

In my office in West Windsor last Friday, officials from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services joined me in hosting [a swearing-in ceremony](#) for five women who had traveled [a long pathway](#) from tragedy to [citizenship](#).

When Waqar Hasan came to the United States in 1993, he did so in search of a better life for his family. His wife, Durreshahwar, and four daughters, Nida, Asna, Anum, and Iqra, followed a year later, and the family settled in Milltown.

They epitomized the hardworking, optimistic spirit that immigrants have always brought to this country. And they were on their path to citizenship when Waqar Hasan lost his life for no other reason than he was a Muslim with a “Middle Eastern” face.

An angry young man walked into Waqar’s convenience store in Dallas, Texas on the night of September 15, 2001, four days after the 9/11 attacks, ordered two hamburgers, and then shot the 46-year-old father of four in the face with a .380 caliber handgun. Nothing was taken from the store. When asked by police why he shot Waqar, 32-year-old Mark Anthony Stroman expressed no remorse. “I did what every American wanted to do but didn’t.”

His death would have ended his family’s path to citizenship – but in 2004, Congress passed and President Bush signed a bill that I wrote to allow the Hasans to stay in the United States and to become American citizens.

Statement of Rep. Rush Holt, Oath of Citizenship Ceremony, March 16, 2012

Let’s not lose sight that this ceremony is, first, about five individuals. These five, like one million others each year, now formally tie their futures to the future of the United States of America. These five individuals – Duri, Nida, Asna, Anum, and Iqra – are taking the oath to be citizens of the United States.

In a real sense, though, this is about the United States of America as much as it is about these five women. These five were tied to America long before today. They have considered themselves American. And the United States of America has had an obligation to them for many years.

Today we see hope coming out of tragedy, a fair result out of an insane injustice, and compassionate concern out of impersonal laws and regulations. The USA intends to provide and strives to give hope, fairness, and compassion; but these are not automatic. Cruel fate or happenstance often threatens to crush hope and opportunity. Irrational human passions and prejudices can thwart justice and fairness. The demands of life in a busy, complicated society and the exigencies of a complicated legal code can crowd out compassion.

All across the country America reacted in dismay when they heard in September 2001 the news of the hate crime that took the life of Pakistan-born Waqar Hasan. When they learned that the murderer committed his brutality as a perverse retaliation for the attacks of September 11, as an act of twisted patriotism, they knew this was a blot on our country. And all Americans felt the pangs even more deeply when they learned that Waqar Hasan left behind a struggling widow and four little girls.

For most Americans that was the end of the story, as they went back to their busy lives. The wheels of justice will turn and take care of this, they thought. What they did not think about was that the United States had already incurred an obligation to the Hasan family. Nor did they consider how impersonal the law can be.

Duri Hasan and her four little girls were subject to immediate deportation because they had been in the U.S. legally only by virtue of Mr. Hasan's working papers. He had taken the first steps to become an American citizen, but when he died, the family's visas and their hopes of American citizenship died with him. He was building his future and theirs in America. They were already Americans in every sense but the legal sense. This was the country the girls knew. Mrs. Hasan was working hard so that her family could make it in America. The girls were studying in school and growing up like so many million other American girls. It was apparent to those of us who got to know them that these are brave, industrious people, the kind of people our country is made of. In the laws of this country there was no exception. It required a new law to create a place for this family.

Waqar Hasan was a victim of the hate of September 11 as much as the thousands of others we mourned then and now, but he and his family might have been forgotten. The law did not include a provision recognizing that obligation our nation had incurred. Still, many Americans did not forget this fine American family. They rallied to support them in their struggles and to make a place for them in our society and our country. Human rights advocates, religious organizations, and concerned neighbors and strangers from around the country pushed for special legislation that was eventually signed by President Bush in the fall of 2004. Today, finally, hope, fairness, and compassion prevail. It is wonderful and heartwarming to see this family here today becoming full-fledged, official citizens of the United States of America.

The people of the United States and our government have an odd attitude toward immigration and immigrants. Often forgetting our own origins, and even our own best interests, we resist diversity and even lash out against others, like ourselves, because we mistakenly think they are not like ourselves. Our country has a founding commitment and history of openness, however, punctuated with many instances of rejection, bias, and hatred. The historical record is very clear that openness toward immigrants and policies of inclusion have benefited us greatly. Yet human prejudices too often break through. We see it around the country even today. Today, here in New Jersey, though, we recognize and celebrate the realization of the aspirations of these five Americans—and the aspirations that Waqar Hasan had for his family – and we recognize the successful functioning—ultimately—of American law.

We must not forget that year by year over two centuries the United State of America has moved by means of laws to overcome these prejudices of humans and the impersonal forces of society to create opportunity and fairness and to build a compassionate and supportive society for each person. This is not a country that says, “You are on your own.”

We must lift our lamp by the golden door, but also keep the door and our laws and our hearts open.

Sincerely,

Rush Holt
Member of Congress