



The Republican.

Marie Grady: From students to citizens, one vote counts

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MARIE

GRADY In between her two full-time jobs and her college studies, Sreymach Stephenson somehow found the time to fit in some additional reading. She went to the bookstore and picked out one book each on presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama.

José Tomas Saravia was also busy studying and working full time as a manager of a downtown Northampton restaurant, but he found the time to do something millions of Americans never do - register to vote.

Like many United States citizens, Stephenson and Saravia were drawn to the polls in this presidential election. Both talked with a mixture of excitement and even awe at the prospect of casting a ballot.

Maybe that's because this historic election will go down in their own histories as the first time they ever voted for a U.S. president. Both became citizens in the past several months after taking English as a Second Language classes at the International Language Institute in Northampton. The classes not only helped them learn the language but gave them the confidence they needed to fully participate in this Democratic process.

Stephenson, a 28-year-old Cambodia native, works full time as a counselor at two human service agencies while studying for a degree at Holyoke Community College. She didn't hesitate when asked how she found the time to study the candidates.

"I think one vote, one person is important," said Stephenson, who came to this country for love and married a U.S. citizen. "Some people don't care, but one vote is important."

Saravia, a 44-year-old married father of three, works hard as a manager of the Northampton restaurant Bueno y Sano, which means "Good and Healthy" in English. A native of El Salvador who escaped the ravages of a civil war two decades ago, he just became a citizen in the past month. He wasted no time in registering to vote.

He wouldn't say who he planned to vote for, a tradition of secrecy his teacher Daniel Cuenca says may be rooted in a time when Latin Americans were afraid to reveal who they were voting for at home.

"We have a lot of Latin American people right here in the U.S.," Saravia says. "I want to help the nation elect a new president."

All across Western Massachusetts people like Stephenson and Saravia are studying in the hope of one day casting a ballot as a U.S. citizen. In addition to a free language class offered by the International Language Institute, citizenship classes are offered at adult education programs from Palmer to Chicopee and beyond.

Last year, the number of people applying to become naturalized citizens doubled to 1.4 million, according to a report by the U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics. A surge in new Latino citizens is already changing the

political landscape in states such as Florida and California.

Like many Americans, Stephenson was leaning toward one candidate but still trying to make up her mind.

"I try to read a lot of books. I want to vote for the right president."

She thinks Obama is "strong and smart." But, after reading up on him, she thinks McCain is strong and smart too.

For teacher Daniel Cuenca, a native of Argentina who will apply for citizenship after the mandatory waiting period of five years next year, the real winners in this election are students who reach the milestone of civic engagement that citizenship brings.

"When one of us makes it, it is a shared pride." Marie P. Grady is liaison for the Literacy Works Project of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. For more information, contact Program Manager Maura Geary at mgeary@rebhc.org or Grady at mgrady@rebhc.org

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