

We Belong Here: #teens4citizenship

Editor's note: Aiti Rai is a 2015 graduate of HPHS Law & Government Academy. In spring of her senior year, she took a citizenship class offered by HPHS and Hartford Public Library, funded by a grant from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. Aiti currently attends Manchester Community College where she studies liberal arts and the sciences. After two years, she hopes to transfer to the University of Connecticut to major in political science. Her dream is to become a lawyer and help her community. Toward that end, this year she is also interning at a law office. By Aiti Rai '14 Law & Government Academy. (This article first appeared in the Hartford Public Schools, October, 2015 newsletter, Spotlight on Excellence.)



I always wondered how a citizen of a country feels. What does it mean? For me, it will be my greatest fortune as I have been internationally homeless since birth. I lived as refugee in my own country, Nepal. I did not have citizenship [anywhere]. I felt hopeless. I experienced discrimination. When you hear the word “home” you think of a place where you feel safe and comfortable, and where you share a common culture and identity. But for me it was different. I had no such place to call home, no place where I shared traditions, food, a set of beliefs, and a common language.

Now I am in the U.S.! At first, I found it hard to adjust to American culture, and still I struggle. It is difficult to hold onto two cultures at the same time, but you do not want to lose your [first] culture while you are trying to learn about the new one. I do not want to lose my Nepali culture. Sometimes I am afraid of being a person without an identity while I adjust to American ways of life. I want to become a U.S. citizen because I experienced discrimination

against non-citizens. We were called “beggars,” and “lazy.” Sometimes we were treated like animals. I felt there was nothing more shameful out there than to be internationally homeless. There are many opportunities for citizens in many countries, but not for people who do not hold citizenship.

In high school [Law & Government Academy], we took a field trip to attend a Naturalization Ceremony at Hartford Public Library. The judge invited us to present small American flags to new citizens when they received their certificates. I enjoyed doing that and felt special. The following year, I attended the citizenship class [at Hartford High]. I was inspired to take it seriously as I learned about opportunities for citizens: a citizen can vote, work for the government, and can speak up for his/her rights. A citizen cannot be deported. I was not aware of these things before I took this class. We took some field trips as well. This class helped me understand the importance of citizenship. I found it useful and had great time!

I think my happiest moment will be when a judge announces that I have officially become a citizen of the U.S.! I will be able to proudly say to the world that I am a citizen of this country, and I will not need to hesitate anymore when someone asks me about my citizenship.

~~~~~

For more information on **We Belong Here: Schools4Citizenship**, please contact: *Judy Wyman Kelly*, Teen Citizenship Project Coordinator, [jwykelly@gmail.com](mailto:jwykelly@gmail.com) or (301) 503-8035; or *Homa Naficy*, Hartford Public Library Chief Adult Learning Officer, [hnaficy@hplct.org](mailto:hnaficy@hplct.org) or (860) 695-6334