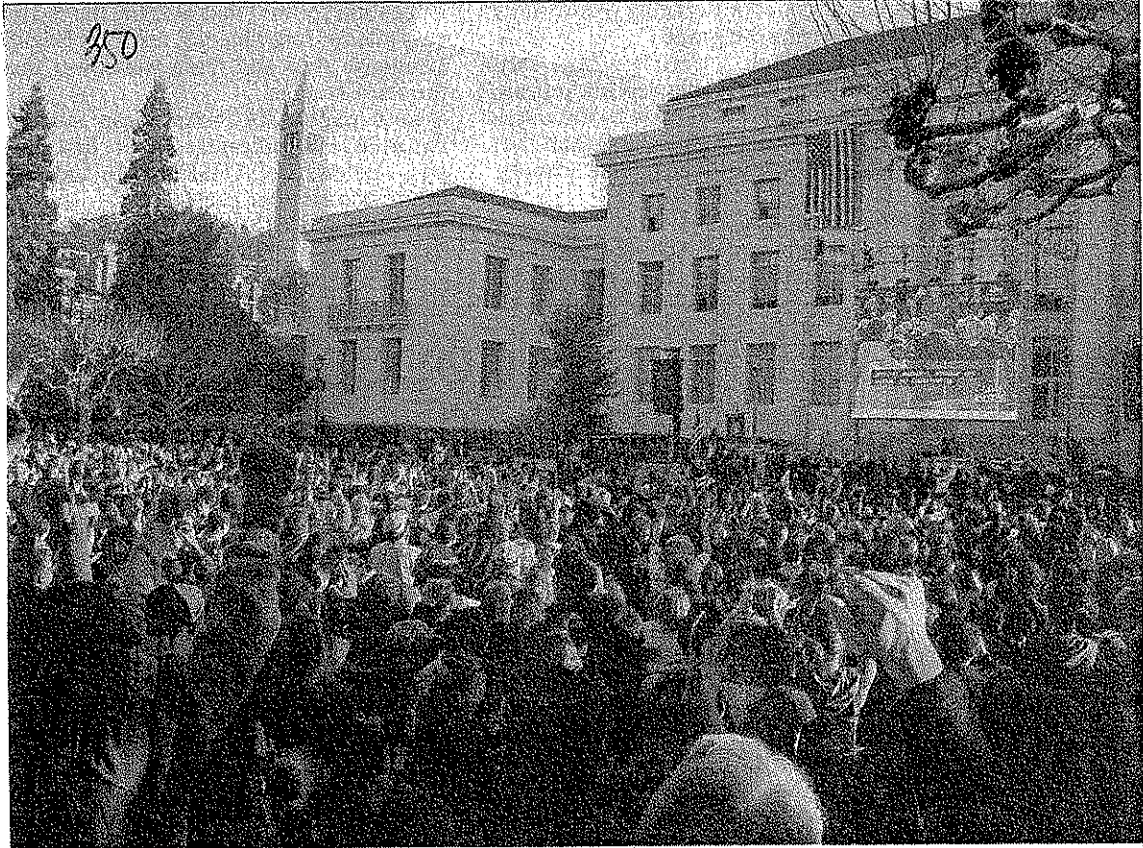


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Steven Finacom

Thousands gathered to watch the outdoor broadcast at UC Berkeley's Sproul Plaza of the inauguration of Barack Obama.

Berkeley Students Celebrate as President Obama Takes Office

By RIYA BHATTACHARJEE

For the 3,500 Berkeley High School students who watched the presidential inauguration unfold Tuesday morning, the steps of the Community Theater could have very well been those of the U.S. Capitol—their solemn expressions and sporadic bursts of laughter capturing one of the greatest moments in the nation's history.

A sea of black, Latino, white and Asian students packed the theater's auditorium by 8:45 a.m., along with teachers, parents and high school staff, to watch Barack Obama be sworn in as the 44th President of the United States, standing up when both Obama and Vice President Joe Biden took the oath of office.

Alameda County Schools Chief Sheila Jordan said that every classroom in the county had witnessed this historic transition, one she hoped would give schools in California a chance to emerge from the financially dire situation threatening the state of public education statewide.

Berkeley High Vice Principal Vernon Walton said the idea of screening the inauguration had dawned upon school officials when they received invitations to view the ceremony at UC Berkeley, which projected the event at Sproul Hall, and the Oracle Arena in Oakland.

"We thought that we had a place big enough to fit all our students, so why not just do it here?" he said.

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Students Celebrate

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At the Community Theater, a giant screen projected crystal clear images from Washington, D.C.—thanks to the wonders of modern technology and Berkeley Community Media—and a hush fell through the audience when the President started talking.

Jamar Leonard, a Berkeley High junior, stood in the aisles the entire time Obama spoke, moving only to applaud along with the rest of the crowd, which had squeezed into every available seat in the theater.

"I am happy now that we finally got a black president, and I am happy that I was able to experience history," said Leonard, a runner back for the high school soccer team, who wants to play professional football when he grows up.

"I think it's going to be a new beginning and a change in the world ... If Obama can do it, I can do it."

Leonard, like many of his classmates, woke up as early as 6 a.m. to watch the celebrations on TV with his family and then rushed to school to catch the most important part—Obama's speech.

Juniors Teraya Taplin, Dazji Daniels, Adriana Clark and Nialena Ali broke into

applause as soon as they saw Obama on the screen, and waved wildly while hugging each other in joy.

"Historical," they said beaming, when asked to describe the moment in one word.

"It's a big change, a major change," said Taplin.

Ali said that she loved Obama's oratorical skills.

"He is really articulate and effective and he also gets everybody's spirit up," she said. "He's a genius. Since he's president, maybe one day we can be president or it could also be that our kids could be president."

The four girls said that Obama's victory meant that young blacks like them had a "real story to tell" to future generations.

They swooned over first lady Michelle Obama, admiring her poise and style and calling her a "role model."

"She is a real woman, very very cool," said Taplin smiling. "She stands by Obama but she doesn't need anyone's support. She's got her own boost. I just loved the gold dress she was wearing, but I thought her daughter Malia's blue coat was cuter."

Ryan Conner, a 10th grader at the high school, sat listening outside the auditorium after failing to secure one of the coveted seats inside.

"For me, it means plenty of opportunities," said Conner, 15. "He is a good leader

who has opened a lot of doors. He's my hero because he might just have changed the world. I love basketball and I think it's kind of cool that he likes to play basketball too."

Jamil Whetstone, a member of the Berkeley High football team, said he would have given anything to go to D.C. to watch the ceremony, but added that he was grateful to his school administration for giving him the opportunity to watch it in such a grand way.

More than 65 parent volunteers ushered the event, making sure that everything worked like clockwork. School started on a late schedule at 10 a.m.

"It was a really exciting place to celebrate this, as exciting to be on the Capitol steps," said Sandy Horwich, one of the parent volunteers, after she made sure that the last student had left the Community Theater and gone to class. "I am very inspired to be here with the children—they were serious at the right time and excited at the right time. Everyone understood the importance."

Lorrie Gray and David Harrington, Berkeley High parents who had chaperoned a group of students to Reno right before the November elections to help get Obama elected, said that they were impressed by how cooperative everybody was during the morning's events.

"Initially a lot of students didn't know who Dr. Joseph Lowery was, they were like 'who is this old guy?'" said Harrington smiling. "But then he turned out to be the hippest guy. They realized he had walked with Martin Luther King Jr. and was somebody who has done a lot of work in the civil rights movement. I guess it's a generational thing—they can relate to Barack but not with someone who came before him."

Most parents interviewed said that they were extremely proud of the way their children had behaved during the inauguration and hoped that Obama would continue to inspire them—the "laptop generation"—to think about the bigger world instead of just their iPods and video games.

"This massive hope for these teens is really important," said Tom Lent, a Berkeley High parent who works in green engineering. "Their view of American politics has been framed by the Bush presidency. This is a radical change from the norm, from what they are used to."

Lent said that he was happy with the straight talk Obama offered and described his inaugural speech as "refreshing."

"He talked to us like we were adults and didn't gloss over stuff," he said. "We need a lot of changes right now, especially in the economy, global warming and our schools."

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