment to preparing students for the application process and interview is matched by their dedication to social justice. When asked why they teach at Encuentro, here is what they said:

I teach at Encuentro to support students navigating a complicated immigration system so they can achieve their goals to participate more fully in society, help their families, receive equitable rights and benefits, vote, and most importantly, be seen and have their voices heard. –Amy Scott

Encuentro students are very motivated to improve the English language skills needed to pass the exam and interview. We practice answering all different kinds of questions about US history, government, current events, and personal questions that the US Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) official might ask. Taking sufficient time and making a studious effort to prepare for the interview will result in confidence and success when the day of the interview finally arrives! –Bill Ancker



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Maria Regina Castillo Betancourt

Maria has been a student at Encuentro since 2016. Over the years she successfully completed ESL, High School Equivalency, ESL for Citizenship, and graduated as a Home Health Aide. She has served as an Encuentro volunteer, emceed several community-wide events, participated with El Centro in the legislative process and civic engagement, supported phone calls for the Home Health Program, and on January 8, 2021, became a citizen of the United States.

“Now that I am a citizen, I have a sense of security and safety that all people deserve to have. With my legal status comes a freedom to do everyday activities such as advocate for my grandchildren in their schools, obtain a driving license or enter a federal building without fear. Thanks to Encuentro, I'm proud to have the opportunity to vote and elect people who represent me.” –Maria Regina Castillo

Special Thanks TO OUR PARTNERS

NM Immigrant Law Center, El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos, and Jewish Community Foundation of NM

Each semester, NMILC lawyer and immigrant rights champion Martha Laura Garcia-Izaguirre outlines the pathway to citizenship. Together with El Centro's community organizers, each organization plays a pivotal role guiding students to successfully navigate the naturalization process and understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Funding for Encuentro's Citizenship classes is made possible by JCF's Immigrant and Refugee Assistance Fund.



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Together we are building immigrant leaders and a strong community for ALL.

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