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An unexpected lesson in U.S. citizenship

By Penny Musco

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When I served as artist-in-residence at [Homestead National Monument of America](#) in Nebraska, the most I hoped for was plenty of time to write, surrounded by the blissful solitude of nature. What I didn't expect was a lesson on citizenship.



The first week I arrived at this [National Park Service](#) locale, I was invited to attend a naturalization ceremony. When I walked into Homestead's Education Center before the proceedings began, the room was filled with people of different races, languages and dress. The ceremony would be conducted in English, of course, but I heard a conversation in Spanish behind me, and one in Vietnamese to my left. As the woman from Citizenship and Immigration Services read the roll call, I counted 21 countries represented covering four continents.

"How fitting that this ceremony is here," Mark Engler, the park superintendent, said to the guests, "because Homestead represents the opportunity of America." The [Homestead Act of 1862](#), he reminded us, not only offered 160 acres of land to citizens, but also to those who intended to become citizens. This law paved the way for millions of immigrants to take hold of the American dream and provide a better future for their children. The new citizens, he said, now shared that dream and future.

The presiding judge, William Riley, also noted it was [National Constitution Day](#), a time to reflect on our government's fundamental document, one whose importance could be summed up in its first three words:

"We the people." It was a phrase, Riley said, embodying all the hard-won rights available to every American, as well as the accompanying responsibilities. Addressing the inductees, the judge proclaimed, "By taking your oath of citizenship, you become part of 'We the people,' and full participants in our representative republic."

Then it was time for the swearing in. The oath is somewhat old-fashioned, but I soon realized I had never heard it because I had never had to recite it. Unlike these immigrants, I had done nothing to gain my citizenship. They filled out scads of paperwork, paid a fee, studied U.S. history and government, and took a test to become Americans. As I congratulated the new citizens, I realized how I took for granted the privileges they had worked so hard to attain, which I had bestowed on me at birth. But I won't anymore, not after experiencing the joy of those who earned it. For I, too, am "we the people," and it's up to me to keep it that way.

Penny Musco is a freelance writer in Montclair, N.J.

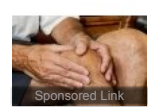
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