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On Wednesday, she became a U.S. citizen. Today, she will vote.

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RACINE — Jessica Diaz came to the United States when she was 6 years old. She has never left.

Her family came to Kenosha from Palmar Chico, a small town in Mexico, to work in the cabbage fields.

On Wednesday, 30 years after her arrival, Diaz fulfilled a decade-long journey. She became a U.S. citizen, just in time to do something she had wanted to do for years: vote.

Today, Tuesday, Aug. 9, she plans to cast a ballot for the very first time.

While she has been working on her citizenship, Diaz never stopped working to improve the lives of people like her in the Racine area's Hispanic community. Diaz is the vice president of the Racine Interfaith Coalition, a nonprofit organization that works to inspire and mobilize faith-based congregations to social justice. But since she was not a legal citizen yet, Diaz had to approach different aspects of polling and voting from different angles, having to opt out of things like nomination signatures and the actual act of voting.

That is how she began canvassing.

“To me, voting is very important,” Diaz said, “We like to complain a lot about our local government, we like to complain a lot about how things don't really work out. I tell people ‘Why don't you ask questions? Why don't you go out and vote?’ If you're worried about your health care, reach out.”

After moving to Racine 17 years ago, Diaz became active in nonpartisan canvassing, urging people to go out and vote more.

Since her youngest son was 6 years old, the same age his mother was when she came to the U.S., he would come along with her while she canvassed during the first campaign of Racine Mayor Cory Mason in 2017.

“I brought him (her son) along to the campaign because it was so important to me. This is our mayor and our city, so I taught my son how to canvas,” Diaz said. “He loves it. He would run up to doors and knock on them and talk to voters.”

More votes for others

Diaz believes that every U.S. citizen should have the right to vote and that taking it away from felons is wrong. She has worked with EX-Incarcerated Peoples Organizing’s Unlock The Vote! campaign, an effort aimed to return the voting rights to people with felony convictions.

“Being someone from a different country, I just couldn’t believe that they could take your rights like that, where if you go to prison and on are extended supervision you couldn’t vote,” Diaz said. “I just couldn’t understand the logic behind it ... that’s not right. How is it you go to prison, pay your dues and lose your citizenship status? You kind of get dehumanized. It’s just so weird to me.”

This election season, Diaz worked as the co-chair of WISDOM’s Statewide Immigration Task Force while she was also prepping for her big day.

After about 10 years, that big day came. According to Diaz, her citizenship ceremony felt like a drive-thru.

Diaz had her citizenship ceremony at the Milwaukee Field Office of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services agency. In 15 minutes, a group of 10 people were brought into a room where they handed in their paperwork, were sworn in, welcomed to the United States, asked to read a statement, got a picture taken and were sent out for the next group to be sent in.

In 15 minutes, her 10-year journey had come to an end.

Becoming a citizen is not easy

A common misconception about the process of immigration is that it takes a very short time and is a simple process to go through. These misconceptions are something that Diaz hears often.

“It’s really frustrating when you hear people say ‘why didn’t they do it the right way?’ or ‘Why didn’t they apply?’ Just for my citizenship application alone, it took 13 months for me to get my first interview — that took 13 months to get scheduled,” Diaz said. “After my interview, I still waited another two-and-a-half weeks to be sworn in.

“It’s a long, complicated process, and right now with the pandemic, everything is taking a lot longer. There’s such a backlog and such a broken system. It’s kind of hard to explain, but it’s very complex and delayed. Everything is delayed, delayed, delayed.”

A **2019 report** from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, states “Since 1991, when the current quotas went into effect, time spent waiting to apply for a green card (i.e., legal permanent residence) has doubled for applicants immigrating through the family-sponsored and employment-based quota categories — from an average of 2 years and 10 months to 5 years and 8 months.” As of 2018, the entire U.S. immigration wait list was more than 4.7 million files long, and there’s a **backlog** of more than 1.2 million green card applicants from Mexico.

Unless there are substantial reforms, the average wait time for a Mexican national applying for a U.S. green card is expected to be well over 30 years; in 2018, the wait time was around 21 years. The cases of Mexicans who applied for green cards that were getting approved in 2021 were usually **applied for around 1999**.

Diaz’s fight for her citizenship might be over, but for others that are in the position she is in, there is still so much left to get through. She works at Cabranes Durkin & Longdin Law Offices, 840 Lake Ave. Suite 100, Racine. The firm represents clients who are going through the immigration and citizenship process.

“I tell people all the time: my process may be ended, but I still have a lot of people close to me who are waiting for their opportunity to even start,” Diaz said. “I have many people around me in my community, and it’s just hard to see.”

Diaz finds that Americans discussing immigration policy often overlook the struggles faced by undocumented children brought into the country by their parents. At multiple points in the last decade in the Racine area, she remembers hearing about children who were openly worried that their parents would not come home that night because they might be deported.

“When people really talk about (immigration) ... we don’t think about those kids, that group of kids that have those collateral effects. It’s hard for them, too,” Diaz said. “So when we like to attack and say, ‘Why are they here in the first place?’ or ‘Why don’t they do it the right way?’ we need to think about that future of kids that have to worry about something they shouldn’t have to worry about.”

As a student at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Diaz remembers one classmate “joked” that he was going to get Diaz deported; another classmate said they believed those without citizenship are “not human.”

“People actually think like that,” Diaz said.

Now a citizen, Diaz next plans to go to law school — after her sons finish school themselves.