

ImmigrationProf Blog

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My 10 Steps to be Considered Human

By Immigration Prof

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In 2009, I drove early to the stadium in downtown LA. I had spent the night at a friend's house that had recently separated from the U.S. Marine Corps. Otherwise, I would have had to drive early from three hours away at my duty station in Twentynine Palms, California. I had recently returned after a ten-month tour in Iraq and decided that it was time to receive my citizenship. I remember it as a fast-tracked system. First step: meet with a lawyer on base. Second step: Meet with an official for an interview and take the citizenship exam. Step three: Go to the naturalization ceremony. It took approximately 3 to 4 months total from the beginning of the process. The best part was that I did not even have to wait the five years as a resident to apply for my naturalization. After the written exam, the official told me that I was going to become a citizen. I felt excitement and joy. I had become the first person in my family, except for the youngest, who had been born in the United States, to become accepted as an official American.

On the day of the Naturalization ceremony, I was sent to the front of the stadium. Little did I know those who sat up front were immigrants who were serving currently in the U.S. Armed Forces like myself. There were a total of seven of us from different backgrounds and ethnicities. The only difference was that I had not received notice that I was required to wear my uniform. Officials gave me a little grief about wearing civilian attire for the ceremony. As the ceremony began, my fellow military service members and I were asked to come to the front and face the crowd. The man behind the podium said some words that will echo eternally in my memories. He looked to the crowd and with gratitude said, "I inherited my citizenship, but these men and women earned it!"

The ceremony will always remain a happy memory, but reflecting on the process is more complicated than the three simple steps that I went through. At the time, I had not counted all the years, money, and hardships that followed with being an immigrant in the United States and the necessary extremes it took to get to that single moment. Step one: be born in a violent and impoverished country that was in a civil war backed by America. Step two: jump onto a moving train in the middle of the night to cross the border into the U.S. Step three: live in low-income communities and shelters until my late teens. Step four: become a legal permanent resident at sixteen. Step five: join the U.S. Marines at 17 years old. Step six: Raise my hand when my unit sat us down and asked who wants to go to Iraq with the next unit. Step seven: complete a ten-month tour. Those were seven steps that took twenty years just so that I can even meet the requirements to apply for citizenship, not counting the money spent on lawyers and yearly fees on visas.

It had taken me an entire lifetime to complete the ten necessary steps that lead to being treated equally as a human in America. It is a status that is automatically given to babies when born within America's borders, but difficult to obtain if born outside of the U.S. and do not meet the requirements of a wealthy white immigrant from Europe. Regardless of status and place of birth, every person still has the right to basic needs that fall under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the U.S has signed. Considering that the United States has immigration roots, it should be willing to help immigrants instead of dehumanizing them by calling people "aliens" or, in the words of President Trump, "animals." Immigrants are still humans, and in some cases super humans, but we will never become animals or aliens.

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