

Naturalized Citizen To Vote, Serve In First Election

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HARRISONBURG — Today is a big day for city resident Ana Aceituno.

"I'm taking my first steps to being a real American," the 25-year-old said.

Aceituno is voting in today's presidential primary — her first election since becoming a U.S. citizen two years ago.

Not only is she casting her first ballot today, Aceituno is also serving at the Keister Elementary School precinct as one of the city's poll officers.

Aceituno and her family arrived in the Friendly City from Brazil 17 years ago to visit her aunt.

"My dad's sister is a nurse at RMH, and she said, 'Oh, I always come visit you, come here and visit,' so we did," she said. "I was only 8 years old. I didn't even know what the United States was at 8."

Shortly after that visit, the family relocated to Virginia permanently, something she said she expected.

"When we got here, I just knew we would be staying," Aceituno said.

Since then, she graduated from Turner Ashby High School and started work at the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community.

She's now taking classes in social work at Blue Ridge Community College, and participating in leadership training through the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce.

"This is my home," Aceituno said. "I haven't been back to Brazil since we moved. I just don't feel the need to go."

Being unable to participate in previous elections makes her appreciate the opportunity she has now, she said.

"At 18, I saw all my friends and classmates voting, and I was so jealous," she said. "It's such a big deal for me, but a lot of people just take it for granted."

She said few people really understand what goes into becoming an U.S. citizen, since it's something natural-born citizens never have to deal with.

"My parents worked so hard to get us here," she said. "There's a lot of lawyers and paperwork. It's a really long process."

Aceituno said today's election is important to her entire family because it will be the first time many of them are able to participate in any sort of election.

"My dad is a permanent resident, but my mom got her citizenship three years ago. My sister and I got ours two years ago, and my brother is working on getting his," she said. "This is such a big deal for the whole family."

Though Aceituno couldn't vote herself, she has always been an advocate for participation in the process.

"I go up to my friends and say, 'You're voting, right? Do you know where your polling place is?'" she said. "A lot of people were like, 'What's the big deal?'"

Aceituno also reached out to some of the residents she works with at VMRC, and one of them encouraged her to apply to be an election officer.

"He knew all about my being in the process of becoming a citizen, and he asked me one day if I'd ever thought about it," she said. "And I hadn't, but then I thought, 'Well, I'm a citizen now, and I need to take advantage of it and show how much of a big deal this is.'"

Harrisonburg Voter Registrar Debbie Logan said she was pleased to see Aceituno get involved in the process as soon as she could.

"A lot of people who've had this right forever just take it for granted, but the ones who've just gotten it are so excited to have it and be a part of it," Logan said. "It's so great to see a new citizen inspired and excited to participate."

Aceituno said participating in an election is just the first of many things she wants to do now that she's officially an American.

"I'm planning a trip to Washington, D.C., so I can go and tour the White House," she said. "Because now I'm a citizen, that's something I can do."

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