

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF WYOMING

In the Matter of the
Naturalization and Granting of
United States Citizenship to:

Cheyenne, Wyoming
November 13, 2024
10:15 a.m.

NELSON PONTALBA TAGAB, GLORIA
FELICIANO MALDONADO, JAQUELYN
ELPHA KLANCHER, ADRIANA ZAMORA,
DIANA PALMIRA HILLMAN, SUSANA
MOLINA, BARBARA MARIA MCMAHILL,
CHRISTOPHER ADEN, ALEXIS MARCOS
TERRAZAS, MARINA ATIMAN KOUADIO,
NAZARIO GARRIDO VAZQUEZ, MISAEL
CARRANZA RODRIGUEZ, VARDGES
HOVHANNISYAN, MALVIA CAMEKA
PALATO, BLANCA ROSSANA
FIGAROLA, MARIANA PAVANELLO DE
MELO PETERSON, HAELEE HAN,
YESENIA MENDEZ,

Joseph C. O'Mahoney
Federal Courthouse

Petitioners.

**TRANSCRIPT OF HEARING PROCEEDINGS ON PETITIONS FOR UNITED
STATES CITIZENSHIP AND NATURALIZATION**

**BEFORE THE HONORABLE KELLY H. RANKIN, PRESIDING
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE**

**THE HONORABLE ALAN B. JOHNSON
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE**

**THE HONORABLE SCOTT P. KLOSTERMAN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

**THE HONORABLE GREGORY A. PHILLIPS
UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS JUDGE**

APPEARANCES:

For the United States: Office of the United States Attorney
District of Wyoming
BY: JEREMY GROSS
Assistant United States Attorney
2120 Capitol Avenue, Fourth Floor
Cheyenne, WY 82001

JANET DAVIS, RDR, FCRR, CRR
Federal Official Court Reporter
2120 Capitol Avenue, Room 2226, Cheyenne, WY 82001
307.433.2154 * jbd.davis@gmail.com

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(Proceedings commenced 10:15 a.m., November 13, 2024.)

THE COURT: Well, good morning. On the heels of our nation's holiday where we give thanks and acknowledge our men and women of our armed services who have fought, defended, and sacrificed for all of us, I ask that we offer a brief moment of silence.

(Moment of silence.)

THE COURT: Thank you. Please be seated.

Well, good morning and welcome to all of you. It is an honor to be up here with my fellow colleagues, and it is a special honor to have our new citizens-to-be and their families and their friends with us today. This is an occasion that we all look forward to, happy faces and just a wonderful celebration of the accomplishments of each of you as new citizens.

Normally we do have a rule that prohibits any photography, any video of activities in the courtroom, but we will happily suspend that rule today, and if you would like to take photos or videos or even move about the courtroom, we certainly invite you to do so.

When we complete the ceremony today, we will be happy to move the flag around and take some photos at the conclusion of today's proceeding.

Well, it is my understanding that we are honored today by the Wyoming National Guard. They are going to present the

colors, followed by the singing of the National Anthem. So I would invite all of you to once again please rise.

(Presentation of colors and National Anthem.)

THE COURT: Please be seated.

Thank you again to the Wyoming National Guard for the presentation of the colors.

And, thank you, Mike Fitzgerald and Wade Holzapfel -- I hopefully pronounced that correctly -- for the beautiful rendition of the National Anthem.

Let's turn to the business of the day. I would invite Jeremy Gross here on behalf of the Attorney General for the United States, and he has a motion along with the roll call of each of our new citizens to be.

Mr. Gross.

MR. GROSS: Good morning, Your Honor. May it please the Court.

THE COURT: Mr. Gross.

MR. GROSS: It is my privilege to introduce the Court to the following individuals who appear for a hearing on their petitions for naturalization as United States citizens:

Mr. Nelson Pontalba Tagab, native and former inhabitant of Philippines; Ms. Gloria Feliciano Maldonado, native and former inhabitant of Mexico; Ms. Jaquelyn Elpha Klancher, native and former inhabitant of Canada; Ms. Diana Palmira Hillman, native and former inhabitant of Mexico; Ms. Adriana Zamora, native and

former inhabitant of Mexico; Ms. Susana Molina, native and former inhabitant of Mexico as well; Ms. Barbara Maria McMahon, native and former inhabitant of Portugal; Mr. Christopher Aden, native and former inhabitant of Kazakhstan; Mr. Alexis Marcos Terrazas, native and former inhabitant of Mexico; Ms. Marina Atiman Kouadio, native and former inhabitant of the Ivory Coast; Mr. Nazario Garrido Vazquez, native and former inhabitant of Mexico; Mr. Misael Carranza Rodriguez, native and former inhabitant of Mexico; Mr. Vardges Hovhannisyan, native and former inhabitant of Armenia; Ms. Malvia Cameka Palato, native and former inhabitant of Jamaica; Ms. Blanca Rossana Figarola, native and former inhabitant of Paraguay; Ms. Mariana Pavanello de Melo Peterson, native and former inhabitant of Brazil; Ms. Haelee Han, a native and former inhabitant of South Korea, and Ms. Yesenia Mendez, native and former inhabitant of Mexico.

Your Honor, each of these individuals has been interviewed and examined under oath by an examiner from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services who has also completed their background check and their character and fitness examination, and Immigration Services indicates that each of these individuals has met all requirements for naturalization and each are well qualified to be United States citizens.

As a fellow citizen, I want to welcome all of you and

congratulate you. I know you've all been members of the community for a long time, but it is still a wonderful ceremony that we get to celebrate with you and your family today. So thank you for letting me be a part of it.

And with that, I would move that each of these folks become United States citizens upon taking the oath of citizenship.

THE COURT: Thank you, Mr. Gross. Thank you for your motion, and the roll call.

And your motion for naturalization is hereby granted.

Well, a couple of more items to make it official, the first of which is your oath. And we'll do that here in just a moment, and then we will follow that with the presentation of your certificates. Then you are official. So bear with us for a couple of more steps.

I will invite my colleagues to stand with our new citizens for the oath of allegiance.

So if you would please rise.

And if you would please raise your right hands and repeat after me: I hereby declare on oath that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince or potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic;

that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the armed forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civil direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, so help me God.

Congratulations.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: And now for the official paperwork. And I would invite, once again, my colleagues to come down and we will present the certificates of naturalization to each of our new citizens.

(Presentation of certificates.)

THE COURT: Well, now it is official. Again, congratulations.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Please be seated. Thank you.

We are honored to have a message from the President of the United States. Should be able to see it on our monitors.

(Presidential message.)

THE COURT: Thank you, President Biden.

Well, I think it is only fitting that we now stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, your first as new American citizens.

So please rise and join me in the Pledge of Allegiance.

(Pledge of Allegiance.)

THE COURT: Well, we're fortunate to have our congressional representatives here with us this morning. They are dutiful about being here at each of these ceremonies, and, of course, Senator Barrasso, Senator Lummis and also Congresswoman Hageman and their representatives. And I think they have some correspondence and letters to hand out to each of our new citizens.

So if you would kindly do so at this time.

(Presentation of congressional certificates.)

THE COURT: Once again, thank you to our delegation and our representatives for your support of our new Wyoming neighbors. We always very much appreciate that.

I'm also delighted to hear that we have the League of Women Voters here to pass out some patriotic items. Thank you as always for your presence. If you would kindly pass those things out to our new citizens at this time.

(League of Women Voters' presentations.)

THE COURT: Once again, thank you to the League of Women Voters for your earnest support. We all appreciate that. I think all that you as new citizens are missing is a Patriot swag bag with all of the stuff that you have today. You need someone to help carry all of that out with you.

One of the really neat parts of these ceremonies is

hearing from you, if you're interested. Maybe you've got someone to thank, maybe you want to tell the story of your journey, maybe you want to tell a little something about yourselves, your family. There's no pressure at all, but Abby is standing over here with a microphone, and if anyone would like to say a couple of words about anything that is relevant to today's ceremony, we would love to hear from you. Again, no pressure, but what I've found is when somebody goes, then others sort of follow.

So if you would like to say a few things, now is your opportunity to do so. Just let us know.

BARBARA MARIA MCMAHILL: So, first of all, thank you. It is really an honor to become a citizen. And my story is I was coming here for only -- for only three years, but this country is so inspiring that I ended up being here -- I don't know -- 20. Thank you.

THE COURT: Well, thank you. Thank you so much.
(Applause.)

THE COURT: Anyone else like to say a word or two?

DIANA PALMIRA HILLMAN: Hello, thank you all for being here. Well, for me this is very, very emotional. I'm here with my husband that -- I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without his help and support. We started our process, the original process, by ourselves. We, like, Yeah, we don't need an attorney. It is all good. We can do it. It is easy.

It wasn't easy. We missed a lot of main information, and I actually got a notice from the ICNS saying, Hey, you have 30 days to appeal it; otherwise, you will be removed from the country. And I was like, Oh, goodness. So thank you for our daughter Courtney, also the U.S. and great help.

And to all of my friends, these people, they are like a family now. I have my uncle here that -- he was a great support for my family that was here at the time. Now he's just -- he's the only family I have here in the United States because my friends -- family friends -- so this is very emotional for me. I -- I'm really happy. I'm very, very happy to finally say I'm a citizen. And to be in this country and to serve this country. I -- thank you. Thank you for everything.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Thank you for sharing. That's wonderful.

Others that would like to say something? Anyone?

YESENIA MENDEZ: I hear you and I'm kind of like you, holding (indicating). Just I came for one year and after I have my first kid, I decided to stay. Now I have four. And, of course, it is their country and mine, too, as I become a citizen as well because it is just -- it feels right, and it's -- it's really a good opportunity, and I think it is the best. And I just love to be here and thank you for, you know, accept me as one of you guys. It is really an honor. Thank you.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Thank you for those very nice words.
Anyone else?

CHRISTOPHER ADEN: Hi, everyone. Actually, I've got a lot to say, but I will try to keep it brief, because I feel like my journey to citizenship has been both very sad and exciting.

When I was 10, my family used to live in Ukraine, and I was super excited to one day come here. And I was infatuated by the culture. So it was an American dream, you know, live inside of me.

And I only realized that dream to come here in 2016 when I got admitted to the University of Wyoming political science department. That was my master's program, finished it successfully, but on the second year when I was doing my second year of master's, I learned that both of my parents, they passed away unexpectedly. And all of a sudden I had no -- no family to go back to, like no more home.

And I like my life here, so I started thinking of how to build a new home, new family. And in two years I met my wife here. We are happily married. We've been happily married for around five years now, which is crazy.

But -- it is hard to put words together right now, but I'm extremely privileged and happy and honored to be part of this country, and I just really never even realized that this

day would happen. And I'm really -- I'm really thankful.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Thank you, sir. We're honored to have you and all of your new fellow citizens with us today.

Anyone else?

SUSANA MOLINA: So, first of all, thank you everyone for coming. And I get so nervous with people coming, but today is very special, so I'm going to make an exception.

Okay. So I'm so grateful and so proud to be a citizen now. My husband is a veteran. My children are citizens. And this is a beautiful country, and I'm so proud to be part of it now. Thank you so much.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Such inspiring words. Thank you for sharing.

Anyone else like to say anything?

Going once -- all right.

Very well. Well, thank you all for sharing. And I know it means a lot to your family and friends to hear from you. And for those that didn't speak, you've got all the support in the world here. And we just know that you've got a wonderful story as well, and we're just delighted to have you here with us.

Let me turn it over to my colleagues for any remarks.

I will begin with Judge Johnson, if you don't mind, Your Honor.

JUDGE JOHNSON: My fellow citizens, it is such an honor to be here today with you as you take the final step in the long journey that each of you have had to becoming a citizen of the United States, our most altruistic nation in this globe.

Your oath to accept the duties and sacrifices of citizenship in this nation certainly are important, that you fulfill them and see the opportunities that those duties present.

Of course, you have family and friends who are here with you who have supported you on this important journey and the decisions that you've had to make going forward. This is a day that the United States needs to celebrate as well. By taking the oath and accepting the benefits and duties of citizenship, you have strengthened this nation with your presence, your energy and all that you have brought from your homeland to contribute to the work and culture of this nation.

History confirms the benefits to society that it receives from the diverse population coming here to better their lives and the lives of their families. Those benefits are witnessed each day in all forms of industry, vital services and in our government.

I was thinking today, this is a momentous month for

us. We have witnessed through the exercise of the ballot the election of a former president of the United States; United States Senator Barrasso was reelected to serve another term in office; throughout our local governments the lawmakers have been selected to preside over the important duty of the legislature and the budget of this state. We have all witnessed what has happened in a very closely contested election process.

And I wonder how my fellow citizens who are here and have taken the oath and been present and have been observers up until now must think about their duties now to participate in this process. I can't help but wonder that you, like me, may be bewildered by the issues that affect our lives and responsibilities as citizens. We're all bombarded with information from many sources, often conflicting, often questionable, sometimes seeking to take advantage of us, other times providing beneficial and useful information in our lives.

How do we sort through all of it to make good decisions as citizens and that should be a part of our lives? It is a challenge. And, of course, this election cycle is over, but there will be others, and you will face the same challenges again and again, and I hope that you will exercise your influence.

This was also a week when we celebrated Veterans Day, which started out as Armistice, a day in World War I to honor

those that had served in what was considered to be then the last war; the "Great War" they called it.

Well, that wasn't true. We have had many conflicts and conflicts are going on in this world today, and, to either a greater or a lesser extent, as citizens of the United States we are swept into those issues on a day-to-day basis.

This morning I got curious. I wanted to think about those veterans: Could naturalized citizens or persons who weren't citizens at all serve in our military, and had any of those people in their service for this country earned the highest award that can be given to anyone for their heroism in service of this nation? And that answer is yes.

We have many noncitizens serving in our military today. We have many who have earned the nation's greatest reward for heroism, and I just want to mention a few from each of the recent conflicts:

Private Pedro Cano served in World War II. He was a Mexican-American veteran, received the Medal of Honor for his actions in combat in Germany in December 1944. He was born in La Morita, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. He moved to the United States into the small community of Edinburg, Texas, when he was 2 months old. There he served as a farm laborer until he volunteered to serve in the Army during World War II. As a private, he was deployed to the European theater to serve in the 4th Infantry Division where he was engaged in battles in

both France and in Germany and exhibited extraordinary courage and valor in battle and later sustained injuries that left him permanently disabled. He returned to south Texas to join his wife and children and resumed his work as a farm laborer.

After repeated requests during wartime to become a U.S. citizen and being ignored by his commanding officer due to other pressing matters, Private Cano finally achieved his longest lasting ambition to become an American citizen in 1946.

In Korea, Tibor "Ted" Rubin served. He was a Hungarian, a Holocaust survivor, who immigrated to the United States in 1948. He fought in the Korean War and was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the war as a combatant and also a prisoner of war. He received the award from George W. Bush in 2005, 55 years after the Korean War.

Rubin was repeatedly nominated for various military decorations but was overlooked because of anti-Semitism -- he was a Jew -- is a Jew -- by his superior officers. Fellow soldiers filed affidavits supporting his nomination for the Medal of Honor, and, nevertheless, he was not awarded what was due him for his service. President Obama signed the legislation renaming Long Beach California VA Medical Center for Rubin, who served in government after that for years.

Alford Rascon, born in 1945, retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel. For his service in Long Khanh province during the Vietnam conflict, on more than one occasion, Rascon

^ exposed himself to enemy fire and grenades by covering the bodies of whom he was aiding with his own. He suffered serious wounds as a result of his bravery.

He was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, in 1945, and eventually settled in California where he attended school. He continues to speak as a Medal of Honor winner.

Medal of Honor winners have come from every nation, your nations as well as others, to serve this nation. You are present in a state that honors veterans, as we have done this morning. Wyoming has a population that is composed -- adult population composed of 11 percent persons who have served in uniform. No other state comes close to that percentage of individuals who have served this nation, who have raised their hands, as you have done this morning, and swore to defend the Constitution of the United States. And why do we do that? We do it because we prize the liberty that we have been given.

In 1944, in the midst of World War II, a ceremony like this one attended by families, supporters and the new citizens heard a famous judge. His name was Learned Hand -- what a name for a judge -- who talked about liberty. And he said: "What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes. Believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women. When it dies there, no constitution,

no law, no court can save it. No constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. When it lies there, it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it.

"What is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not like the ruthless unbridled will. It is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty that leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few, as we have learned to our sorrow.

"What, then, is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it. I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. The spirit of liberty is a spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias. The spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded."

Each of the great religions in this world celebrate those same principles. I'm so pleased to be here to share this moment with you as you join me as a fellow citizen, and I look forward to watching you at the polls, watching you in your day-to-day life and watching you in your successes as you go forward.

THE COURT: Thank you, Judge Johnson. Wonderful

words.

Let me pass the torch, if I may, to Judge Phillips.

JUDGE PHILLIPS: Thank you, Judge Rankin.

Good morning, everyone. I will lead off by giving you my heart-felt congratulation. We meet this morning in a beautiful federal courthouse, appropriate place for such a ceremony. And we also recognize another meeting, which is the meeting of your commitment and dedication with the opportunity that the country affords for citizenship, and all of that has led to the unrivalled prize of United States citizenship.

Not everyone reaches that. A lot of people try and don't, and so hats off to you for sticking with it and obtaining your goal.

So in one sense it's a finish line. You have reached that goal. But as is often the times -- as is often the case, one finish line is also a starting line, and you begin today your life as citizens.

As with all of these ceremonies, it's very easy to look at you and out into the audience of the people who love you and who are part of your lives to see that the country is richer for your having taken the oath. You will bring ideas; you will bring views; you will offer support; you will help the country continue to improve and continue to go forward.

So I wish you all well. I'm very honored to be here with you today and celebrate with you. Thank you.

THE COURT: Thank you, Judge Phillips.

And now I'll turn it over to Judge Klosterman, and I will give you the mic.

MAGISTRATE JUDGE KLOSTERMAN: Thank you, Judge Rankin.

And good morning to all of you and welcome.

We as a Court are all honored to be here today with you as fellow citizens, and we recognize the sacrifices that you have made to be here and become a U.S. citizen. We congratulate you on this accomplishment.

I know that many of you have faced many, many challenges such as maybe being unfamiliar with our language and having to learn a new language, for being in a situation where you are not only supporting yourself, but your family in a complex society that to many of you is -- was very foreign, and it took a lot of courage and commitment for you to make such sacrifices.

You are in a country that is facing its own challenges, but with challenges come great opportunities. We all have the opportunity as citizens in this country to teach and to learn, and by your presence here in the United States, we can all learn and teach each other.

I myself had the opportunity when I was in college to study in a foreign country, and I got to live with a family there and learn about their culture. We can learn from each other about our customs, traditions, practices, ways of life.

All of those things help enrich us and our country and our community.

And through your voices we remember that our country is a representative democracy. And when I was thinking about what I might say this morning -- and this is my first naturalization ceremony that I've ever attended -- I thought about the preamble to our Constitution. And in that preamble it says "We, the people . . ." And when we think about that phrase, it couldn't be more inclusive, that it includes every man, woman, and child of every race, gender and nationality.

And so I congratulate you on becoming a citizen of the United States, and I would ask you to do this as a citizen: that you love and cherish this country; that you honor and protect it; and that you embrace all the possibilities and responsibilities that you have, and some of those new responsibilities include exercising your right to vote.

Also, as new citizens you may be called to become jurors in cases that are presented here in court, and your responsibility as jurors is so vitally important to our work here in the judiciary. This country is dedicated to the idea that we are a nation of laws and not men.

And so on behalf of the Court, we welcome all of you and we wish you great success.

THE COURT: Thank you, Judge Klosterman.

Well, welcome, my fellow Americans. The process of

becoming an American says so much about each of you, your courage and determination to find a new life for yourself and your families is our inspiration, the new life that perhaps you didn't have before. It tells us that you sought a new life of opportunity, freedom, and independence. It tells us that you share that hopeful promise that all Americans share, one of hope and prosperity.

Your path to this place in life was challenging, no doubt. For many of you you've left behind friends, cultures and customs, perhaps governments and ideologies. But these losses or changes for you are our gains. We welcome you with open arms because your way of life enriches us all. That's what makes this country so diverse, so unique, so special.

We are a nation of different cultures, ideas, and stories. Our very first president, George Washington, recognized the importance of immigrants to our land, "not just the rich and high-ranking newcomer," quote, "but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions who we shall welcome to a participation in all our rights and privileges," end quote.

Your story will enrich this culture more than you may know. Your story will become a part of the fabric of our nation's story, a story that for centuries welcomes the newcomer and their individual contributions to this proud country.

Being a United States citizen also means, of course, that you are free. The Constitution and laws of this country are designed to protect your freedom. You are free to think on your own and to form and express your own opinions. And as a citizen of the United States, you are free to follow your own path, wherever it may lead you.

The freedom of democracy also carries, as we've heard this morning, the responsibility to your communities and your country. You must be willing to serve this country as you can, use your talents, be active in your community, give back to your new country through civic participation and service. Now is your opportunity to pay it back.

All of you come here today having been helped by someone else, perhaps a family member, a friend, a neighbor. Whoever they are, they do what Americans do, they help each other achieve their dreams. Help someone else find their dream by guiding and mentoring them, by giving them a leg up. We are a country built on optimism and service, where every American lends a hand to their neighbor, someone in need. That is when we are at our best.

You now join every American in the extraordinary promise of this country, a promise that is fulfilled by every dream, every success and even every failure, but persistence, hard work and love of country will allow you to fulfill the dreams you have worked so hard to achieve.

So on behalf of all your Wyoming neighbors, we welcome you and we are very glad to have you. Again, congratulations.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: And now, once again, we will turn it over to Mike and Wade for the singing of God Bless America.

(God Bless America performed.)

(Applause.)

THE COURT: Just beautiful. Thank you, both Mike and Wade, for your talents and being with us this morning.

Well, that concludes our ceremony. I want to remind you that the Daughters of the American Revolution have some snacks and refreshments. It is down one floor, as you came into the building. I think there are drinks and things of that sort. So please join us down there, if you can.

Also, if you'd like to take photos around the flag, we will be available to do so if you're interested. Gather your families, if you wish, et cetera.

I want to thank Abby Logan. This is her first naturalization ceremony where she was in charge, and she did a wonderful job. Thank you.

(Applause.)

THE COURT: And thank you for our immigration representative from Denver for being here today. We know behind the scenes you put in a lot of work, and we very much appreciate those efforts.

Anything further for the Court that I can address for my colleagues?

All right. Hearing none, we'll stand in recess.

(Proceedings concluded 11:13 a.m., November 13, 2024.)

C E R T I F I C A T E

I, JANET DAVIS, Federal Official Court Reporter for the United States District Court for the District of Wyoming, a Registered Diplomate Reporter, Federal Certified Realtime Reporter, and Certified Realtime Reporter, do hereby certify that I reported by machine shorthand the foregoing proceedings contained herein on the aforementioned subject on the date herein set forth and that the foregoing pages constitute a full, true and correct transcript.

Dated this 30th day of November, 2025.

/s/ *Janet Davis*

*JANET DAVIS, RDR, FCRR, CRR
Federal Official Court Reporter*