

Local man becomes US citizen

By PHIL RAY

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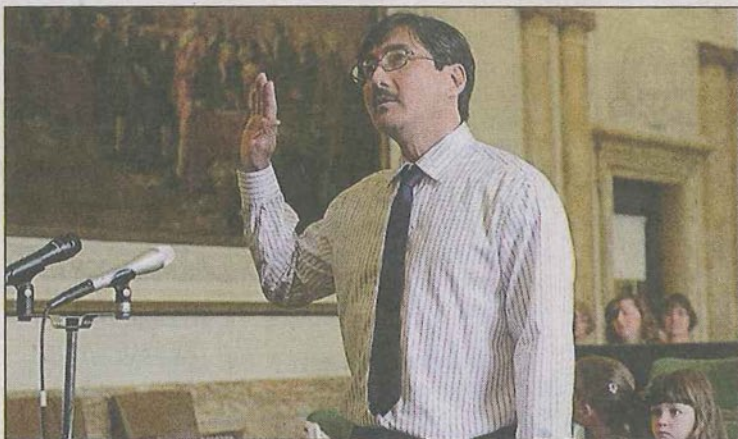
HOLLIDAYSBURG — Blair County's newest citizen, Noel Gatmaitan Villadolid, a native of the Philippines, was asked Wednesday how he ended up in Blair County — considering he was born so far away and spent several years in California.

The 51-year-old teacher at the YTI Career Institute in Altoona began by relating his story, which, at first, was marked by tragedy.

His wife, Maria, died on Easter Sunday 2008, while the couple was in California.

"I was, of course, devastated," he said.

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Mirror photo by Gary M. Baranec

Noel Gatmaitan Villadolid takes the oath to become an American citizen in a naturalization ceremony Wednesday at the Blair County Courthouse.

CITIZEN: Met wife through website

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But what came next, the happiness he feels today, is one of those stories that can't be explained.

He wanted to move forward with his life, and, he said, "Maybe God tells me something."

Villadolid had been attending Catholic church services on a daily basis most of his life, and he said something directed him toward CatholicMatch, an Internet site for singles.

It just so happens that Sylvia J. Fink of Altoona was registered with CatholicMatch, as well.

Her husband had recently died, and, as she explained Wednesday while sitting in a Blair County Courtroom just before Villadolid took the citizenship oath, she was "depressed and lonely."

Villadolid said he wanted to "help the pain in her heart."

The two started communicating, and they knew they were on the same wavelength when she asked him his favorite foods, and he replied "apples."

He had never been to the east coast, and he set up a visit to "just have coffee."

The romance blossomed, and in late 2008 they were married in the courtroom of Blair County Judge Elizabeth Doyle.

The marriage ceremony played out again as their union was reaffirmed in a local Catholic ceremony.

On Wednesday Noel



Mirror photo by Gary M. Baranec

Noel Gatmaitan Villadolid glances back at his family after taking the oath to become an American citizen on Wednesday in the Blair County Courthouse. His wife, Sylvia (back), Sylvia's granddaughters, Isabella, 6, and Sophia, 3, and his mother-in-law, Jean Karnes, congratulate him on his new citizenship.

Villadolid, his wife of five years, Sylvia, her mother, Jean Karnes, and Sylvia's two grandchildren from her son, Isabella, 6, and Sophia Miller, 3, returned to the courtroom of their marriage and took the oath of American citizenship.

In years past, Blair County's annual naturalization ceremony included 20 or more people, but in recent years the new citizens have been going to Pittsburgh for the swearing-in ceremony.

Noel Villadolid was the only new citizen sworn in during a moving ceremony that included presentation of the papers to the judge by Blair County Prothonotary Carl Newman, and comments by Judges Timothy M.

Sullivan and Wade A. Kagarise.

It concluded with vocalist Beth Carpenter of Hollidaysburg singing God Bless America, but as she began singing the entire courtroom joined in, including Blair's newest citizen.

State Sen. John H. Eichelberger Jr., R-Blair, and state Rep. John D. McGinnis, R-Altoona, witnessed the ceremony. Judge Kagarise told Villadolid he was in a courtroom with people of many titles — judge, state representatives, county officials — but he said, "You leave the courtroom today with the highest title there is, citizen of the United States of America."

Court Administrator

Janice Meadows presented him with a bag of mementos appropriate for the day, an American flag, a copy of the U.S. Constitution, and histories of Blair County and the Blair County Courthouse.

Kopriva said his presence enriched "all of us," because it reminds everyone of the value of U.S. citizenship.

Sullivan had Villadolid lead the courtroom in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

With immigration and citizenship now controversial topics in America, Villadolid was asked his opinions of the ongoing debate about those who are coming over the borders illegally.

"I know how hard and difficult it is to go through the process," he said.

Villadolid, who teaches computer system technicians at YTI, said he normally doesn't go to work until the afternoon hours, giving him the chance to learn about the issues, and to listen to the Glenn Beck Show, and, he said, despite what he had to go through to become a citizen, he has mixed feelings about what to do about the crisis on America's southern border.

"My heart goes out to the children," he said.

Villadolid was born in Manila and lived in Quezon City. His father and mother, Dogracias and Maria Navidad, and his siblings live in California.

He has sons, ages 22 and 29, in the Philippines.