

# LIlife

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**VOLUNTEER  
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A MONTHLY SERIES

# Model citizens

THE TUTORS OF **LITERACY NASSAU**  
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**HOW SUITE** Where to catch 'The Nutcracker' [exploreLI.com/theater](http://exploreLI.com/theater)

"I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

— Edward Everett Hale

# Preparing new citizens

Literacy Nassau extends its reach to help immigrants pass naturalization exam

## VOLUNTEER NATION

A MONTHLY SERIES

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN  
Special to Newsday

**W**ho was president during World War I? How many justices are on the U.S. Supreme Court? Which has the power to provide education — the federal or the state government?

Five students — a couple in their early 20s, a middle-aged man and woman, and a senior — struggled on a recent Thursday afternoon as they tried to first understand the questions, then respond accordingly.

They're all immigrants. English doesn't come easy. But they're eager to soak up as much as they can about American history and government.

The class was held at the Freeport-based nonprofit Literacy Nassau. Its main mission is to provide reading, writing or speaking English lessons through personalized instruction. But in this particular class, the students have also been learning about our country so they can pass a naturalization exam and become U.S. citizens, said Literacy Nassau director Karen Micciche.

Sessions such as this one are run by Literacy Nassau at public libraries throughout Nassau County. The ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and citizenship class on Thursday, was headed



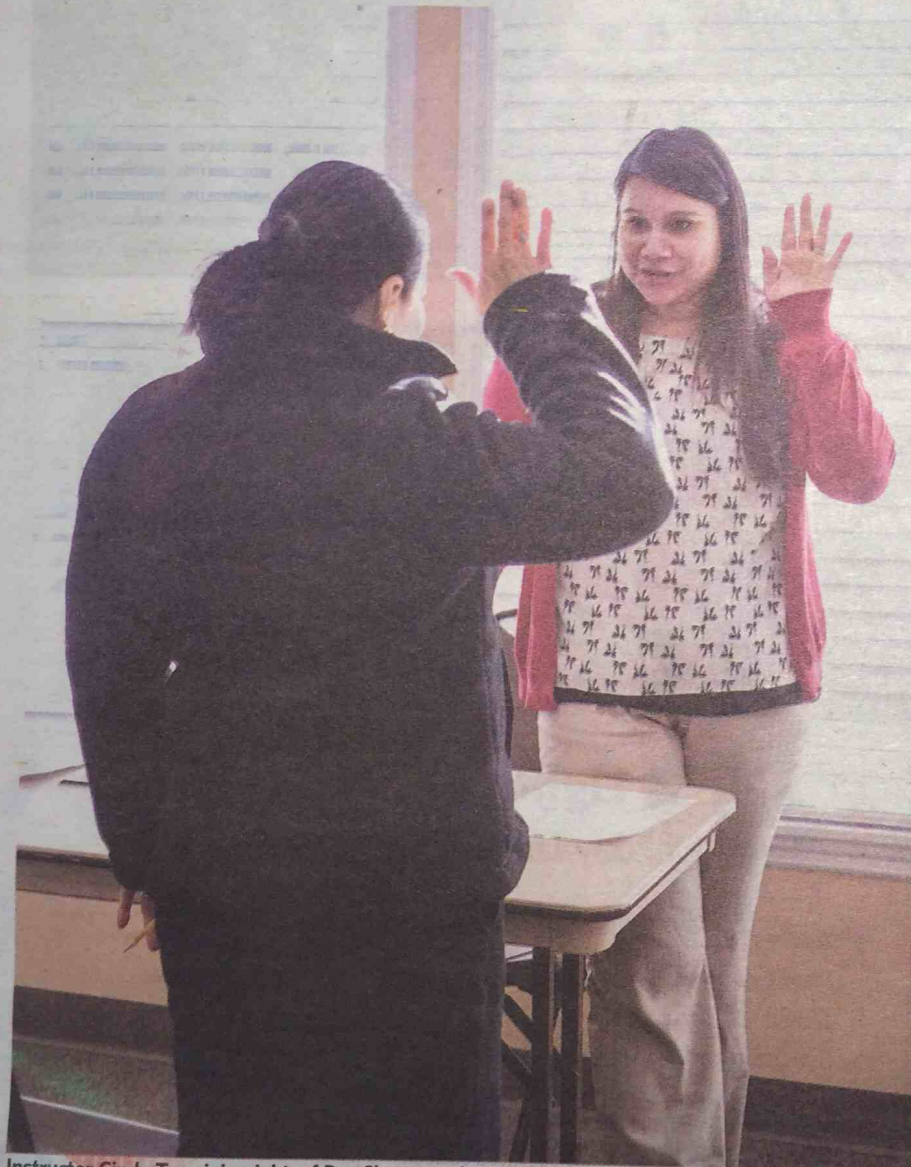
**ON THE COVER** Marta Sanchez of Farmingdale holds her citizenship certificate. Sanchez, who came to the United States from Mexico, became a U.S. citizen in May.

by Digna Johnson, one of three teachers hired by Literacy Nassau with a \$150,000 grant. It was awarded in 2012 when Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office was establishing the New York State Office for New Americans.

### State effort

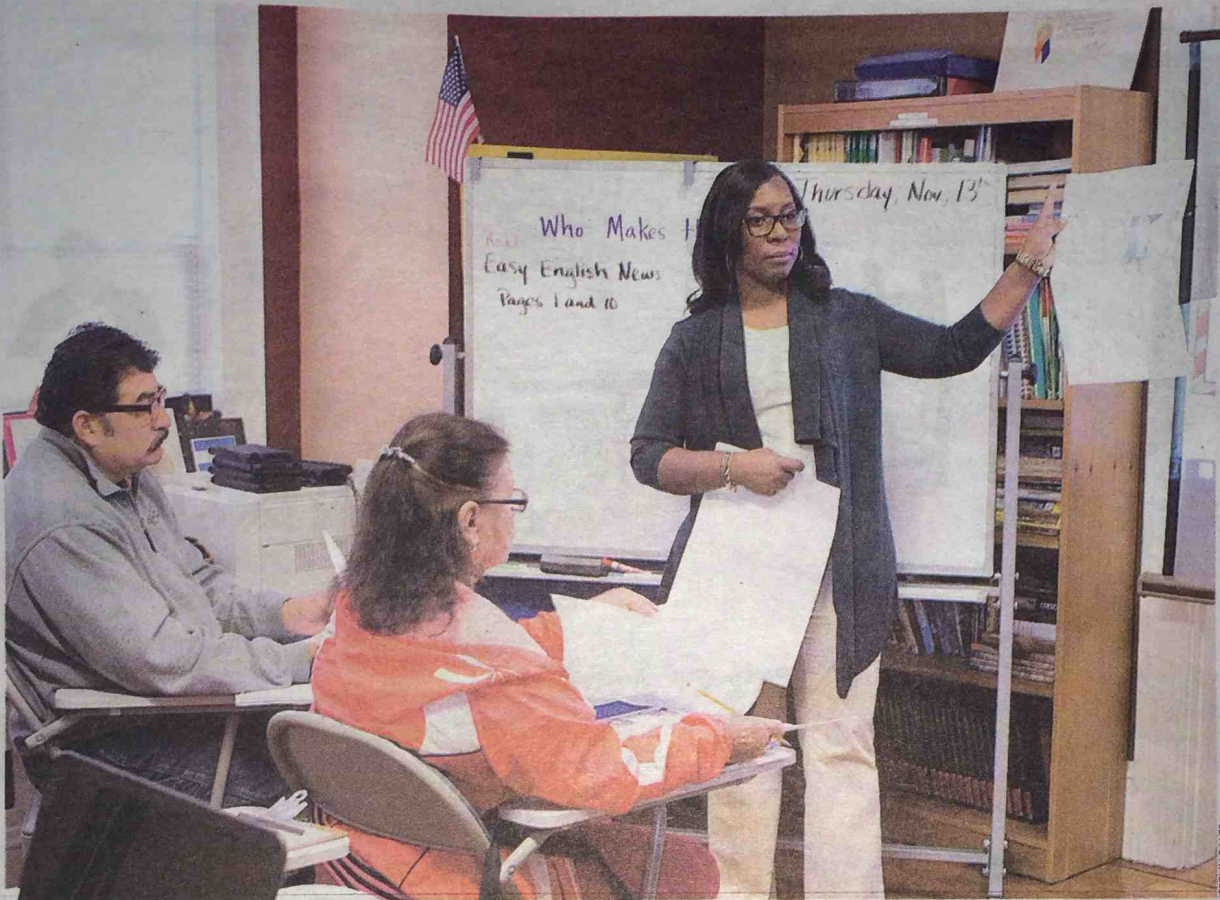
In March 2013, the Office for New Americans was officially launched to help immigrants who wish to fully participate in civic and economic life, said Jorge Montalvo, the office's director, by providing them with free access to English language and civics classes so they can become naturalized citizens, if eligible.

Literacy Nassau is one of 27 Office for New Americans Opportunity Centers set up



Instructor Cindy Treminio, right, of Bay Shore, works with Maxima Diaz of Amityville at a citizenship course held at St. Kilian Roman Catholic Church in Farmingdale.

JEREMY BALES



Digna Johnson, one of three teachers hired by Literacy Nassau after the group was awarded a \$150,000 grant in 2012, works with a class of students in Freeport. ■ Video, more photos at [newsday.com/lilife](http://newsday.com/lilife)

across New York State within established organizations that already offer community programs. Make the Road New York/CARECEN's Brentwood office and the Economic Opportunity Commission of Nassau County in Hempstead are the other two on Long Island.

What's unique about Literacy Nassau is that "they offer the same services, but the delivery of the service is different," Montalvo said. "Literacy Nassau is more focused on volunteers who teach alongside the teacher, while the others have traditional classroom settings."

According to Micchiche, Literacy Nassau has 354 tutors working with students, helping them with basic literacy. But 43 of those are designated Office for New Americans volunteer tutors who come from all walks of life: retired teachers, lawyers, bankers. They're matched with 46 students (two tutors work with more than one student) based on common geography and availability. They supplement the formal classroom lessons



Literacy Nassau volunteer Carol Markman and board treasurer Judy Beckman read a guidebook for tutors at a training workshop.

taught by hired teachers such as Johnson.

#### Federal initiative

On Nov. 20, President Barack Obama issued an executive order protecting nearly 5 million people who are living in

the country illegally from deportation. The action will affect mostly parents and young people, and the Office for New Americans said it will help those who are eligible to apply under Obama's initiative.

Micchiche said Literacy Nas-

sau will have some educational seminars on the deportation deferrals to educate people and let them know where they stand, but no dates have been set yet.

Literacy Nassau volunteers are required to take a 12-hour workshop before working one-on-one with a student. They can then indicate a preference for the student's gender, language proficiency and reading level, according to literacy specialist Barbara Fody.

Retired dentist Mel Breshin of Plainview meets his student, Shushila Patel of Levittown, at the Plainview-Old Bethpage library on Thursday nights.

"We go over a lot of vocabulary, and I try to anticipate the questions they're going to ask her" when she takes her naturalization exam, he said. The test includes reading and writing sentences in English, plus orally answering as many as 10 out of 100 random questions on U.S. history and government. Applicants must answer six of 10 questions correctly to pass

See COVER STORY on G6

## Joining the cause

Volunteers signed up as of Nov. 25 as part of a Long Island Volunteer Center initiative

Goal: 153,000

150,000

149,240

125,000

100,000

75,000

50,000

25,000

0

Find volunteer opportunities at [longislandvolunteercenter.org](http://longislandvolunteercenter.org)

JEREMY BALES

HEATHER WALSH

coverstory



Literacy specialist Barbara Fody conducts a tutor training workshop in Manhasset for new Literacy Nassau volunteers earlier this month.

# Tutoring toward citizenship

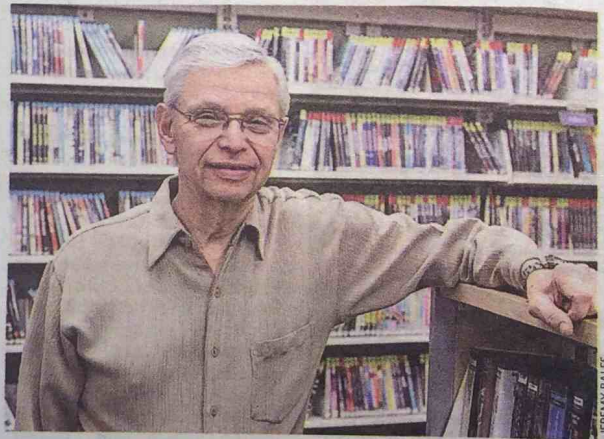
COVER STORY from G4

the civics portion of the test. If they're asked, Woodrow Wilson was president during World War I; the Supreme Court has nine justices; and states have the power to provide education. Learning those facts and other material is especially taxing for those with limited language and reading skills in English.

Patel, who is Indian, is in her mid-50s. Said Breshin, "Every time I ask her, 'Why do you want to become a citizen?' she says, 'Because I love the United States. I love living here and I want to vote.' So she's very motivated, and that motivates me."

Marta Sanchez knows the feeling. She became a naturalized citizen in May and voted in her first U.S. election on Nov. 4 with a friend who is also a new citizen.

"I was excited and nervous but happy now because I do



the first time, and it's good for me," said Sanchez, 46, who lives in Farmingdale and came to the United States from Mexico. "It's important to vote. I didn't know what I needed to do. I will vote in the next election."

For two years, retired bank

executive Sharyn Parr, 70, of Plainview, has helped a Pakistani couple at the Hicksville library.

With assistance from Literacy Nassau, their 21-page citizenship application Form N-400 has been submitted.

Micciche, who lives in Wan



Volunteer Mel Breshin, of Plainview, left, has been working with Shusila Patel, above, of Levittown, to prepare her for the citizenship test.

tagh, said Literacy Nassau frequently conducts citizenship drives offering free services, including private legal consultations and help completing applications, mailing and follow-up, for people who are not students with the Office for New Americans.

### Preparing for the test

A face-to-face naturalization exam at a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office can only take place after a citizenship application has been submitted and approved.

The cost is \$680 per person, but Literacy Nassau can help with that, too.

"We provide assistance with the I-912 application, which is the fee waiver, for folks who qualify," Micciche said. "To qualify, you have to demonstrate financial hardship or inability to pay the fee."

Come test day, students aren't the only ones thinking about the outcome.

"I hope they pass the test," Parr said of her students.

"They're very caring people and they love this country. These people view this country as a blessing to them."

That's a sentiment expressed by Edwin Duran, 24, who came to the United States alone six years ago from the Dominican

## Volunteer Spotlight

### Diane Dubno

What does a devoted teacher do with a passion for education after retiring? For Diane Dubno, the answer was to keep teaching.

Dubno, a resident of Rockville Centre, was an elementary school speech language teacher for 25 years before retiring five years ago at 61. She's a board member of the Rosa Lee Young Childhood Center in Rockville Centre, where she assists with fundraising. "We raise money for scholarships for parents and children who need to go there but can't afford it," she said.

While that's fulfilling for the mother of two adult children, it wasn't enough.

"I knew I would miss teaching," said Dubno, whose husband, Peter, is a retired math teacher, "and thought, 'How can I continue in some capacity on a volunteer basis?'"

The answer was in an article about Literacy Nassau that she happened upon in the Rockville Centre Herald, a weekly community newspaper. Dubno has been a volunteer tutor with the nonprofit for the past three years and has worked one-on-one with several immigrants. One of them was Edwin Duran, who also wanted to take the naturalization exam and become a U.S. citizen.

"I started with him in 2012," Dubno recalled. "He was fantastic. A quick study and eager to learn vocabulary, writing and improve his reading skills."

In May, with his tutor waiting just outside the exam room, Duran passed the naturalization test with flying colors, and in June took his oath of citizenship in Holtsville. While he's done with his lessons, he stays in touch with his tutor. "He called me about two weeks ago," Dubno said proudly.

"It's extremely rewarding to be able to make a difference in the lives of others — knowing I can impact their lives, and affording them the ability to acquire a better job, a better economic future, a car, a house — all things that are part of the American dream."

— CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN



### SIGN ME UP

Literacy Nassau's Office for New Americans program seeks volunteers who would enjoy working on language material related to citizenship. Tutor training workshops are held as many as 20 times a year. A schedule can be found at [nwsdy.li/tutorschedule](http://nwsdy.li/tutorschedule)

Volunteers must be at least 18, with a high school diploma or its

equivalent and have a comfortable command of English.

Officials ask for a good-faith commitment of one year to the program. You must also be able to tutor in Nassau County.

For more information, contact Alison Orme, director of volunteer recruitment and retention, at 516-867-3580.

For frequently asked questions, visit [nwsdy.li/literacyfaq](http://nwsdy.li/literacyfaq)

### YOU MIGHT CONSIDER . . .

Want to become a U.S. citizen? There's an app for that!

There are several smartphone apps to test your knowledge of U.S. history and government. This one, which features flash cards with 100 basic questions, is free: [nwsdy.li/citizenapp](http://nwsdy.li/citizenapp)

To qualify for naturalization, you must be at least 18, be a lawful U.S. permanent resident and have resided in the United States continuously for five years (or three years if married to a U.S. citizen). You must have good moral character and be able to speak, read and write English. You must also be knowledgeable about U.S. history and the country's system of government.

Applicants must file a Form N-400 Application for Naturalization and then complete an in-person interview with a U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services officer. At that time, written and oral English and civics tests will be administered. On passing, the applicant will receive a notice to take the Oath of Allegiance at a naturalization ceremony. A certificate of naturalization will then be distributed.

Two other Long Island organizations are Office for New Americans Opportunity Centers:

#### Economic Opportunity Commission of Nassau County

134 Jackson St., Hempstead  
516-292-9710; [eoc-nassau.org](http://eoc-nassau.org)  
**Make The Road/CARECEN**  
1090 Suffolk Ave., Brentwood;  
631-231-2220  
[carecenny.wordpress.com](http://carecenny.wordpress.com)

For more volunteer information and opportunities, contact the **LONG ISLAND VOLUNTEER CENTER** at 516-564-5482; [longislandvolunteercenter.org](http://longislandvolunteercenter.org)

Republic. For two years, he worked with tutor Diane Dubno at the Rockville Centre Public Library.

"It was a great experience," Duran said, adding that he's happy someone was able to devote time to help him.

She accompanied him to the naturalization exam in May. "He came out after 10 minutes with a big smile, beaming, and I knew he passed!" Dubno recalled.

Duran took his oath of citizenship in June in Holtsville and is one of the at least 50 people who Micchiche said have been tutored by her group's volunteers to gain citizenship. But unlike Duran, not everyone does well the first time around.

Said literacy specialist Umama Pasha, who began with Literacy Nassau as a volunteer in 2011 and is now a paid employee, "When a person applies, they have two chances to take the naturalization test. If they don't do well in speaking, reading or writing, they have an opportunity to go back," without having to reapply and pay the fee again.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. naturalizations increased from 757,434 in 2012 to 779,929 in 2013. In the New York State area, which includes New Jersey and parts of Pennsylvania, the number of people naturalized in 2012 was 123,891. By 2013, that

number went up to 136,513.

Among those was Bridgitte, 50, a native of Trinidad. She began lessons with her tutor, Susan Santoro Bevilacqua, four years ago at the Roosevelt Public Library. She became a U.S. citizen in September.

"I drove her to the courthouse in Islip and went to the ceremony," said Bevilacqua, 54, a real estate attorney from Rockville Centre. "I felt very proud of her."

For Bevilacqua, the experience was surprisingly emotional on a deeper level.

"I'd never seen anyone get sworn in as a citizen, and it mustered up patriotic feelings," she said. "It was inspiring to see so many people wanting to become Americans."



A student takes notes at a Literacy Nassau class leading toward the test for U.S. citizenship.