



## Meet America's Patriots

*They volunteer for the military. They create jobs. They help their communities. They are U.S. immigrants.*

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July 5, 2019

Ro Khanna Learned A Lot from immigrants – who just happened to be his parents. Khanna, born in Philadelphia during America's bicentennial, is the son of Indian immigrants who came to this country to build a better life for their children. Early on, Khanna says, his parents made clear what his obligations were as a first-generation American-born citizen.

They said, "You were born in America – don't mess it up. You won the lottery," Khanna recalls. His parents took Khanna and his brother to Washington to see the monuments and insisted they both learn about the Constitution. Now, Khanna is a Democratic congressman from California after teaching economics at Stanford University and law at Santa Clara University, and his brother, Vikas Khanna, is an assistant U.S. attorney in New Jersey.

As a second-term member of Congress, Khanna is naturally drawn into the political battle over immigrants: How many should be let in and under what circumstances? What can be done to make sure people arriving at the border are treated humanely? How should the federal and state governments handle immigrants – whether it's making education and services understandable to non-English speakers, or ensuring immigrants follow the law when it comes to their legal presence here?

But as a deeply politically divided nation celebrates another Independence Day holiday, Khanna adds, "Lost in that conversation is the focus on the things so many immigrants bring, a sense of real duty to contribute. So many immigrant families I know say, 'I owe everything I have to America.'"

Immigrants made up slightly less than 14 percent of the population in 2017, according to reports based on U.S. Census Bureau data. That's an increase from record lows in the 1970s but still slightly less than the 14.8 percent mark hit in 1890. In the late 19th century, the overwhelming majority of immigrants came from Europe; now, immigrants more commonly arrive from Asia and Latin America.

Immigrants in the country illegally – a group causing political turmoil and individual angst – made up about 3.2 percent of the population in 2017, with 10.5 million people living here illegally, according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center. That's a drop from 2007, when 12 million people, or 4 percent of the population, were living in the country illegally. For the first

time, Mexicans made up less than half of those unlawfully residing in the U.S., at 47 percent, Pew said, with an increase in illegal immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Asia.

And while many Americans – and elected officials – fear that immigrants, legal and unauthorized, increase crime and take jobs away from native-born Americans, research by a broad array of institutions finds the opposite.

### **Becoming American**

People in the country illegally have declined as a percentage of the labor force, according to Pew. The Hamilton Project, an immigration research initiative by the Brookings Institution, found that immigration has a small impact on low-skilled, native born American wages; that economic output is higher and grows faster with more immigrants; that high-skilled immigration increases innovation, and that immigrants in the long run contribute positively to government finances.

"During this period of high migration, we have the lowest unemployment rate in the post-World War II era, the highest stock market, the lowest uninsured rate, declining crime rates and increasing college attendance rates," says Simon Rosenberg, founder of the policy group NDN and an expert on immigration. "It's just very hard, when you look at the data, to conclude anything other than that this wave of immigrants has made the country better and stronger, not weaker and more divided," Rosenberg says.

Crime does not appear to be exacerbated by immigration, including by illegal immigration, studies show. The Brookings researcher found that immigrants to the U.S. are "considerably less likely" to commit crimes or be incarcerated. And while the data is not sufficient in every state to assess crime rates for native born and non-native Americans, Texas does record the immigration status of convicted criminals and the crimes they committed, according to the Cato Institute. And in the Lone Star State, conviction rates for immigrants are about half of that for native born Americans, the study said. The rates are lower for both legal immigrants and unauthorized immigrants.

Despite the heated debate over immigration, and the bias and harassment some immigrants experience, "I think people still see this country as a beacon of light, with the promise of hope," says Pili Tobar, deputy director of America's Voice, an immigrants rights group.

Immigrants, their advocates note, display a kind of patriotism that comes with an appreciation of American citizenship that was earned, not born. They volunteer for the military and in their communities. They start businesses, providing jobs to others. They know the history of the United States and love the country they have made their home, even when faced with discrimination or hostility.

On this Independence Day week, U.S. News talked to five immigrants across the country about their experiences. Here are their stories:

### **Cesia Bulnes**

Cesia Bulnes didn't have a choice about coming to America. Her parents brought her here when she was 3 years old. Her father's business had gone bankrupt, so he brought his family to the U.S. – legally, Bulnes says – to help his daughter get an education and opportunity she could not

get in her Central American birthplace. The legalization process didn't work out, she says, so the family lost its legal status. Gang violence began to pop up in Honduras, and her extended family was targeted.

"My dad had to make a decision of whether to go back or stay," Bulnes says. Facing the choice of extreme physical danger in Honduras and a fear of being deported in the U.S., the family decided to stay, she says.

Without legal status, Bulnes was not eligible for college financial aid, despite having legal status as a recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. She was awarded a full scholarship by [TheDream.US](#), an organization that takes its name from the DREAM Act legislative proposal and which promotes college access for DACA recipients. The 22-year-old Bulnes graduated this year from Florida International University with a degree in computer science and a job offer from Microsoft. At FIU, Bulnes, who graduated with honors, found her passion for computer science by participating in "hackathons" for programmers, including the 36-hour Mangohacks that bills itself as promoting innovation and cooperation among participants. During breaks, Bulnes talked to other female students about succeeding in the tech world. She's also rung the bell to open trading at the Nasdaq.

One of Bulnes' proudest moments was singing the national anthem at her graduation.

"What resonated to me the most was when a U.S. veteran came to me and told me that was one of the proudest moments he had, being an American. I'm not really considered an American in this country by many people," Bulnes adds. "I realized that if a 'Dreamer' can catch someone's heart like that – a veteran who fought for this country – that really touched my heart."

### **Carlos Castro**

Poverty and a bloody civil war led Castro to leave his home of El Salvador when he was in his early 20s – first, illegally – he was quickly caught and sent back over the border – and a second time, in 1980, legally. Castro worked his way up from cleaning toilets at a D.C. restaurant to working construction and then getting licenses to sell real estate and do tax preparation. It was all to build a future for his family. Castro says he could not have achieved back in El Salvador, where, as the eldest child, Castro carried the family obligation of looking out for his low-educated parents and his siblings.

Now, Castro is a northern Virginia business success story, owning two large grocery stores, called Todos Supermarkets, and employing 180 people – not including the security guards, accountants and lawyers the bustling company needs. The stores, in Woodbridge and Dumfries, offer a cultural oasis for Prince William County's Latino community along with other local residents who like the aisles of international foods and exotic produce. True to its name – "todos" in Spanish means "everything" – the Woodbridge store sells mobile phone services, clothes and has on site an old-fashioned barber shop, beauty salon and Virginia's first fully bilingual U.S. Post Office.

Castro – who once scrounged to get an unskilled job to send money back to El Salvador – now prides himself on being able to offer opportunities to others, especially women. In fact, he notes he's the only male member of his management team. He's testified about small business growth before Congress.

With a degree from Northern Virginia Community College and U.S. citizenship he got in 1990, Castro says he experiences discrimination as an Hispanic but still is proud to be an American by choice.

"It puts out in clear view that this is a great country, if you work hard, if you dream, if you do your duty," Castro says. In the U.S., "I think you can accomplish any dream you set out to reach," he adds.

### **Alicia Nyein**

Being an American includes a central purpose for 27-year-old Alicia Nyein: helping other people, especially those whose countries of origin present particular challenges or dangers. That, after all, is how Nyein ended up in California. When she was 6 years old, her mother brought Nyein and her sister to the U.S. from Myanmar, a country going through political turmoil.

Nyein's mother – sponsored by her own sister – got her citizenship when Alicia was about 12. Driving Nyein to school, her mother would listen to audio cassettes over and over again in the car, practicing for the rigorous citizenship test that would make the young Nyein a citizen as well. Some of the kids at her school made fun of her English, Nyein recalls, making her withdraw, but she was grateful for the good education she had the chance to receive in the Golden State. With a scholarship from the Key Club service program, Nyein became the first in her family to get a bachelor's degree, graduating from the University of California, Riverside with a degree in political science in public service.

After finishing college and working a couple of years, Nyein found her purpose: She joined the Peace Corps, which sent her to a town in Moldova. There, she taught English and could relate to native youngsters struggling to learn a new language.

"I told them if you learn English, it can open a lot of opportunities for you," Nyein says, noting her own efforts to become fluent in English.

As a returned Peace Corps volunteer, Nyein is continuing her work with those who – like her family – are striving to make a better life. She's working for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services division of the Department of Homeland Security. There, she assists those seeking asylum in the United States, a job that brings full circle her own journey to America and to U.S. citizenship.

"The work is very needed. There are still a lot of people who need asylum. They're coming from harsh conditions or feeling persecution," Nyein says. And that, she says, is what defines her status as a citizen and her desire to help others: "I had the opportunity."

### **Francois John Ruvera**

Tax accountant Francois John Ruvera had a long route to his current home of Buffalo, New York, and he acquired a lot of knowledge along the way. Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ruvera escaped the civil war there with his family when he was a small boy, living in Burundi, Tanzania and Zambia before being resettled as a refugee in Burlington, Vermont, in 2005. After meeting his wife in Vermont and earning his bachelor's degree in accounting from Champlain College in Burlington, Ruvera, now 32, moved to New Hampshire, where he got his MBA at Southern New Hampshire University.

Ruvera worked as a case manager for other arriving refugees and identified a problem: Other newcomers to the country were getting scammed by shady tax preparers, who took advantage of people who didn't understand the tax code of their new country of residence.

"Sometimes [refugees] were going to people who didn't know what they were doing and were giving them false information," Ruvera says. "Some of them started receiving large bills from the IRS because their taxes were not prepared well."

So Ruvera started Foresight Tax Services on Concord and Manchester, New Hampshire, specializing in assisting people from other countries and doing bookkeeping for small businesses. He had already volunteered for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance grant program, an IRS initiative designed to support free tax preparation service for the underserved through various partner organizations. It also helps that Ruvera speaks Kiswahili, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda, Kinyanja, French and, of course, English – the language of the nation which made him a citizen in 2010. Expanding the business, Ruvera and his family recently moved to Buffalo.

"I am so proud to be part of this society," Ruvera says. "It's something I've always wanted in my life – to be an American."

### **Abdul Memon**

As a Muslim and retired military servicemember, Cmdr. Abdul Memon has experienced discrimination and hostility in the country where he is now a citizen. But he still calls the United States "the greatest country," one he'd defend again "at the drop of a hat."

Born in Mumbai, India, Memon came to the U.S. in 1984 as a student, married and became a citizen in the early 1990s, and then volunteered for the military. He served in the U.S. Naval Reserve for 25 years and volunteered to be mobilized for Operation Iraqi Freedom. He sailed as a civilian mariner with the Military Sealift Command and was deployed on the hospital ship USNS Comfort in 2003 after war was declared against Iraq. It's not been without difficulty: Aside from being separated from his family, Memon was harassed by members of his own unit, who questioned whether a Muslim could be counted on to defend the United States in a conflict with a Muslim nation. When Memon was promoted – a big deal in the military, he notes, and one generally accompanied by celebration with one's comrades – no one in his unit congratulated him. And since then, the 60-year-old Memon worries about his young adult daughter, who he says is harassed for wearing a hijab.

None of that diminishes Memon's patriotism to his adopted home country.

"I don't take my citizenship lightly. I think we have the best freedom anywhere – especially the freedom of speech," Memon says. He teaches now, in Houston, and describes the morning ritual of saying the Pledge of Allegiance. Some don't stand. Others stand and barely mouth the words. But Memon says he looks forward to the daily affirmation of his love of country.

"I'm living in the best country in the world. I have traveled all over the world and I have seen other places," Memon says. "I would do anything for our country."