



Dr. Joe Schaffer, President || Laramie County Community College
Remarks given at the US District Court District of Wyoming
NATURALIZATION CEREMONY
November 7, 2016. || Laramie County Community College

Good morning, and welcome to Laramie County Community College. Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to share some remarks with you on this special day. It truly is an honor to be part of this ceremony. This is actually my first naturalization ceremony, so it is also a learning experience for me.

Chief Judge Freudenthal, Judges Rankin, Phillips, and Parker, my sincere appreciation for your leadership in our judicial system and all you do for our state and country. Also, thank you for choosing to host this naturalization ceremony here at LCCC. It is an opportunity for us to engage in our community and for the community to engage with the College.

And to our newest citizens of the United States of America, my heartfelt congratulations to each and every one of you on this special day. I hope you realize what an accomplishment and privilege it is to become a citizen of our country.

This weekend, I was sitting in my home office working on these remarks when my youngest daughter, Lia, who is six years of age, asked me what I was doing. Now, Lia is at that interesting age where she can surprise you with her rapidly advancing intellect, but also remind you quickly of the simplicity of her childhood innocence. However, one thing she doesn't lack is sassiness.

I told her I was trying to write some things down that I could share with people who had just become Americans. She looked at me for a second, then in a dismissive tone, she said:

“Dad, what do you know about being an American? You're from Minnesota.”

I was caught off guard and had to wonder if that was a moment of true ignorance, or perhaps an insight into some advanced intelligence. No offense to any Minnesotans in the room!

Of course I promptly sent her to her room! I also made a mental note to have a conversation with her social studies teacher at school.

All levity aside, her statement got me to thinking. What do I really know about being an American? And perhaps more poignantly, how much do I take for granted about being a citizen of this great country.

While I pondered this, I came to the realization that I envy you, and all those newly sworn into the citizenry of the United States. Let me explain.

My wife and I are fourth generation Americans. Her family immigrating from Bulgaria and Italy, my family from Austria and Sweden. Yet more than a century separates our lives from those of our great grandparents, who had to struggle with the transition to this country.

In addition, our knowledge of the challenges America faced as a developing nation - with individuals from so many different backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures coming together to form a new world - came from what we were told in a classroom or what we read in books. Now there's nothing wrong with this, but I cannot deny that fact that I experienced America's development, and really becoming an American, second-hand.

I believe part of what made our country great was the very fact that those who helped charter our constitution, shape our laws, develop our cities and states, had to experience this strife first-hand.

Their pain, and accomplishments in overcoming adversity, helped instill a pride and commitment that has become the social fabric of what was, and is, America. I envy you because you too have had to endure the effort of transitioning from your native country to becoming a citizen of the United States.

My business is education, and specifically higher education and the community colleges. These institutions, and the shifting perspective on education in America over time, is a wonderful case study of the development of our democracy in the United States. Humor me while I take you through a bit of history.

Not long after colonization, the first institutions of higher education were established in America. Not surprisingly, given the early colonist's roots and origins, these institutions were modeled after colleges and universities in Europe. And for nearly two hundred years, higher education in America followed a European model.

Similar to those served in Europe, these early American colleges and universities served a very small, elite population of individuals. The educational focus was on religion, classic texts and languages, and philosophy – far from what many would consider a practical education.

Things began to change though in the mid 1800's. State charters for public colleges and universities, coupled with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, established public investment in higher education. This investment led to an expansion of educational opportunities for all.

Now, instead of requiring small groups of privileged students to head into the countryside for college, higher education began to go to the people.

Public land grant institutions, such as the University of Wyoming, were established to teach the practical – science, mechanical arts, agriculture, and military – to the sons and daughters of the working men and women in our states.

It was rightly believed that education was critical to the achievement of the American dream. With expanded knowledge and rapidly advancing technology, fueled by an increasingly better-educated society, America prospered and so did its citizens. It is nothing short of inspiring to consider that since our founding, each generation of Americans has become better-educated and more prosperous than the generations they followed.

Certainly there were struggles. Equity in access to higher education, diversity, inclusion, opportunity, and affordability, while lauded as American values, took a while to become a reality in the United States.

Then arose the community college. Unlike the university, the community college is truly an American innovation, something other countries today are just now trying to emulate.

Community colleges flourished and expanded from the early 1900's through the middle of the century. You may not find it surprising that this occurred at the same time the country struggled with many of the civil rights movements and challenges. In fact, the Higher Education Act was passed just one year after the Civil Rights Act, 1965 and 1964 respectively.

Higher education and civil liberties are interrelated, because higher education is the gateway to opportunity and prosperity, something we believe all deserve in our country.

However, while many of the protests, riots, and visible conflicts during the civil rights movement played out on university campuses, behind the scenes the community colleges were working tirelessly to actually address these issues and open the doors to a higher education for all.

Like America, community colleges were, and to this day, still are a melting pot of individuals.

We serve the majority of minority students, and it is a place where people of various ethnicities, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds come together. These American institutions are a current-day representation of the values and beliefs that our country is founded on - equality, opportunity, and a diverse community coming together to make a better society.

We still face challenges as a country. You only have to follow the rhetoric presented daily in the media to understand that we are at a crossroads. A crossroads where the expectation of singularity in our ideals intersects with the preservation of a respect for individuality and diversity, two things that made America what it is.

I was brought up to experience both. A solidarity to a country whose ideals were rooted deeply in our families. Yet rich, cultural customs derived from my Austrian and Swedish roots that shows up at our dinner table and in our family traditions.

My family celebrates Independence Day with reverence, respects the Constitution, and recognizes our family members who served in war and conflict to ensure our freedoms. But we also eat German table fare year-round, cherish and celebrate holiday customs carried over from other countries.

I have been exposed to Italian traditions through my wife's family, as well as varying political and religious beliefs. We have had some pretty heated debates around our differences. And I must admit that a time or two my German stubbornness landed me a night's stay on the couch. But without these differences, my life would not be as rich, nor do I believe I would be as productive a member of our society had I not experienced them.

Our country was founded on concepts such as *all men are created equal*, the *separation of church and state*, individualism, *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. Yet these foundational tenants are being tested today.

Instead of encouraging diverse opinions and beliefs, we chastise those who do not share our own. Then we have the audacity to be insulted when others question our own positions and perspectives.

We are losing the willingness to engage in civil, productive discourse, and we ignorantly hope to lessen inequality by further polarizing ourselves with an unwillingness to consider the perspectives of those who we believe oppress us.

Our very stubbornness to receive and respond to diverse perspectives and opinions in a humane, and constructive manner, erodes the values of our forefathers. It diminishes the import of the productive struggle our ancestors endured, protected, and ultimately used to establish a country where we live and benefit every day.

Like I said, I envy you. It is far too easy for me and my family to retreat to the comforts of inexperience. To believe the world revolves around us as Americans, and to take for granted the liberties and opportunities we have because we did not have to fight for them nearly as hard as our forefathers. Or nearly as hard as you have had to work to gain your citizenship today.

I realize that becoming an American has been challenging and required a commitment from each of you. I also realize that in many ways what you might seek now is to simply fit in.

I hope that isn't the case, because I am going to ask you to stand out.

You are a fresh reminder of the commitment this country has made to inclusiveness, equality, opportunity, and the freedom to express our voice and share our perspectives. You can be a catalyst for those of us, who perhaps have gotten lazy or a bit too comfortable in our lives, to fight for what makes America the nation it is.

The good news is you can start doing that tomorrow. For today, celebrate and rejoice in the fact that you are now a citizen of the United States of America, the greatest country in the world. Congratulations and best wishes on wherever your future leads you.