



Intelligencer & Journal LANCASTER NEW ERA

It's a proud day for new American **Egyptian native aces big test**

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PHILADELPHIA — The question momentarily stumped Reem Desouky.

She sat in an office of the six-story U.S. Department of Homeland Security building last Monday and tried to remember the name of the governor of Pennsylvania.

"The governor of my state now would be ..., " said Desouky, drawing a blank. "Ummm."

A native of Egypt, Desouky, 38, was taking the 10-question oral exam required of immigrants seeking U.S. citizenship.

Her husband, Essam Hamed, 49, and 5-year-old Moustafa, their American-born son, waited in a separate room across the hall. The family had left its modest Manheim Township home at dawn to arrive in center city Philadelphia for Desouky's 8:20 a.m. test.

"... the governor of my state ...," said Desouky, still searching her brain.

She had studied for that question. It was one of 100 that applicants for citizenship know they may be asked.

Melvin Roby, an immigration officer who was administering the test, looked across his desk at Desouky, who was perched on the edge of her chair, and he patiently waited for her to answer.

Then Desouky said triumphantly, "Corbett! Something Corbett. Tom Corbett."

"Good," Roby said, assuring her she had answered it correctly. "Just relax. Take a deep breath."

Desouky, wearing a black head scarf and long, colorful Egyptian skirt, had correctly answered the first two questions he asked. To pass, she needed to get six out of 10.



Soon after moving to the United States in 2004, the newly married Desouky made up her mind she wanted to be an American citizen, just like Hamed, who had come to this country from Egypt a decade earlier and now works at a Sunoco station.

"One day I want to vote. One day I want to get a bachelor's degree in the United States. And when they ask me, 'Are you an American citizen?' I want to say, 'Yes,' " she told a reporter. "I want to be like everybody else."

But citizenship isn't automatic. Desouky, who taught art in Cairo, first had to satisfy the three-year residency requirement for an immigrant married to a citizen. More importantly, she knew she would have to speak English more fluently and prepare herself for the civics exam.

The odds were in her favor. The Philadelphia office conducts about 15,000 citizenship tests a year, and nationally, the pass rate is 92 percent.

But Desouky wasn't taking any chances. She found study help last fall at a twice-weekly citizenship class taught by Intermediate Unit 13 instructors. The class is funded through a one-year federal grant that might not be renewed.

In January, Desouky started attending a volunteer-led citizenship class that meets Monday evenings at Lancaster Public Library. She became a regular, joining, on average, 17 other immigrants from places like Cuba, Bhutan and Japan.

The instructors, Jason Stevenson, a freelance writer, and Michael Milunic, a stay-at-home dad and former insurance agent, go at a lively clip, using a PowerPoint presentation they developed.

Over the course of a 14-week session, they cover all 100 questions a test taker might encounter. One week the focus is American geography. Another week it's federal holidays.

Stevenson and Milunic ask lots of questions and engage students in conversation. The point is to help them improve their English, something Desouky appreciates because when she is with friends, they prefer to speak Arabic.

On a recent Monday, the class practiced saying "Mississippi" and "Missouri" because one of the test questions asks for the name of one of America's two largest rivers. On another night the class stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Stevenson and Milunic conclude each class with a fun look at American culture that won't show up on the citizenship test but might help immigrants relate better to their American neighbors. One week, for example, Stevenson and Milunic offered a whirlwind review of TV shows, from Ed Sullivan to Bill Cosby.

Since the pair launched the class, called Citizenship Lancaster, in September 2009, more than 75 students have attended at least two classes, Stevenson said, and at least 18 went on to become citizens.

"After nine hours at a fruit-processing factory, would I want to practice citizenship at night?" Stevenson asked. "Maybe not, but they come, and it's humbling for me to encounter their stories. The first man who passed hadn't seen his wife and children in 10 years. He was taking the test with the goal of reuniting his family."

On the Monday before Desouky's scheduled test, Milunic called her to stand in front of the class for a five-question quiz.

"What does a U.S. senator represent?" Milunic asked.

Her hand pressed to her chin, Desouky said, "Toomey, Casey." She had named Pennsylvania's senators but had not provided



the correct answer to the question.

"The answer," Milunic said, "is all the people in their state."

Desouky frowned. "I'm not ready today," she said, but Milunic insisted she continue and she answered three more questions correctly.

On the night before taking the test in Philadelphia, Desouky said she tossed and turned in bed, checking the clock every hour. But her weeks of preparation paid off. Facing Roby, the immigration officer in Philadelphia, Desouky responded in clear English to his many inquiries about her citizenship application. She also wrote a short sentence — "The president lives in the White House" — in response to one of his questions, and she correctly answered the first six questions of the oral exam, which meant the test could end.

"You passed," Roby told her. "Congratulations."

Desouky smiled and chuckled softly.

Passing the interview didn't mean she was an American yet. She will officially become a citizen after swearing an oath at a ceremony in the Lancaster County courthouse later this year.

Last Monday evening, Desouky beamed when she returned to the library for the citizenship class.

"Welcome everybody. We have some exciting news," Milunic announced. "Today. Reem took her interview and passed."

The class applauded her success. Desouky then told everybody about the experience and which of the 100 test questions she was asked.

"He asked me six questions, and I got all of them," Desouky proudly said, letting the other immigrants know that if she can do it, they can, too.