



CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

Najuge Joseph takes his oath of citizenship next to Hien Van Eaton, formerly of Vietnam and now of Lynchburg

Determination, friends help make new citizen

By DWAYNE YANCEY
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Najuge Joseph became an American on Friday. But just barely.

"Everything OK," the soft-spoken Haitian immigrant said after he was sworn in and had finally relaxed enough to smile. In his hand, he clutched a tiny U.S. flag and his coveted citizenship papers. His lawyer, his boss, and his two tutors all came by to give him a handshake and a hug.

Only a few hours before, everything had not been OK.

Friday morning, while 79 other prospective citizens were filing into the federal courthouse in Roanoke for the swearing-in ceremony, Joseph was still laboring over part of the citizenship test.

He wouldn't have even gotten a chance to do that, though, if it hadn't been for his boss, Frank Huffman, owner of ABC&C Inc., a Roanoke cleaning company.

Twice, Joseph had flunked the Immigration and Naturalization Service test.

The sticking point was that the 35-year-old Joseph, who is illiterate in his native Creole and has spent the past four years learning to read and write a foreign language, still couldn't write English well enough to suit the immigration officials.

But Huffman didn't think the INS had treated Joseph fairly, so he hired a lawyer to help his custodian sweep through the federal bureaucracy.

"You probably wonder — I'm a Protestant, he's a Catholic. I'm white, he's black. I probably don't have much more money than the people who are working for me, so why am I doing this?" Huffman said. "I really and truly love America. America can't do without people like Gigi [his nickname for Joseph]. We've got enough dope dealers and, heaven knows, enough politicians. I couldn't let this opportunity go by."

Joseph's story goes back to 1980, when the gardener left his wife and three children behind on the impoverished Caribbean island nation of Haiti to come to the United States. "This is something challenging," he explained. He hoped to stay long enough to become a citizen and earn enough money so his family could join him.

Joseph wound up in Southwest Virginia, picking apples near Chilhowie. "Boss cheat people, no good," Joseph said. So when a Catholic nun who worked with immigrants in the Smyth County orchards suggested he come to Roanoke in 1981, Joseph quickly agreed.

Soon he was working two jobs — by day, a maintenance man at Our Lady of Nazareth Catho-

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lic Church; by night, cleaning offices for ABC&C — and became a favorite with employers and customers alike.

“He’s very self-effacing and humble, in the true biblical, scriptural sense of what humility is,” Huffman said. “He’s always thinking, ‘How can I help other people?’ He puts other people’s needs ahead of his own. He’s just a fine Christian man.”

On his days off, Joseph often works with the Roanoke Office of Refugee Resettlement, helping other immigrants move.

Once, Joseph decided a carpet at his church needed cleaning and borrowed some of Huffman’s equipment to clean it with. A church official walked in “with a wild look on his face,” Huffman said, asking who authorized the cleaning and appalled at what the job would cost. “Gigi put his hand on his shoulder and said, ‘I’m not going to charge you.’ The trustee said, ‘That’s crazy. The last time someone came to clean the carpet they charged \$1,800.’”

Last fall, Joseph went to take his INS test, designed to measure whether an immigrant can speak, read and write English and knows something about U.S. government.

But he flunked.

At first, all Joseph would say was, “the lady was mean.”

But as Huffman questioned further, he learned the INS examiner had thrown some trick questions at Joseph — such as “who founded America?” Joseph, who had boned up on American history, proudly answered “Thomas Jefferson.” But the

INS wanted “Christopher Columbus.”

“It didn’t seem to me he had been treated fairly,” Huffman said. “But coming out of a very repressive form of government, where you don’t have a complaint department, he was not one of those people who complains.”

Huffman did, however.

He hired the Roanoke law firm of Wetherington & Melchionna to arrange a second round of tests in January. This time, Joseph passed everything except the written part.

So Huffman’s lawyers went back to work.

After months of legal finagling, the INS finally granted special permission for Joseph to take the written part a third time — and to take it on the morning of the naturalization ceremony in Roanoke, instead of having to drive to Washington, as he normally would have to for the 15-minute test.

Meanwhile, tutors Susie Fetter and Ann Zambacca drilled Joseph. Even lawyer Cheryl Watson took time Thursday afternoon to coach Joseph in writing some simple sentences that immigration officials might ask him for.

And this time he passed.

Friday morning, they all crowded into the courtroom to watch their employee, client, student — and friend — take the oath.

There was a moment of suspense as the examiner read the roll, but sure enough, Joseph’s name was on it.

He stepped forward to shake hands with U.S. District Judge James Turk and pick up his papers. Then, as he returned to his seat, Joseph stepped out of line for a moment — to hug the boss who had stuck by him.