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CITIZENSHIP CEREMONY



Lolav Arman, center, takes the citizenship oath during a naturalization ceremony at the Fred Thompson Courthouse in downtown Nashville on April 15. Sixty people became U.S. citizens. PROVIDED BY PACKFILMS/WELCOME.US

A hopeful American ending

New citizen tells of her journey from war-torn Iraq

Evan Mealins Nashville Tennessean | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

In about 2018, a young Kurdish woman sat across from the victims of the terrorist Islamic State group in Iraq. • The victims, other young women, were Yazidis, an ethnoreligious group that, like the Kurds, had been persecuted for centuries. The Yazidi women had been captured by the Islamic State group, also called ISIS, raped and forced into sex slavery or marriage with their captors. • The young Kurdish woman, Lolav Arman, translated their words from a Kurdish dialect to an English-speaking psychologist.

While the psychologist feared the women might not trust Arman, a Muslim from outside their community, they soon opened up around her. The psychologist wanted only to work with Arman after that, she said. But Arman was looking to leave her home country.

Her journey led her from northern Iraq, to Ankara, Turkey, and finally to the U.S.

> **"I want them to feel welcome. I want them to feel safe. I want them to have dreams. I want them to succeed."**
>
> **Susan Seligson**
> Retired writer and journalist who helps immigrants prepare for citizenship exam

After arriving in Nashville, Arman's path crossed with Susan Seligson, a retired writer and journalist who lives in Cape Cod, but whose travels have taken her across the

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Church leans on TEMA for disaster help

Works through agency's ReadyTN Faith initiative

Liam Adams
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency stepped in to help Church of the Advent Episcopal in ways it didn't anticipate following the devastating winter storm in January and its power outages.

Greg Platt, who is part of the Nashville congregation's junior warden committee, said the first way TEMA helped was through its crisis hotline. The hotline connected the Episcopal congregation with the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board and Brentwood Baptist Church, which dispatched a team to help with cleanup at Church at the Advent at no cost.

Church of the Advent is located along Franklin Pike, right near Radnor Lake. That whole area, among others throughout the city, experienced heavy damage due to fallen tree limbs.

The second way TEMA helped the church was by walking its leaders through a process to apply for FEMA reimbursement to cover a $6,800 bill in cleanup costs that the church paid to a contractor. "I can't say enough about TEMA and FEMA that walked me through this process," Platt said.

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TN budget adds food aid costs, vouchers

Democrats: Plan fails to relieve working families

Vivian Jones
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

Tennessee lawmakers approved a $58.3 billion state budget for the year, cutting more than $282 million from Gov. Bill Lee's proposal to fund legislative priorities – including a summer food program for which Lee declined to seek federal funding.

Lee initially made a $57.9 billion proposal, then came back with new additions last month, to which lawmakers made significant changes. In total, lawmakers trimmed state spending by about $1.5 billion since last year.

The final budget includes funding for 15,000 new private school vouchers, bringing the Education Freedom Scholarships program to 35,000 total seats. It also includes funding for a takeover of the Memphis-Shelby County School district, funding for a bill that requires drivers' tests to be administered in English, and funding for the controversial FAIR Rx bill, which requires pharmacy benefits managers to decouple from pharmacies they manage. CVS Pharmacy has threatened to close all of its Tennessee stores should that bill pass.



Lee

Democrats criticized the budget as failing to fund initiatives that offer substantive relief for working families.

Sen. Heidi Campbell, D-Nashville, said the budget "keeps money where this supermajority wants power."

"There's always money for privatization ... but somehow there's never enough money to fully meet the needs of the school districts we serve," Campbell said during Senate debate. "Tennesseans sit in traffic every day wasting time, wasting gas, and paying for the consequences of legislative neglect."

Sen. Charlane Oliver, D-Nashville, said partisanship blocked any effort to

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Report: Cardinals interested in Jeremiyah Love

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Citizen

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globe.

On April 15, the two women met at the Fred Thompson Courthouse in downtown Nashville, where Arman became a U.S. citizen.

A day later, as Arman told her story during an interview at Nashville State Community College, where she studies engineering, Seligson told her, "You have a gift."

A calm childhood

Arman, born in 1994, had a quiet childhood, she said. She grew up in Duhok, a mountainous city about 15 miles from the Tigris River in northern Iraq. Her father, a geologist, was the first person from his village to graduate from college. She and her five siblings spent time playing with dolls.

In a nearby town, a boy whose family knew Arman's family was developing a crush.

Arman remembers that when the boy came to Duhok, he'd always ask if they could take a picture together. Arman thought it was a little creepy.

That boy was Mehvan Sadeq. His father had been taken by the Iraqi military as Saddam Hussein's regime unleashed violence on some of its citizens. His grandparents, aunts and uncles fled Iraq for the U.S. during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, settling in Nashville.

A history of oppression

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the major European powers took their pens to a map of the Middle East and carved up the land into different states. The Kurdish people were split between four countries. The Brookings Institution and many others have called Kurdistan the largest nation without a state.

Throughout the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds were displaced through a policy of "Arabization." It's how Arman's mother and father, from the villages Chelki and Kesta, respectively, wound up in Duhok.

Hussein, who assumed control of Iraq in the late 1970s, violently oppressed the Kurds, resulting in the deaths of at least 100,000 of them through military campaigns that the European Parliament and dozens of other organizations and nations have declared were a genocide.

Many who survived fled to the U.S. More than anywhere else, they came to Nashville.

When Hussein died in 2006, Arman remembers people celebrating. Kurds found renewed hope for statehood then, she said, but independence has yet to come.



Susan Seligson, a volunteer for the Citizenship Coalition, hugs Lolav Arman after her naturalization ceremony in Nashville on April 15.
PROVIDED BY PACKFILMS/WELCOME.US

'I had lots of dreams'

In Duhok in 2016, Arman logged onto Facebook to an unusual notification.

Sadeq, the boy who had a crush on her as a kid, had reunited with his father and moved to the U.S. in 2012. He messaged Arman, asking her to marry him. They weren't even in a relationship yet, Arman said, although they had stayed in touch after he moved. She told him no.

While she wanted to leave Iraq, it wasn't the right time. The Islamic State group had gripped parts of the country, leading to a cratered economy that resulted in her father receiving just half his normal salary. She needed to stay and support her family financially after graduating from the University of Duhok.

By 2019, her feelings had changed. Sadeq visited Iraq that year, and the two reconnected and began their relationship, Arman said. She found that he is a kind, generous and loving person. When Sadeq visited a second time that year, he proposed again, which Arman found courageous. She said yes.

They made plans to move to the U.S., where Arman dreamed of continuing her education. She looked forward to the diversity, freedom of speech and freedom of religion she had always associated with the U.S.

"I had lots of dreams," Arman said, but she couldn't pursue them in Kurdistan.

It took two years to schedule, but after a successful visa interview in Ankara in late 2021, Arman made a bittersweet trip back to Kurdistan before heading to the U.S. in February 2022.

'I want them to feel welcome'

On March 10, Rep. Andy Ogles, a Republican representing parts of Nashville in Congress, wrote on social media, "Muslims don't belong in American society."

Rhetoric like Ogles' is part of what motivates Seligson to help newcomers to the country on their path to citizenship.

"It is so ignorant and insane to demonize immigrants in this country," Seligson said. "I mean, this is exactly what our country is about."

Seligson, who grew up in New York but traveled the world and spoke to people from all walks of life as a journalist, found fulfillment in connecting with people across cultures.

"There's so many different kinds of people getting along, smushed together, eating each other's food, and that's my heaven," she said about the U.S. "It's why I love journalism. I can connect with anybody, anywhere, and that's my job. .... That's my favorite thing about this country."

Through the nonprofit Welcome.US and its partnership with the Citizenship Coalition, Seligson helps immigrants prepare for the 120-question oral citizenship exam. She sleeps better at night knowing she's helping them get closer to achieving a dream.

"I want them to feel welcome," Seligson said. "I want them to feel safe. I want them to have dreams. I want them to succeed."

Arman was one of her most well-prepared students, Seligson said. Most of their preparation was focused on developing Arman's confidence – ensuring she always sounded sure of herself when, for example, Seligson asked her who the governor of Tennessee was. As they got to know each other, Seligson found they both appreciated being around different cultures. It's part of what Seligson finds so special about Arman.

"Lolav is very special in a million ways, but especially because Lolav really, really believes in community," Seligson said.

Arman said she thinks anti-immigrant rhetoric does not make sense.

"The original people were American Indian," Arman said. "All the people immigrated, especially from Europe to here. So, it doesn't make any sense for me."

As for people who make anti-Islam statements like Ogles', Arman thinks they do not understand the religion.

Judge: 'You're here because you worked hard'

A young boy with a new haircut beamed as he waved toward a family member seated in the jury box. Beside him, people smiled and held miniature American flags.

Sixty people became U.S. citizens on April 15 in the Fred D. Thompson Courthouse, a curved glass building in downtown Nashville. The entirety of Chief Judge William Campbell's courtroom, from the jury box to both sides of the gallery, with extra seats brought in, was packed.

One by one, the new citizens introduced themselves and said they were from Colombia, India, France, Jamaica, Ghana, Honduras, Canada and other places. This is "our nation," Campbell tells the new citizens, a land with a proud history of immigrants, from Alexander Graham Bell to Madeleine Albright.

"You're here because you worked hard, studied and, most of all, because you dreamed," he said.

At the end of the ceremony, Campbell handed them their certification of citizenship and staffers from several politicians' offices, including Ogles', shook their hands. Arman smiled and found Seligson and Sadeq in the crowd.

After the ceremony, Sadeq returned to work at YZ Auto Sale. Arman, Seligson and a team from Welcome.US headed to Edessa, a Turkish and Kurdish restaurant on Nolensville Pike, where they "ate copious amounts of Kurdish food," Seligson said.

Arman expects to earn her associate's degree in civil and construction engineering from Nashville State in spring 2027.

Have questions about the justice system? Evan Mealins is the justice reporter for The Tennessean. Contact him with questions, tips or story ideas at emealins@tennessean.com.

Fired Mt. Juliet IT workers charged in alleged cell phone scheme

Andy Humbles
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

Two ex-Mt. Juliet information technology department employees have been formally charged for their roles in an alleged cell phone scheme after a Tennessee Bureau of Investigation-led probe, according to the Wilson County Sheriff's Office.

Marshall Travis Taylor, 55, is the former Mt. Juliet Information Technology director. Taylor and former Information Department Technician River Johnson, 28, were accused of selling old city-used cell phones for personal profit that led to the investigation.

Taylor is charged with tampering with or fabricating evidence, theft of property between $1,000 and $2,500 and theft of property between $2,500 and $10,000. He was released on $7,500 bond, according to the sheriff's office.

Johnson is charged with theft between $2,500 and $10,000, according to jail records. Johnson was released on a $3,500 bond.

The City of Mt. Juliet conducted an internal investigation that led to the employee terminations. Taylor and Johnson were also accused of an inappropriate sexual relationship that occurred during work hours and on city property, a termination letter from the city said.

Neither man had any other disciplinary notices in their personnel files.

Taylor was placed on paid administrative leave Sept. 30, while the city conducted an internal investigation.

District Attorney General Jason Lawson asked the TBI to investigate the allegations.

Taylor and Johnson were fired Oct. 7 for personnel policy violations, including personal conduct, code of ethics, use of city vehicles and equipment, cell phone use, computer and internet use, sexual harassment and the personal relationships policy.

"Those in public service must be held to a a higher standard, while also recognizing that everyone is presumed innocent unless proven guilty," Mt. Juliet Mayor James Maness said in a text message. "I have not been contacted by the TBI or provided details. I remain committed to transparency and to maintaining the public's trust, but when that trust is broken I expect accountability."



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