

Becoming Canadian

For newcomers to the country, there's no better celebration of Canada than the citizenship ceremony, which formally welcomes them into the Canadian family. *Our World* speaks to two people who have gone through this ceremony: a Torontonians who became a citizen only last year and a DFAIT employee who recalls the exciting day nearly two decades ago when her dreams of becoming Canadian became a reality.

Beena Brijesh Vora, an accountant now living in Toronto, came from India with her husband and son in 2005. Theirs was a dream common to newcomers—they wanted a better and more secure future for their nine-year-old son, Shrimad.

After studying Canadian history, geography and civic rights and duties to pass the citizenship exam, Beena, accompanied by Shrimad, went through

her citizenship ceremony with 50 other people on July 5, 2010. Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty attended the event held at Queen's Park in Toronto, site of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Beena's group included people from all reaches of the globe. Together, they proudly recited the citizenship oath and then, one by one,

walked up to receive their citizenship certificates.

"There was real excitement in that room," Beena recalls. "Everyone was talking about their good fortune to be part of this country, where you feel at home no matter where you originally come from and where everyone's humanity is respected."

Since he was under 14, young Shrimad did not have to swear the citizenship oath—but he too was delighted to become a new Canadian. Beena laughs as she remembers his excitement when television reporters interviewed him.

For the many DFAIT employees who were born outside of Canada, the citizenship ceremony is one of their fondest memories. Elisa Kaltcheva, advocacy strategist with the Planning, Advocacy and Innovation Division, went through the ceremony

in 1993 at age 18. The journey to that proud moment began four years earlier when she, her parents and her younger brother fled their native Bulgaria because of political persecution, ending up in a refugee camp in Austria. There, after interviews with staff from the UN and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) over the course of a year, they were eventually given landed immigrant status and arrived in Montreal in 1990.

"It was difficult here at first," recalls Elisa, who was only 15 when she arrived in this country. "We had no family and no friends—but we were sure we could build a good life in Canada."

She knew she had to pass a citizenship exam, "And I knew I couldn't afford to fail," she adds. "I studied like I have never studied in my life." The hard work paid off at her oral exam, which she took when she was 18. Her quick answers impressed the citizenship judge. She laughs as she remembers her one slip-up: when asked to name the person who discovered Canada, she was so nervous that she answered Jean Chrétien instead of Jacques Cartier. The judge, an understanding man, praised her for getting at least the initials right and passed her.

Elisa recalls being excited during her citizenship ceremony, but her primary feeling that day was anticipation of a future full of new opportunities that she was determined to take advantage of.

Last year, some 155,000 immigrants like Elisa, Beena and Shrimad participated in roughly 1,700 ceremonies that took place across the country.

Perhaps the ideal day to become a new Canadian is on Canada Day itself. In 2010 on Canada Day, CIC organized 46 ceremonies nationwide. To enhance the sense of celebration, the ceremonies are usually held in such venues as parks, museums or summer fairs. Last year, the ceremony for the National Capital Region was held at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Que., where people from 20 countries were welcomed into the Canadian family.



photo: Photo Features

New Canadians take the citizenship oath on Canada Day at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.