

## I Am an American by Choice by Ric Calleja

I am an American by choice. I swore allegiance to the flag and pledged to uphold the Constitution by becoming an American citizen at age 22. I embrace the US, its freedoms and contradictions, its language, its myths and pop culture.

I came to the Boston area with my parents and sister from Cuba at the age of 12 in 1969. My family and I faced a tough period of adjustment to a new language, culture and climate. But we persevered and made the Brighton neighborhood of Boston our new home.

I made a real effort to learn the English language and the customs and traditions of my adopted country. I made American friends, learned to eat American foods and learned to sing the national anthem., and America the Beautiful. But more importantly, I learned that what truly makes one an American, regardless of one's ethnic origins, is a belief in Democracy, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the rule of law and the separation of church and state.

I believe in the Chinese proverb that says that for people to be happy and grounded, they need both roots and wings. Despite my having embraced my American identity, I also value my Cuban and Spanish ancestry. I love the Spanish language, the poetry and ideals of Jose Marti, the novels of Isabel Allende and Arturo Perez Reverte. I love a steaming plate of black bean soup, roast pork, and celebrating Three Kings Day and the feast of the Virgin of Charity. Although I call myself a Cuban-American, check the Hispanic/Latino box in government forms, and can function in both cultures. But I am not nationalistic. To me being a human being, a resident of the planet earth, is much more important to me than being Cuban or American.

I pride myself in being able to cross the artificial barriers of language and culture that we humans erect to separate from each other. In the almost 50 years I've lived in Boston, my life has been enriched by the multitude of people I've met from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Unfortunately, there are many in our multi-ethnic society who do not embrace diversity. Just listen to the rantings of politicians who incite their followers to pull out the welcome mat, circle the wagons and build a wall to keep the rest of the world out That's a serious mistake. Diversity enriches our society. We immigrants bring new ideas, new foods, new ways of doing things and a hunger to work hard and do our best to provide for our families. In summary, I believe one can be a patriotic American who lives up to our nation's values and defends our freedoms but also embraces the world, welcomes the stranger, and is willing to share our rich culture and celebrate our common humanity.