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Helping Immigrants Become Citizens

BY JILLIAN ABBOTT

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When Maria Batista came to New York from the Dominican Republic to live with her mother as an eighteen-year-old college student, it never occurred to her that one day she would make her living helping new Americans solve their immigration problems and make the transition from immigrant to citizen.

Back then, the Richmond Hill resident was too overwhelmed and confused by her own struggle to find a place for herself in her new country. She enrolled in college but the language barrier was too great – she had to drop out, despite taking bilingual classes, because she could not understand what was going on in class.

For 10 years, she worked as a home attendant, trying to figure out a career path for herself. “I realized this is a dead-end job. I wanted a career.” However, when she decided to try taking a college course, the old problem resurfaced.

“I couldn’t keep up in class,” she said. “No matter how hard I tried to do the work, I failed. It seemed that I had nowhere to turn.” But by a stroke of luck, she found her way to New York City College of Technology. “Once I enrolled, everything changed for me,” she said.

Batista’s advisor arranged for her to register in the College Language Immersion Program. After two semesters of concentrated English instruction, she was able to participate in general coursework, and even earned A’s for her efforts.

Batista’s mother left for America when she was only seven-years-old. Her father provided emotional and financial support for her to make the move.

“In the Dominican Republic we see people from New York wearing expensive clothes and think it’s the New World, the land of the money tree. When you get here, you realize it is not that easy. You can have the



Maria Batista (left) with Law and Paralegal Studies Professor Mary Sue Donsky.

Photo courtesy Michele Forsten for NYC College of Technology

American dream, but you have to work hard for it, and compete with all the Americans who are already here,” she said.

Now the 37-year-old has her bachelor’s degree in Health Services Administration. She works as an administrator in the college’s Immigration Clinic, helping other immigrants overcome the many hurdles they face as they try to navigate through the immigration maze.

Law and Paralegal Studies Professor Mary Sue Donsky, clinic manager, said that the facility serves immigrants from all over the globe.

“A great many come from the Caribbean and the West Indies, and a good number come from China and India, among others. We’re open five days a week and provide all of our services free of charge.”

“I spent three years in the clinic when I was a work-study student,” Batista said, “and now I’m working at the clinic as a college assistant. I love this job.”

“A man from Honduras was facing deportation before coming to the clinic. He thought his situation was hopeless,” she said. “Our staff wrote him a letter and immigration reopened his case.”

“I was so proud to be part of this. The man was smiling and so happy. He had paid \$2,000 to an immigration lawyer, but was still facing deportation. One letter from us – a free letter, we don’t charge for our services – and he now has a new chance at staying,” she said, pointing out that New York Daily News immigration columnist Allan Wernick is the clinic’s director.

As part of her job, Batista helps student volunteers provide services including informing clients of naturalization requirements,

helping to complete forms, reviewing answers to sample civic and history questions, providing lists of free legal service providers and explaining fee requirements.

They also help applicants deal with Lawful Permanent Resident Status and related matters such as visas and green card eligibility.

With her degree in hand, Batista envisions a bright future for herself. “I would like to apply to dental school in two or three years,” she said.

“You can have the American dream, but you have to work hard for it, and compete with all the Americans who are already here.”

Maria Batista