

# ManhattanTimes

The bilingual newspaper of Washington Heights and Inwood

## Making the Call –

CUNY's Citizenship Now! program at 16

Story and photos by Robin Elisabeth Kilmer

**Wednesday, June 19, 2013** - Rosybel Escamilla has been busy hitting the books. She has been studying for her citizenship test. Despite being eligible for citizenship five years ago, it is a task Escamilla, who moved to New York City from Puebla, Mexico in 1992 when she was seven years old, hadn't been able to dedicate herself to until recently.



"They really help out," said Rosybel Escamilla, with her son.

The problem, explained Escamilla, a single mother of a five-year-old son, was the prohibitive cost of the application, which is \$700.

"I wasn't able to afford it," she said.

The fee was only a little less than her monthly rent.

Moreover, she had to pay for her son's childcare, food, and other expenses.

Not being a citizen has excluded her from voting (Obama would have been her choice).

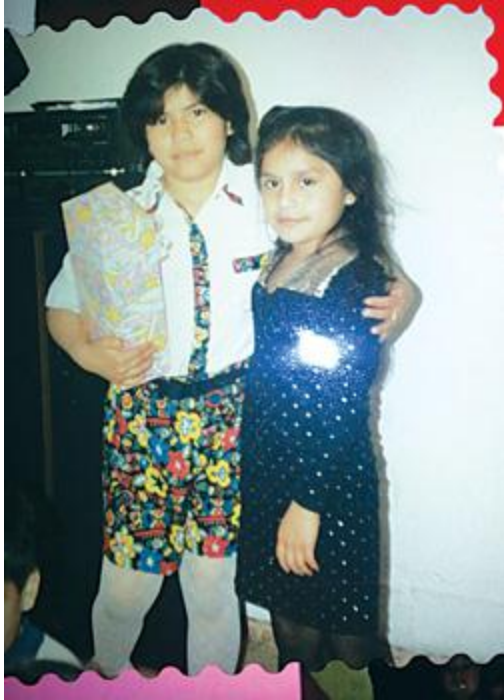
Her lack of citizenship has prevented her from following her dreams.

"I've been thinking about applying to the police academy, and they told me I had to be a citizen," she said.

Fortunately, Escamilla heard about a way to get help.

The mission of City University of New York's Citizenship Now! program has been to provide assistance to those seeking citizenship.

Every year the program hosts a Call-In. Thousands of calls are received from all parts of the city, with a large concentration from the Bronx and Northern Manhattan.



Escamilla immigrated from Puebla, Mexico at the age of 7, and is gearing up for her citizenship test

Callers are screened to see if they qualify for citizenship; if so, they are referred to one of CUNY's application assistance workshops.

Escamilla called during April's Citizenship Now! Call-In, and was promptly scheduled to attend an application assistance event at John Jay College the following week.

She said the experience was overwhelmingly positive.

Moreover, that expensive application fee?

Escamilla qualified for a voucher to pay for her application, and even received assistance filling out her forms.

"They really help out. They had the patience to fill out all those papers," she laughed.

She reported that the process took just three hours. She had her fingerprints taken earlier this week and will take her test soon after.

"I hope more people can get help like I did," she said.

That is Prof. Allan Wernick's goal, too.

Together with CUNY Senior Vice Chancellor Jay Hershenson, Wernick, an immigration attorney and professor at Baruch College, founded Citizenship Now! in 1997 to address the growing need for free citizenship and immigration services among CUNY's foreign-born students, faculty, and staff.



One of the programs of CUNY's Citizenship Now!, The 'Call-In' offers help to thousands of participants.

Responding to high demand for these services in other communities, CUNY soon expanded its mission to benefit all New Yorkers.

Its first Call-In consisted of 24 phone lines, and calls were fielded in English.

The most recent Call-In in April featured 48 phone lines, and calls were conducted in multiple languages—with a separate room altogether to field calls in Spanish.

Aside from volunteers who take all calls, there are two separate screeners for callers who are likely candidates for citizenship; they schedule appointments for application assistance—which greatly increases the efficacy of the process for

people like Escamilla.

In total, over 90,000 participants have been assisted since Citizenship Now! was founded.

It has now developed into the country's largest university-based citizenship and immigration law service provider, operating nine centers throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

Keeping to his characteristically casual manner, Wernick noted, "It's pretty cool."

*For more on CUNY's Citizenship Now! year-round programs, please visit [www.cuny.edu/about/resources/citizenship.html](http://www.cuny.edu/about/resources/citizenship.html).*



Wernick at work

CUNY Professor Allan Wernick has been on the immigration frontlines for a long time.

He was born in Southern California to two immigrant parents.

His father was from Poland, and his mother was from Canada.

His vocation started decades ago as a student in San Diego, California. He started learning Spanish as a result of an internship he had in law school.

At the time, he was living in what he described as an urban commune, and was acutely interested in social justice issues.

He worked with Bert Corona, who Wernick calls the "grandfather of progressive immigration policy."

"I just stuck with it," he said.

But he didn't stick with California.

Instead, he moved to Brooklyn, where the young attorney picked up the case of a Dominican immigrant that was arrested in a factory raid. It was his first case.

The detained man gave the authorities a false name at the time of the raid, and at the hearing, didn't give his name at all.

Wernick contested that the man's arrest was unlawful.

How, argued the first-time attorney, could authorities arrest him when they didn't know he was undocumented, since they didn't even know his name?

"It was a very combative tactic," admits Wernick.

But it worked- the argument was successful in drawing the attention away from the man's legal status.

“It was an interesting case. It went on forever,” he recalled. “For a young lawyer, it was difficult. Everyone was yelling at him and yelling at me.”

It remained an exciting case through and through.

At one point during the hearing, someone called for the man’s arrest.

“These big guys just started moving onto this guy,” said Wernick, who continued to ask if the police were certain they were after the right man.

Eventually the man was allowed to leave court.

“That was a pretty dramatic moment.”

The man picked up on the factory raid left unscathed, and undeported.

“I started getting referrals from the Dominican community after that case,” said Wernick.

Eventually, Wernick was compelled to move to the heart of the same community that sought him out, and he made his way to Washington Heights, where he still lives. He also helped to found the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights in 1982.

Wernick plans to expand the reach of CUNY Citizenship Now. It will host its first gala in September, and while many details are being planned, Wernick wants to honor volunteers and new citizens.

“It’s time to come out in a bigger way. We believe immigration reform is going to be happening, and we’re gearing up for it.”