

GUEST COLUMN

Fellow citizens, welcome to this journey for the American dream

Linda Prokopy

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Linda Prokopy was invited to speak at the naturalization ceremony on Friday in West Lafayette. Her remarks are presented here in their entirety.

I moved to America 33 years ago with my parents at the age of 11. It quickly became my home, and I was fortunate enough to get a green card because of my dad's job.

When I was 22, as I was graduating from university, I was eligible to become a U.S. citizen and I didn't hesitate. I never considered not becoming a citizen — this is the country I effectively grew up in, and I had long considered it to be my home.

I am a political person, and I didn't like not being able to vote once I turned 18. I also believed in the fundamentally American values of democracy, free speech and freedom of religion. In Great Britain, where I grew up, a Christian prayer was said during all school assemblies. In contrast, the United States is founded on the critical premise of separation of church and state, and I believe this is liberating for everyone.

But this country is not perfect — its history is rooted in slavery, near genocide of Native Americans and persecution of immigrant groups. Its current day is marred by inequitable treatment of minority groups, high levels of poverty, a degraded environment and an underfunded public education system. With these issues, it is sometimes challenging for me to be "patriotic" and proud to be an American. I refuse to say the Pledge of Allegiance when I do not believe our country currently ensures "liberty and justice for all." But instead of giving in to despair, I instead remind myself why I chose to become a citizen.

And ultimately I have a deep faith and optimism that the American dream will prevail and there one day will be liberty and justice for all in a way that could only happen in America where our Constitution supports our rights to speak up for what we believe in ... but this will only happen when the American people, including you, use their privileges to not only vote but to speak out against injustices and speak up in favor of the rights of all people, including future generations.

I have voted in every election since I became a citizen (even uncontested primary elections). I write letters to the editor, I write to and call my elected representatives, I financially support political candidates I believe in and spend time campaigning for them, I attend protest rallies and candlelight vigils. I am a proud member of the League of Women Voters and the American Civil Liberties Union, which fights for our First Amendment rights.

As new citizens, you probably know the Constitution better than many people born into citizenship, and you understand the importance of upholding and practicing our freedom of speech. I use my rights and responsibilities as a U.S. citizen to try to make this country a better place for everyone, including all of you becoming citizens today.

I welcome you to this journey — being an American citizen is not a passive activity but a call to action. If you haven't already done so, register to vote today and make plans to vote every year in not only national elections but also local elections. It's easy to know and care about national elections, but local candidates and elections are also very important, so take some time to get to know our candidates at this local level.

The truly great thing about America is that you don't have to agree with a single thing I just said and you are still welcome here. So today I welcome you all as citizens of this country with the same rights, responsibilities and privileges as citizens born in this country. Let's collectively fight for the American dream so that we can proudly wave the American flag, sing our national anthem and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Prokopy is a professor in the Department of Forestry and Natural Resources at Purdue University. She lives in West Lafayette.



Daleth Assad, right, embraces Thalita Mendes following Friday's naturalization ceremonies in West Lafayette. Assad, originally from Brazil, was sworn in as a naturalized American citizen.

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