

## LWVS Lends A Hand On The Road To Citizenship By Ronny Hersch and Amy Cooper

Among its many activities, each year, the League of Women Voters assists local officials at the Westchester County Naturalization Court by welcoming new citizens, and providing them with important voter information. This program is coordinated by the League of Women Voters of Westchester, who, through various local Westchester Leagues, welcomes thousands of new citizens each year. On January 25th, two members of the Scarsdale League attended the Naturalization Hearing in White Plains, and it was a day to be remembered for them, and even more so for the 120 soon-to-be new citizens. These immigrants filled the courtroom to capacity along with their families and friends who accompanied them to witness their final step to U.S. citizenship. The new citizens varied in age from young adults to senior citizens, all with diverse backgrounds. They represented immigrants from Latin America, Mexico, China, Japan, Denmark, the Middle East, Caribbean and many other countries.

After all the participants were called up individually to hand in their green cards, the heart-warming ceremony began. Honorable David Everett, Supreme Court Judge welcomed the soon-to-be citizens to his court and the country. County Clerk, Timothy Idoni then administered the Oath of Allegiance and led the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, each recited formally by the new citizens. The formalities and oaths touched many in the courtroom. Judge Everett reminded the new citizens that democracy is not a spectator sport and they should become involved in their communities. He recommended they participate in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and other community organizations. He reminded the new citizens that he also was the son of immigrants, and it is not about where you come from but what you make of yourself. Judge Everett stressed the importance of voting in elections and encouraged the new citizens to utilize their new right to vote! He provided a lot of insight and inspiration to the group, which was heartfelt and inspired tears of joy for some.

After the citizens were called up individually to receive their Naturalization Certificate, officially proclaiming their citizenship of the United States, they were able to proceed outside the courtroom where The County Board of Elections was on hand to assist with voter registration. The U.S. Passport office also was there to help the new citizens obtain their passports with photo services, applications and advisors to assist with the application process. Each citizen appeared to cherish both their new right to vote and their ability to obtain a U.S. passport.

From speaking with the new citizens, the process to become a United States citizen is complex and takes many months to complete. In addition to the many requirements for citizenship, each potential citizen needs to complete a background check by the FBI, submit photos and fingerprinting, pass two exams, and be

interviewed by Immigration Services. It was clear from a day at Naturalization Court that those who were sworn in felt that it was all worth it.

The Naturalization Hearings, open to the public, occur twice a month in White Plains where the County swears in about 125 new citizens at a time. For more information about the work of the League of Women Voters of Scarsdale, please visit its website, <http://www.lwvs.org>.