

Editorial: An inauguration to remember

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Jan. 21, 2009 - Not even the below-freezing temperatures could deter the massive crowds from witnessing history on Washington D.C.'s National Mall on Tuesday, January 20. Bundled in winter coats, gloves, hats, and scarves, the record breaking crowd braved not only the cold but also hours of travel, enormous security lines, and extreme confusion throughout the crammed city. And despite the obstacles faced, the crowd couldn't have been more exuberant.

The estimated two million in attendance for President Barack Obama's Inauguration lined metro stops throughout the District, Maryland, and Virginia as early as 4 a.m., hoping to get as close to the Capitol as possible.

As I stepped out of the subway car before sunrise at the L'Enfant Plaza metro stop, the station's crowd resembled sardines packed into a can 10 times too small. As we moved painfully slowly, cameras were raised high above the immense sea of people, taking photos and recording video of the astonishing site surrounding us.

"Yes, we can," echoed throughout the station as people cheered loudly, completely oblivious to what would normally be a claustrophobic and even dangerous situation. Something big was happening. The sheer anticipation of that moment when the first African-American would be sworn in as President of the United States was enough to make us easily forget the very uncomfortable circumstances.

After the hour-long exit out of the metro station, I welcomed the freezing cold wind as the sun began to slowly rise over the Smithsonian Institutes lining the mall. The moment of solitude was short lived as I joined the herd and marched down Independence Avenue to one of the few security checkpoints for ticketed guests. For two more hours I anxiously waited in the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, treasuring every step I took closer to the reflecting pool below the Capitol.

"O-ba-ma, O-ba-ma, O-ba-ma," cheered those surrounding around me every few minutes as we moved through security. Once again, the crowd transcended their current situation and looked forward to the future.

Inside the security gates young children sat on the shoulders of a parent, seniors were guided forward

in wheelchairs, others ascended high into the trees, and families huddled together under one shared blanket. Songs and chants echoed proudly throughout the mall as we all looked eagerly onto the steps of the Capitol waiting for the noon hour when Barack Obama would take the oath of office.

The singing crowd silenced immediately as Obama finally stood before Chief Justice John Roberts and recited the oath. Tears streamed down faces, hats were thrown in the air, and thousands of flags were waved as people applauded and celebrated the new leader before them.

The president's speech continued to draw both applause and tears from the millions before him. For the man standing to my right and wearing a "Veterans for Obama" baseball cap, it was these words that brought tears to his eyes.

"As we consider the road that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who, at this very hour, patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains," President Obama said.

"They have something to tell us, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages. We honor them not only because they are guardians of our liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service; a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves."

As the daughter of a Soldier and an Army civilian, these words weighed heavily on my mind as well. Still, for much of the speech I remained flooded with emotion, leaving many of the president's words muddled in my mind.

This was certainly a historic moment and I couldn't have been more proud of the American people for overcoming our past and electing an African-American as our President.

Still, for me, this day was much more than just about race.

Since I was a kid, sitting on my father's shoulders at Bill Clinton's Inauguration in 1993, I have always cared about politics. I studied it in school, I interned on Capitol Hill, and I volunteered on campaigns. I was in the minority when I voted at 18 and again at 22. I never understood how much of America remained quiet at the polls.

Thus, what overwhelmed me on January 20, 2009 had little to do with the color of Barack Obama's skin, but the simple fact that so many people cared. They voted. They volunteered. They campaigned. They donated. They traveled to Washington to see this day. We, the American people, reversed our downward spiral of political apathy.

When I looked into millions of faces filled with smiles and tears that surrounded me on the mall, they were anything but apathetic.

Hopeful. Excited. Proud. Reassured. Happy.

As the sun set over our nation's capitol that evening we were a rainbow of these emotions. And the three simple words that rang throughout the city served as a reminder for all that we had overcome.

"Yes, we did."

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