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Fulfilling her American dream

Workshop offers free legal help for citizenship applicants

By MARK STAYTON

Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON —Veronica Castellano has lived in Mount Vernon since she was 5 years old. She moved here from Mexico with her family, attended Mount Vernon High School and has worked a few part-time jobs holding a resident's (green) card.

Now 22 and with a daughter of her own, Castellano is finally on her way to becoming an American citizen.

"I want to do it to be able to vote, to have more opportunities, have an opinion," she said. "It's important so that my voice can be heard."

Castellano was one of nearly 100 legal immigrants who were helped with free legal advice and professional assistance in filling out citizenship applications at the Citizenship Day workshop, held on Saturday at Skagit Valley College.

The workshop is one of eight held statewide through a cooperative effort of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and the Washington New Americans program, designed to streamline and simplify the citizenship application process.

At the workshop, immigrants' documents were checked to make sure nothing was missing. Volunteer paralegals helped clients fill out the 10-page citizenship application, lawyers looked over clients' backgrounds to ensure that no legal issues would arise, and senior lawyers vetted everything for accuracy.

When clients walked out, they carried a sealed application package, ready to mail.

Megan Vogel, a lawyer for Davis Wright Tremaine LLP in Seattle, said she grew up in Mount Vernon and attended Skagit Valley College. She now lives in Stanwood and saw this as a way to give back to her community.

"There's a great need for legal assistance in this area, and a lot of people who come to Citizenship Day could not afford to get the legal counsel they need," Vogel said.

Vogel said citizenship offers many benefits over simply holding a green card, including voting rights, the ability to leave the country for longer periods of time and more employment opportunities.

"It's a way for them to express their commitment and dedication to our country," she said.

Donna Rieper, site coordinator for the event, said out of 60 volunteers, 15 were lawyers and 15 were paralegals. Washington New Americans volunteers helped organize the event, and students from Western Washington University's Law, Diversity and Justice Program provided operational support.

Rieper said Mount Vernon was one of the first locations in which Citizenship Day was held. Started in this state in 2005 by the Washington chapter of the AILA, it soon spread to 35 other chapters around the country.

Vogel said the day couldn't have been possible without the on-the-ground support of volunteers from Washington New Americans.

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Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Jasmine Castellano, 3, waits patiently Saturday while her mother, Veronica Castellano of Mount Vernon, fills out forms during Citizenship Day at Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon.