

**Citizenship Ceremony for Immigrant Youth:
“Today is the First Day of the Rest of your Life!”**

By Judy Wyman Kelly

On November 23, 2015 words of wisdom, hearty congratulations, and citizenship certificates were offered to 20 immigrant youth ranging from ages 5 to 16 and representing all corners of the world. The Honorable Judge Donna Martinez presided over this special ceremony joined by community leaders, state officials, and friends and families. “Today is the first day of the rest of your life!” Hartford Public Schools Chief of Staff, Dr. Gislaine Ngounou, told them!

These immigrant youth derived their citizenship through their recently naturalized parents. Many adult immigrants aspire for citizenship to ensure that their children have the opportunities that they may never have had such as, a right to free public education. By participating in such a ceremony, the child proudly takes the Oath of Citizenship and gains appreciation of his parents’ similar experiences.



Left to right: Courtroom Deputy Robert Wood, USCIS Section Chief Ethan Enzer,
HPS Chief of Staff Dr. Gislaine Ngounou

The event was opened by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Section Chief Ethan Enzer, who offered his congratulations and also thanked the library for a 15-year partnership.

Enzer was followed by the Presentation of Colors by three leaders of the CURET Boy Scout Troop 1443, as well as a soon-to-be Eagle Scout and, also, new citizen.



Leaders and member of the CURET Boy Scout Troop 1443

After a lovely rendition of the National Anthem sung by Eduardo Rocha, HPL Immigration Legal Services Manager Maryanne Daly-Doran officially welcomed the more than fifty attendees from Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Honduras, India, Israel, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, South Korea, and Ukraine. Judge Martinez led the new citizens in the Oath of Allegiance and all participants in the Pledge of Allegiance, after which she, Connecticut Secretary of State Denise Merrill, and HPS's Ngounou shared their own immigration stories.



Pledge of Allegiance



The Honorable Judge Donna Martinez

Martinez’s son is adopted from Colombia and her grandmother arrived at age 13, alone, illiterate, and with no knowledge of English. “Being naturalized is such an important part of everyone’s history,” Martinez said. “Every single one of you has your own story. Be sure to tell it, often!”

Merrill’s grandmother arrived from Ireland in 1917 with only a few cents to her name and yet went on to become a successful business woman in California.

Merrill urged the new citizens to care about their city and their state and to vote in order to “participate in this most marvelous government in the world.”



Connecticut Secretary of State Denise Merrill

Ngounou, herself an immigrant from Cameroon, explained that her arrival at age 16 was made possible by the “sacrifices of many people who believed in me.” Becoming an American

citizen “comes with great responsibilities,” Ngounou advised the new citizens, and implored them to “seize the opportunities that will come your way, and knock on doors that appear to be locked. Stay focused, stay hopeful, build connections and relationships and learn, learn, learn.”

The new citizens went to the stage one by one to receive their certificates of naturalization and, as a bonus, take pictures with the judge! On their way back to their families, USCIS Community Relations Officer Erika Taylor and HPL staff presented gifts bags and a copy of the book, *We are America*, by Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers.



Each child received a gift bag and a copy of *We Are America* by Walter Dean Myers



Erika Taylor, USCIS, presenting gift bags

Welcome to Connecticut and to the United States of America!

