

Americans unite in love of country

From immigrants to clubs to veterans, it's all about the nation.

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The faces of Southwest Florida range from immigrants eager to become U.S. citizens, residents who can trace their ancestors to the American Revolution and those who serve their country in times of war.

Be it at fireworks in Cape Coral, the San Carlos Park parade, or one of a thousand backyard barbecues, parties and gatherings throughout the area, what's on their minds today — Independence Day — can be called patriotism, citizenship or simply love of country.

Their feelings on this celebratory holiday are shown in how they view their lives, families, friends and obligations as U.S. citizens.

The promotion of patriotism and the American Revolution is the focus of groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Sons of the American Revolution.

Officials for chapters of both groups in Lee County say they are going strong and have had no problems finding new blood.

"We now have about 80 members," said Mary Randell, the club's regent. "The club began on Feb. 22, 1927, with 21 members."

She noted one of the charter members was Mina Edison, wife of inventor Thomas Edison.

The groups are open to men or women who can directly trace an ancestor's combat or support activity to the Revolutionary War.

"We have a strong growth in new members," Randell said.

"We've had no problem keeping the club viable," she said. In fact she said members of the club range in age from their 30s to their 90s.

Randell said the club bolsters its purpose of support and promotion of patriotism by spearheading education programs, essay contests, awards, scholarships and the

placing of historical markers such as ones that highlight Seminole chief Billy Bowlegs and Mina Edison.

“Our job is to make the community aware of historical events,” she said.

The Sons of the American Revolution, which like the DAR was formed by congressional act, also is thriving.

“It has been growing for the past few years,” said the Rev. Albert Myers, secretary for the local Caloosa chapter. “We have 60 members, with most in Lee County and one in Hendry County.”

Run by the same principals and rules as the DAR, Myers said the group promotes and discusses patriotic topics.

“Most of our members have a stronger understanding of the American Revolution,” he said.

For immigrants, the all-encompassing dream is to come to the U.S. seeking the freedom to pursue a better life.

One such person is Pedro Vicente, 61, a naturalized U.S. citizen who came here from Guatemala 28 years ago.

Attorney Ricardo Skerrett of Fort Myers represented Vicente in his quest to become a U.S. citizen two years ago.

Skerrett said Vicente had a dilemma because he had several old DUI violations that, though they had been revoked, were a concern.

“You have to prove that for five years you had good moral character before you can apply for citizenship,” Skerrett said. “Vicente was afraid he would be labeled a habitual drunk.”

However, Skerrett said Vicente’s desire to become a citizen was so strong he studied as much as he could before taking his test.

“The immigration officer was impressed at how well he answered the questions,” Skerrett said. “And even the translator, who was another immigration officer, was flabbergasted at how well he answered.”

Vicente, who speaks little English, said he “studied, studied, studied” and was helped along by his daughter, Ingrid Vicente.

“We sat down every night and I asked him questions,” she said.

Vicente is appreciative of what the U.S. offers someone like him.

“More help here, more possibilities here,” he said through his daughter. In his home country there is trouble, Ingrid said.

“Here, he lives fine. He was in the army in Guatemala and there was trouble,” she said. “It was more dangerous there. It was a dream to come here.”

Vicente also is helping his wife of 43 years, Eulalia, with her citizenship studies.

Skerrett said stories such as Vicente’s show that those who have to work and earn their citizenship are more aware of their obligation as a citizen than those who are born here.

“They are truly outstanding citizens, they contribute to this country and don’t expect the government to do things for them,” he said.

Songs of patriotism rang out Sunday at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church on Cleveland Avenue.

Smiles as well as tears came to the faces of the crowd as they reminisced about the tough times and dangerous situations brought up in song.

As the church choir sang specific theme songs of the armed services, such as the “Marine’s Hymn” or “Anchors Aweigh,” members of the audience who had served in those branches stood at attention.

Donald Buttorff of Fort Myers, a World War II Navy vet, said the patriotic tunes served as a reminder for him.

“I was in the South Pacific for four years at age 18. I was really happy that I could go to protect my country,” he said.

He said he sees signs of patriotism remaining strong. “Of all the people who were here, there were three kids over there who were the first who stood to salute the flag,” he said.

Richard Helms of Fort Myers, an Air Force veteran who served in Vietnam, said: “It always brings tears to my eyes to hear patriotic music.”

He noted: “We are all Americans, regardless of politics.”

Also watching and listening to the concert was a Brazilian exchange student, Bronislau Prestes.

“I never saw this in Brazil,” he said. “This is unique. It is interesting to see how strong patriotism is here. It gave me goosebumps. It is not as strong in Brazil as it is here. We’re a little bit more calm.”