



The Conversation

March 2021



Greetings, Friends of Welcoming the Stranger!

Spring is here and 151 Welcoming the Stranger students and 33 teachers are hard at work as our 12-week winter term comes to a close this month! All WTS offerings remain fully virtual at this point and we feel fortunate to reflect on the many challenges we've overcome thanks to our incredible volunteers and generous donors! Read on to learn what your support makes possible, and if you'd like to check out our year-in-review by the numbers, click [here](#) to view WTS' 2020 Impact Report. Thank you for your partnership that changes immigrants' lives and builds stronger communities.

A Dream to "Do Better and Grow" Leads to Citizenship

On July 16, 2020, Greyci Tapia stood at the U.S. Customs and Immigration's Philadelphia field office, raised her right hand, and proudly spoke the words of the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America.

"I was very, very happy," Greyci recalls of that moment. "I felt that I was really a true part of the nation, not a person in transit with a temporary permit. I feel it is a privilege to be a part of this nation and be a citizen."

Greyci was one of nine Welcoming the Stranger students to attain citizenship last year. She and her family are natives of the Dominican Republic.

"We came to America to work, do better, and grow," Greyci says. "In the Dominican Republic, good jobs are scarce, even for those with a college degree. Here, there is much more opportunity for education and work."

Having arrived in the U.S. a few years ago, by 2019 Greyci was ready to pursue her goal of U.S. citizenship.

"I wanted to feel I am a part of this country," she recalls. "It was important to me to have full American rights and freedoms, and to more easily travel back and forth to visit relatives in the Dominican Republic. To be a U.S. citizen is to have a sense of liberty, follow the law, and uphold the responsibilities of being a citizen."

Greyci enrolled in a WTS citizenship class led by volunteer teacher Richard Keeler, a decision that ultimately did far more than simply prepare her to pass an exam -- it transformed her understanding of America.

"Now, I understand how the U.S. was colonized and created," she says, "and that America really is a nation of immigrants."

Greyci was surprised by some aspects of the course.



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“We learned about segregation and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” she recounts. “I think that seeing how Martin Luther King is recognized and remembered today shows how the U.S. changes and grows throughout history. I’m thankful to God to be a part of this country that is not only big and powerful, but is a country of people who have a heart.”



Greyci Tapia (third from left) with her husband David, daughter Daniela, and son David upon his graduation from college.

Welcoming the Stranger helped Greyci gain confidence about the citizenship interview and understand the extensive paperwork that accompanies the naturalization process.

“Things that are simple for those of us who grew up in the states, like opening a bank account or applying for a driver’s license, can be overwhelming for a foreign national. Likewise, navigating the naturalization process isn’t easy, The N-400 application form is 20 pages long!” shares Rich Keeler. “Welcoming the Stranger explains and defines the items on this form. We also teach and explain the 100 history and civics questions the students are responsible to know. Another thing that we help them with is being able to read and write simple sentences containing particular words specified by the government. Most importantly, we perform mock interviews to help prepare them for the real thing.”

Greyci was astounded that WTS offered so much assistance completely free of charge.

“It cost me nothing to attend the classes and get help with the forms,” she reports. “I know others who have spent money on this, and I feel bad for them because it isn’t necessary.” Some other agencies offer assistance with forms and exam preparation for fees as high as hundreds of dollars on top of application fees and, at times, legal fees.



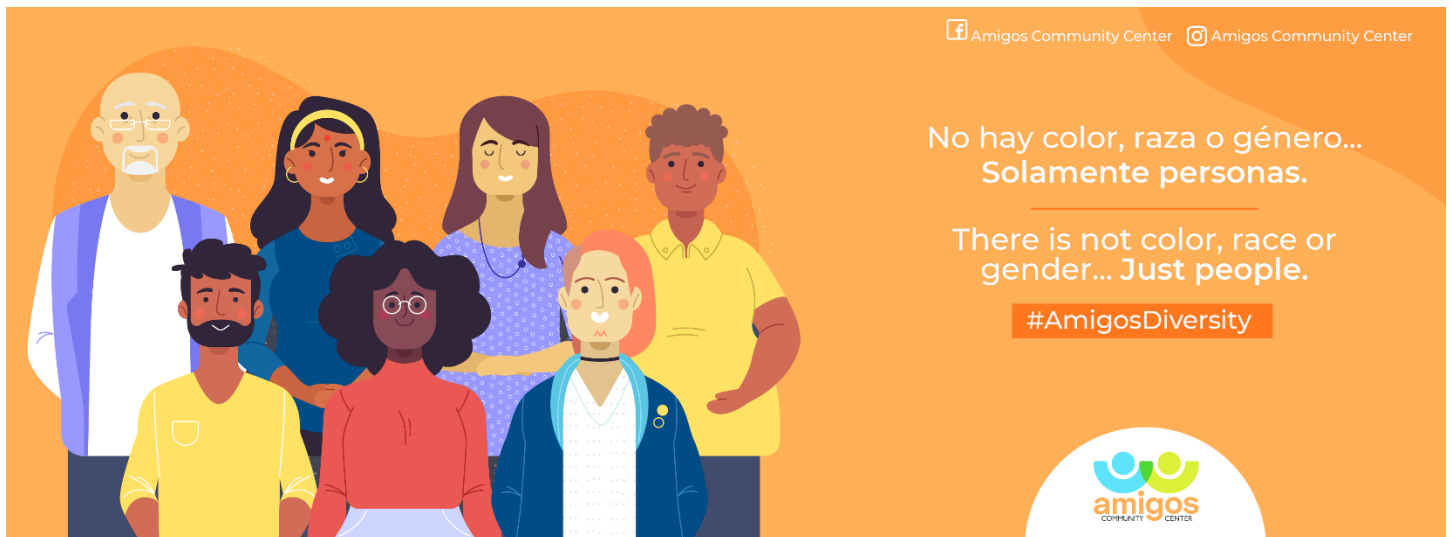
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After months of preparation, Greyci went to her citizenship interview in January 2020. A USCIS officer reviewed and verified her application materials and administered the two-part naturalization test. Greyci passed the exam and her application was approved! After being delayed by the pandemic, the process concluded with Greyci's naturalization ceremony in July.

Deeply appreciative of the WTS volunteers and donors who do so much to help and support immigrants, Greyci's advice for others considering citizenship is to get help from Welcoming the Stranger.

"I tell people I meet, go to Welcoming the Stranger. From the very beginning, I felt so very welcome there. They will hold your hand and help you get your citizenship. For me and for many people, it is a big decision. It was not easy for me to say that I was giving up my home country. But it was the best thing to do. Citizenship is a plus. It's something that really counts."



"If You Want to Go Far, Go Together"

Are you aware that WTS works collectively with approximately 69 other local and statewide organizations on behalf of our immigrant students? It's true. We partner with community groups like the United Way and Amigos Community Center; social, health and legal service providers such as HIAS in Philadelphia; advocacy organizations; faith communities like The Immigrant Rights Action Group (IRAG); and fraternal organizations such as Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Perhaps our most important relationship at this time is with the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC), a diverse coalition of 60 organizations and hundreds of individuals representing different ethnicities, immigration statuses, faiths, and other backgrounds. Even as WTS focuses on our central mission of immigrant education, our membership in PICC allows us to advocate with a unified voice for public understanding and welcoming immigration policies throughout Pennsylvania.

As a member of PICC, WTS also has access to PA is Ready!, a unique grantmaking fund created in 2014. Despite the Supreme Court's tie vote in June 2016 that halted the implementation of new forms of administrative relief, the PA is Ready! network has pressed forward in recognition of the many unmet needs of immigrant communities across the Commonwealth. It provides us with information on emergency relief funds that we can convey to those in our student population in need. It was the source of the Covid relief funds WTS secured for student families in late 2020.



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Meet Bill Kennedy, President of the WTS Board of Directors



William J. (Bill) Kennedy has served as President of Welcoming the Stranger since 2008. Bill and his wife Camille initially became involved as classroom volunteers in WTS founder Sturgis Poorman's ESL class.

Bill graduated from Temple University School of Law, Evening Division, in 1966 and joined the Philadelphia law firm Dechert, Price and Rhoads (now Dechert, LLP) where he practiced until his retirement in 2002.

Bill has served as past president of the Pennsylvania Prison Society; past president of the Philadelphia and Suburban Lawn Tennis Association; past president of the Bucks County Coalition of Senior Communities; and past president of the Traditions at Washington Crossing Homeowners Association. He also currently serves as a Trustee of the St. George Church Scholarship Fund and as Vice President of the Council Rock Senior Center.

WTS thanks Bill for his continued support and dedication!

To make a donation, please click below. Thank you!

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