

'I hereby declare ...

Journeys to US citizenship began in Mongolia, Thailand and Mexico, ended in Grand Junction

By JAMES BURKY
James.Burky@gjsentinel.com

The first place Eggie Erkhembayar Munkhtogoo and his wife, Mira, always show family and friends visiting them in Grand Junction is Colorado National Monument.

To the couple, the beauty is inescapable. So there was no more perfect place for Munkhtogoo to officially become an U.S. Citizen. Munkhtogoo was one of 38 people to earn their citizenship at a special ceremony on Wednesday.

"It means a lot to me. I feel like I'm more a part of the community. I can now vote. It's a big difference than having just a green card," Munkhtogoo said. "One of our children has been pushing for us to get this done for a while now. I'm really happy to be at this stage."

Usually these ceremonies are held in a courtroom or on the steps of a courthouse. But Wednesday's ceremony coincided with the week of Citizenship Day and Constitution Day, both Sept. 17. U.S. Magistrate Judge Gordon Gallagher presided over the ceremony and delivered opening remarks.

"It has not been and is not meant to be an easy path to today," he told the crowd. "Active participation in this great republic requires hard work, and I welcome you as fellow citizens."

U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert welcomed the new citizens, many of whom are now her constituents.

"Newly naturalized citizens are among those who completely embody what it means to be an American," she said. "You have taken the initiative freely and actively to become a member of our republic. You have faced countless obstacles, diverse challenges and a complicated process, and yet you persevere to be where you are today."

Before the end of the ceremony, some new citizens took the opportunity to tell their stories.

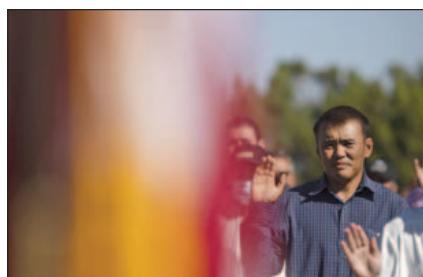
Edgar Niebla of Rifle has lived in Colorado for the majority of his life and was born in Mexico. He spoke about his desire to become a citizen and love for his home.

His two adopted daughters, Reni, 6, and Lillian, 4, rushed the podium to hug their dad's legs mid-speech. He looked down and wrapped his arms around them, holding



Photos by MCKENZIE LANGE/The Daily Sentinel

U.S. Magistrate Judge Gordon Gallagher administers the Oath of Allegiance during the naturalization ceremony at Colorado National Monument on Wednesday.



Eggie Erkhembayar Munkhtogoo raises his right hand as he takes the Oath of Allegiance.



A new U.S. citizen holds an American flag.

back tears.

"To say this has been a process 30 years in the making would be an understatement," he said.

FINALLY HOME

Munkhtogoo, who is from Mongolia, and Mira, a native of Kyrgyzstan, met while in graduate school in Japan. The two fell in love and moved to Grand Junction in 2006 when Munkhtogoo secured a work visa to work as a geologist.

They stuck around even after Munkhtogoo's job left, because they loved the area so much.

"It's so beautiful here. It reminds us a lot of home because of the nature," Munkhtogoo said. "Although, it's a lot hotter here."

"Well, it's hotter than what he's used to. I'm fine with it," Mira chimed in.

There was a time when the couple may not have been there Wednesday.



Edgar Niebla hugs his daughters, Lillian, left, and Reni, right, after speaking about his experience in becoming a U.S. citizen.

In 2011, they were homesick, so they sold their home and moved back to Mongolia, while also spending time with Mira's family in Kyrgyzstan, about 1,500 miles away.

"That was a big mistake," Munkhtogoo said.

"After six months we were over that and missed Grand Junction, so we moved back here."

Today, the couple has three children.

Mira became a citizen earlier this winter. Although COVID-19 restrict-

ed that ceremony, she was happy that her husband got to join her atop their favorite place.

"It's really just beautiful. We always come here, and we're glad to finally be citizens," Munkhtogoo said.