

# From Cuba to America: Finding citizenship in the US



[Beth Walton](mailto:bwalton@citizen-times.com), bwalton@citizen-times.com 10:12 a.m. EDT July 6, 2015



Cuban immigrants from left, Jose Luis Santi Silio, tutor Hannah Epperson, Margarita Maestri, Mayrol Santi, tutor Sandra Johnson, Judith Hernandez, Jose Luis Santi Jr., Luis Mariano Santi, Mario Santi, Ailimys Santi and Alfredo Diaz on the front porch of a family home in West Asheville Thursday afternoon. (Photo: William Woody / wwody@citizen-times.com)

ASHEVILLE – José Luis Santi Silo doesn't hesitate when asked what he likes about America. "Ser libre," he said in Spanish. "To be free."

The grandfather had gathered his family and their English tutors in his West Asheville home to celebrate Thursday morning.

With the help of the Literacy Council of Buncombe County, three generations had just become U.S. Citizens.

As José Santi, 61, begins to tell the tale of their journey from Cuba to America, he starts to cry.

His younger brother, Luis Mariano Santi, 54, steps in.

The Santis were split up during the Cold War, said Luis Santi, who left Cuba with his parents in 1970. José Santi and another brother were left behind.

Under the regime of Fidel Castro, young men of military age weren't allowed to leave Cuba, Luis Santi said.

"There was 27 years of family separation," he added. "There were a lot of people trying to leave in rafts and that sort of thing, but we never wanted him to try that, even though he wanted a better life for his family."

The youngest brother started the paperwork to move the rest of the Santis to America in 1995. It took 13 years for the immigration process to go through. In 2008, the brothers were reunited.

"If you are used to being free all your life, than freedom can be really kind of hard to understand," Luis Santi said. "(Cuba) is a different world, like a different planet. There are so many boundaries there, so many limitations. For my family, freedom is like a big gulp of fresh air."

In America, the electrical grid is reliable, José Santi's son, José Luis Santi Jr., added in Spanish. There is always food on the shelves of the grocery stores and people don't worry so much about being able to afford clothing. There is credit and people have checking accounts and the ability to save.

"Life was very difficult there in the most basic needs," José Santi Jr. said through an interpreter. "It's a way that most Americans wouldn't know or couldn't understand."

Three members of the Santi family recently became naturalized U.S. citizens after studying with Literacy Council for nine months. Another plans to take the test in the fall. Because their mother passed the exam, José Santi's two grandchildren, both born in Cuba, also earned citizenship.

The Literacy Council of Buncombe County offers test preparation services to help foreign-born individuals strengthen their language skills and knowledge of American civics. This year, the nonprofit had 15 students pass the exam, up more than 50 percent than its usual average.

"If we're here, we should participate in the things that all Americans citizens should participate in, like the political process," said José Santi's wife, Margarita Maestri, 62, through an interpreter. "I knew nothing of English when I came here. It was very frustrating, but it was something we had to do."

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization test involves an extensive application and examination. The test is conducted in English and includes listening, speaking, reading and writing.

There are many questions about American history, something that isn't part of the Cuban education system, said Judith Hernández, the Santis' daughter-in-law.

"Our tutors at the Literacy Council made us feel like we were learning about our own country," she said through an interpreter. "I guess this is our country now."

Hernández' tutor, Sandra Johnson, cried when she heard the mother of two passed. "It is one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had," she said. "They are such eager students. They are not there because they have to be. They are there because they want to be. They do the work. They put in the hours. They run families, work multiple jobs and they still show up."

Mini American flags line the walkway to the Santis' trailer. The family is celebrating their first Fourth of July as American citizens. Like everything else, the event is a fusion of Cuban and American cultures.

Maestri was planning a feast of white rice, black beans, roast pork and marinated yucca root. The youngest grandchild, Maykol Santi, 10, was eager for fireworks.

As the family laughed and chatted about their new life together in America, many of them couldn't stop saying thank you.

"Cuba will always be my homeland, but I identify with here now too because this is my new home," Maestri said in Spanish. "I'm very thankful to this country for giving us this opportunity to be able to travel and to come to this area."

"I passed the test at 62 so it can be done," she added. "This is a country of opportunity. Please take advantage of it."

## **GET INVOLVED**

The Literacy Council of Buncombe County is always in need of volunteers and support. Contact [828-254-3442](tel:828-254-3442) or [volunteers@litcouncil.com](mailto:volunteers@litcouncil.com) for more information. To learn more, visit [www.litcouncil.com](http://www.litcouncil.com).