

Celebrating Citizenship in Beaufort

Written by Editor

Tuesday, 15 October 2019 15:34



On Saturday, October 26, Beaufort will honor its newest Americans at Celebrating Citizenship, a public event in the Waterfront Park Pavilion, from 2 – 4 pm.

Celebrating Citizenship committee member Kathy Folsom says, “We are recognizing the history and incredible positive impact of the people in our community who have come from other countries and earned their US citizenship. We will be celebrating over 1,800 Beaufort County Naturalized Americans and their contributions.”

The event will feature several speakers – including USCB Professor Emeritus, Dr. Larry Rowland and US Representative Joe Cunningham – and music by the Lowcountry Community Concert Band. There will be tables of information about citizenship and free refreshments will be served. People are asked to bring their own chairs. Below, a few of Beaufort’s 1,800 naturalized Americans share their stories...

Labi Kryeziu

(pictured above)

I was 29 when I came to live in Beaufort five years ago. It was my third trip to Beaufort and my fifth trip to the US. My first trip was in 2010 visiting California.

My first visit to Beaufort was in 2012 and it was so different from everything in CA! Later that

year I came as a guest of Community Bible Church when I represented the church in my home at the 2012 World Missions Conference. Eighteen months later I came back to marry my wife, Lycia, and build a life together in this wonderful community. She and I met in my country in 2001, where she lived as a missionary for 13 years.

I am from Kosovo where I grew up in a village. It was a simple life with a village school, family farm and family gatherings. Then came a terrible time of war and ethnic cleansing. My teen years were filled with stories of suffering, civilian massacres, the sound of enemy jets, tanks and guns in distant villages. The enemy army was systematically advancing from village to village to run my people from their homes and destroy everything and everyone they could. Our local militia, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), would notify villages of the enemy's approach. In 1998 I had to flee from my village with my mom, grandparents, sister, and two younger brothers. I was 13 years old. My 16 year old brother and my dad had to stay hidden in the mountains because any adult male, if found with his family, was in danger of being taken by the enemy and never heard of again. For a year we moved to three different villages and hid in the mountains until the enemy found us and forced us to leave Kosovo as refugees to Albania. None of us knew if we'd ever see our homes or my dad and brother again.

As refugees in Albania we received water, food and shelter in a refugee camp, and then with an Albanian family who hosted us for four months. During that time America came and saved my country and my family by defeating our enemy. It felt like a miracle when everyone went home. We cried tears of sorrow and tears of joy as we remembered the lost, saw our village burned down and reunited with brothers, fathers, cousins, and uncles. Freedom is good, but freedom isn't free.

A Christian Missionary organization was there providing aid after the war. A retired Marine, now a pastor, and his wife led the mission and later established a church which became our beacon of hope. I became a Christian and helped with the church. Our pastor died suddenly from a heart attack and many years later his widow, Lycia, became my wife.

The process of becoming a US citizen was interesting and exciting. What I wasn't prepared for was how emotionally powerful it was to actually take the oath of citizenship. Earning a US Passport felt like I'd won my freedom all over again. I am the first in my family to become a US Citizen and I am passionately patriotic. This country is unique. It doesn't matter who you are or how you get here. The US is the only place on this earth that offers the opportunity to work hard, learn and establish yourself. Anyone can achieve their American Dream! It bothers me to see young people, who have so much opportunity, be lazy and unproductive. We settled in Beaufort where my wife had lived with her late husband. It is a great place with a wonderful

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quality of life and many opportunities. I started a business in real estate investing where I purchase distressed houses, renovate and sell them. I also have a business in financial services to help other middle Americans achieve their financial goals and dreams.

I want my story to inspire people of all ages, races, and creeds. I want to make a difference by sharing the lessons I continue to learn about God, life, business, and being a contributing member of the community. You never know, if I stay in Beaufort I may become mayor!

Connie Kling

At twenty-two I left County Clare in Ireland and came to Hilton Head. I was amazed at the beauty of the area. This was paradise! Literally, I knocked on the door of some Irish connections on the Island and they took me in. I was working in the food and beverage business which later led me to manage a bar in Beaufort, where I met my husband to be. We married and soon after I purchased an existing business called Deals, a lady's clothing store on Bay Street. I also carry men's Irish caps and rugby shirts along with a variety of Irish jewelry, fragrance, throws, etc. Thanks to the support of locals and tourists, my business has been successful for over 30 years. I came to America and was warmly embraced and I feel especially patriotic when I hear our National Anthem. I am deeply moved and thankful to be part of this wonderful country.

Babet Villena-Alvarez

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