

Gwinnett diversity on display at multicultural festival

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The second annual Gwinnett Public Safety Multicultural Festival played host to 25 residents who took the Oath of Allegiance to become U.S. citizens Saturday. Here, the new Americans pose for a photo. (Staff Photo: Joshua Sharpe)



The event, held at Gwinnett Place Mall in Duluth, had a variety of attractions, including police and fire department vehicles and demonstrations, as well as dancers hailing from around the world. Here, members of Grupo Folclórico de Costa Rica Grano de Oro, affiliated with the Asociación De Costa Rica

DULUTH — On Saturday at Gwinnett Place Mall, you could watch dancers hailing from around the world, drop a cop in a dunk tank and, if you'd done the legwork, become a United States citizen.

The second annual Gwinnett Public Safety Multicultural Festival drew hundreds — residents, public safety workers and officials — to the sprawling Duluth shopping development off Satellite Boulevard. The sunny parking lot was lined with fire trucks, police vehicles and information booths manned by workers from the Gwinnett County Police Department, other departments around the county and organizations such as the Center for Pan Asian Community Services.

At one table, a Duluth Police Department officer greeted residents in Spanish and passed out handheld American flags.

One dance group, performing Korean numbers, came to represent First Baptist Church of Duluth, where a congregation including people of 32 different nationalities is said to worship.

In all, the spirit of the festival was one of inclusion, with dozens of officials — government and non-profit — putting forth an effort to show that all are welcome in Gwinnett, a county that has in the last few decades become a widely-known example of diversity in the Southeast.

Gwinnett's reputation and the spirit of the festival were clear factors behind the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' decision to hold a naturalization ceremony during the event.

At noon, 25 immigrants who live around the county took the Oath of Allegiance, officially becoming U.S. citizens. Afterward, the new Americans, many with paperwork in one hand and a small version of the stars and stripes in the other, hugged family. Then they posed for a picture with some of Gwinnett's highest officials, including county police chief Butch Ayers and fire chief Casey Snyder.

Ella Agamez waived her flag in the photo.

A Lawrenceville resident, she's been in the U.S. since 2005. She said she immigrated from Columbia for greater opportunities. She found them, too, now working in a pharmacy.

Even 10 years in, Saturday's ceremony changed things.

"You're feeling really part of the country," she said, smiling.

For Vidhi Shah and her family, the feeling was similar.

The 21-year-old Georgia Gwinnett College student said she looked forward to American opportunities — mostly educational — not possible in her native India.

— Atlanta, perform. (Staff Photo: Joshua Sharpe)

"I'm going to live here for the rest of my life. It's better to be a citizen," she said.

In taking the oath, Shah also broke new ground for her family.

"She's the first citizen," proud father Kalpesh Shah said. "It's very important for us."

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