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Residents help with high cost of citizenship

Concerned citizens donate money to cover increased application fee of \$675

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When Kevin Connolly heard that local immigrants were having difficulty coming up with the money to pay the new application fee for citizenship, he was compelled to do something.

The citizenship application fee, which rose from \$400 to \$675, was among a number of new processing fees for immigration petitions and applications that took effect in August.

"I said to my wife, 'Maybe we could make up the difference for somebody?' " Connolly said.

Connolly, whose own parents were Irish immigrants who settled in San Francisco in the 1930s, recently gave Catholic Charities of the Santa Rosa Diocese a \$275 check to help an immigrant cover the fee hike. The retired financial adviser was among several local residents who pitched in to help immigrants after they heard about the fee hike.

Last week, Connolly met Rafaela Zavala, a Mexican immigrant who was to receive \$100 of the money he and his wife contributed.

Zavala, a part-time in-home care worker who sometimes works as a house cleaner, and her husband, a construction worker, are struggling financially. A mortgage and growing debts leave little money to cover the extra cost of citizenship.

Connolly said he "felt the injustice of such a large increase in rates making it harder" for people to become citizens.

"My mother was a maid and my father worked in construction," Connolly said. "It's interesting, the parallels in our lives."

Zavala, who recently completed Catholic Charities' citizenship class, said she was thrilled when she found out an American citizen wanted to help people like her.

"I felt emotion," she said, speaking in English with a heavy accent. "I was excited. I wanted to thank the person."

Mary Lowe, naturalization supervisor for Catholic Charities, said the fee increase has discouraged some from applying for citizenship, especially during the holidays.

"I called back clients who canceled because they said they couldn't afford it," Lowe said. "And also because of the Christmas holiday, that's their main priority, getting gifts for the kids."

Other immigration fee hikes include the cost of replacing a green card, which went from \$190 to \$390, and applying for employment authorization, which rose from \$180 to \$340. Some of these fees include an \$80 "biometric" charge for fingerprinting and photos.

Tom Boyd of Petaluma said he was compelled to help out after reading about the fee hike. Boyd, a small-business consultant, told Catholic Charities that he wanted to make up the \$275 difference for a prospective citizenship applicant.

"It just kept bugging me, that I should do something," Boyd said.

Like Connolly, Boyd reflected on his immigrant roots. He was born in Germany in 1948, a year after his father, an American GI, married a German citizen.

"My mother used to tell me about my uncle, who went to New York in the 1920s, and about his struggle," Boyd said.

The story of Angel Jimenez, a Mexican immigrant profiled in a Press Democrat article about the fee increases, prompted Boyd to offer help.

"We're a country of immigrants," Boyd said. "People forget that at times."

Jimenez's story also motivated local Santa Rosa attorney Michael C. Fallon to offer \$675 to cover the entire application fee for Jimenez. Fallon said the idea that someone could not become a citizen because of money didn't sit well with him.

"I just couldn't see that this man should be deprived of his citizenship for \$600 dollars," Fallon said. "I just wanted to help."

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