

East Bay reacts to election of first African American president

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Oakland Tribune/Contra Costa Times

Article Launched: 11/04/2008 10:17:12 PM PST



Al Sparks and his 18-month-old son Alex of Oakland celebrate the win of Barack Obama as President...

OAKLAND — Cheering and honking car horns filled the air Tuesday night in downtown Oakland as U.S. Sen. Barack Obama clinched the race for the White House, becoming the nation's first African-American president-elect.

A crowd of all ages and all races packed into the Oakland Marriott's convention center, cheering as each state was called for the Democratic nominee, and losing itself in ecstatic celebration as the race was finally called.

"As a young person, I could not have ever conceived of this moment," said Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums, a veteran of more than two and a half decades in Congress. "I think this is a momentous victory... for the human family."

At a block party on Broadway and 2nd Street, about 300 people celebrated the historic win with live music, barbeque and spirited reaction.

"Obviously it's an unprecedented junction in the politics of this century," said Greg Vaughn, a 54-year-old Oakland man who grew up in Georgia. "It's been an inspiration for a whole generation. Not since the Civil Rights movement have you seen so many people of all ages in the political process — that's reflected in the high energy here.

"I think it will have some impact, but this country has a way to go," he said of the racial divide in America, "as evidenced by the reaction to an African American candidate... I'm

talking about people on the grass roots level — a lot of people in exit polls bases their concerns on race, and that's

problematic."

Ken Elamin, who gave age as "over 30," from San Francisco's Fillmore District, said it hasn't really sunk in yet.

"You've seen it transpire over the past two years," he said. On the issue of race, he said, "You did see that as a definite obstacle. Black people over time have had to overcome many obstacles. (Race) is always going to be an issue... (But I) never thought I'd see a black president."

Some decided to keep a cool head about the election.

"I don't expect change to happen immediately, it will probably happen in the next two to three years," David Robinson said. "But once the loopholes are closed, I know things will start to go right."

Frank Davis, a 35-year-old child psychiatrist from Oakland said he's tried to stay calm the last few weeks.

"With all the ups and downs, it's been like a rollercoaster ride, so I tried to stay kind of out of it. But in a day or two when it sinks in, I'll give over to it finally.

"The fundamental change we're going to see is hope... This isn't a one-night party. It's a long term deal. It's the next four years, and there's a lot of work to do," Davis said.

One woman bought 20 two-dollar bills and went around the party handing them out, pointing out a black man "in a position of power, because he's seated" with the group signing the Declaration Of Independence on the back of the bill. Her name was Darnisha Wright, 37, of the San Francisco Martin Luther King Civic Committee.

"That's no mistake they printed one man with dark skin like that. That's John Hanson, and I'm spreading the word and proud to share these bills with people. I just want everybody to own one," she said.

"People don't realize the positive reaction that Obama receives all around the world, especially in Europe," Simone Harvey said. Harvey, who was born and raised in Switzerland, says that she feels like a citizen for the first time in this election. "He's going to change the way that the rest of the world looks at the United States."

The overall energy at the party was thrilled, with many people laughing and shouting and giving big hugs to everyone they saw.

"I'm overjoyed, I'm overwhelmed and ecstatic." Steve Hunt said. "I know there is a lot to be done, so the win is bittersweet, but the sweet definitely outweighs the bitter... Tomorrow I'm going to go into work, walk in the door like Kramer and do a cartwheel."

At an election night party at Geoffrey's Inner Circle in downtown Oakland, many called Obama's election a dream they'd thought unattainable.

"It just gives me a great deal of pride," said Donnell Dantzler, 38, of Hayward. "As an African-American you always question things that have never been done before."

People across the East Bay called it a tremendous step in American race relations that so many voters had been able to look beyond the color of a candidate's skin.

"If he was an African American and didn't have the integrity and qualifications that Obama has, I wouldn't vote for him," Lashawnta Rufus, 30, of Oakland, at a party at Everett & Jones restaurant near Jack London Square. "It's not about the color — if you are not a qualified candidate, you're not going to win."

Rufus spoke just before a deafening roar erupted at the restaurant as CNN reported Obama's win in Ohio.

"This is very emotional," is all Susie Grantham, 78, could muster as she wiped away tears. "I was hoping..." she added, as Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," played over loudspeakers. "This is unbelievable, amazing," Grantham's daughter Margerie Grantham added. "In our lifetime, how amazing is that?" the daughter added. "And we all made history," as the song changed to Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours."

Obama campaign volunteers had worked right up until the last minute in the East Bay; the Northern California headquarters on Adeline Street in Berkeley was jammed with people on cell phones calling voters in Colorado and Iowa. Adam Stern, 49, of Berkeley, said it was his daughter who'd brought him there.

"She's 13, and she's been here half a dozen times in the last two weeks," he said. "I'm very motivated to keep working for Obama; my daughter is an inspiration to me. She actually recruited two of her best friends to join her on several of her visits here."

Sasha Stern paused between calls, phone still cocked by her ear, to disclose that she has placed about 350 to 400 calls by her estimation. "I've called New Mexico, Florida, Missouri, Colorado and Iowa," she says, before dialing the next Iowan.

Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, who was among Obama's early endorsers and later became his campaign's Western Regional Co-Chair, basked in the moment Tuesday night after months of trying to get out the vote.

"When they told us it was a dream... what did we say? SI SE PUEDE!" Lee told an exultant crowd at the Marriott just before U.S. Sen. John McCain gave his concession speech. "It's a night that has transformed the political landscape of our country. This has been a campaign of unity."

Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover, waiting anxiously Tuesday night for results in the District 5 runoff, got emotional upon hearing Obama won the presidency.

"Oh my God, this is probably one of the most exciting moments in my life to see this step in our history take place," said the three-term African American supervisor. "It's amazing and just shows how far we've come as a country. I'm numb. I'm at a loss for words."

Glover said during his campaign he'd met a 96-year-old woman who used to eat at colored-only tables in restaurants.

"She just wanted to hold out and see this reality," he said. "For all people who've been through those struggles, it's something wonderful to see it become a reality."