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Originally published Tuesday, July 1, 2008 at 12:00 AM

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Kate Riley / Times staff columnist

OneAmerica provides microphone for new voters to find their voices

Clint Gomez is a real-estate agent who sees American opportunity even in a slowing market. "You've just got to work a little harder," says...



Clint Gomez is a real-estate agent who sees American opportunity even in a slowing market.

"You've just got to work a little harder," says the 32-year-old Lynnwood man. Gratitude was the theme of a conversation I had with this new citizen — and voter — last week. He immigrated legally to the United States 17 years ago from Trinidad and Tobago. His mother arrived first, working as a nanny in New York for five years before she could bring her children here.

Many boys he grew up with are dead, locked up or squeaking by.

"I don't know where I'd be or who I'd be if I had stayed in Trinidad," he says.

Gomez is among more than 23,000 new American citizens who have registered to vote with the help of Seattle-based OneAmerica. The organization was founded as Hate Free Zone Washington in response to backlash against immigrants after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Its recent name change more fully reflects its mission of advancing immigrant, civil and human rights.

The new-voter program was an innovative collaboration with the Seattle office of the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Once citizens were sworn in, the OneAmerica volunteers helped those interested register to vote.

Pramila Jayapal, founder and executive director of OneAmerica, says voter registration became more urgent because the group found that many issues important to people they were helping were getting short shrift. Helping eligible immigrants become citizens and encouraging them to vote is certainly one way to prevent that.

She says 170,000 immigrants in Washington are eligible to become citizens. The state ranks 10th among all states for residents who are foreign-born and ranks fourth for refugee resettlements.

OneAmerica is a nonprofit organization that does not endorse candidates, but it does send questionnaires to political candidates, shares information, and holds and co-sponsors candidate forums.

"People have the right to be educated about the things they care about," Jayapal says. "We want political leaders to pay attention because these immigrant voters matter."

OneAmerica's work seems to be paying off. In March, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded OneAmerica \$400,000 over the next two years for the Washington New Americans Initiative, building resources and strengthening the infrastructure of services for immigrant communities across the state.

Earlier this year, Gov. Christine Gregoire established the Washington New Americans Policy Council to determine how the state could help integrate immigrants into communities. And the Legislature appropriated \$344,000 in 2009 to help immigrants become citizens.

The cynical might say these efforts are the work of a Democrat-controlled Legislature and governor to register more immigrants who tend to vote for Democrats. After all, four years ago, Gregoire edged her opponent Dino Rossi by only 129 votes.

Maybe. But what it tells me is that Republicans ought to be paying just as much attention to immigrant issues in a state where about one in eight people are foreign-born and whole industries, especially agriculture, rely on these residents.

Ten years ago, Gomez erroneously registered to vote but never voted. He finally decided to become a citizen and vote last year because he wanted to participate more fully.

"Here I am talking about how things should be and I'm not voting," says Gomez, who owns rental property. "That was hypocritical to me."

What goosed his political interests? The same things that inspire other Washington voters — among them, property taxes and the region's interminable dithering on transportation solutions.

Gomez tends to be more independent-minded. He's enamored of Democrat Barack Obama for president but is wondering if Republican Dino Rossi might be a better choice for governor.

This new voter, like many voters, is hungry for change. Now he can finally do something about it.

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