

# East Bay celebrates inauguration of 44th president

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[Contra Costa Times](#)

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Tears, cheers and unabashed enthusiasm flowed like free champagne at East Bay inaugural celebration events Tuesday morning.

Thousands of excited residents gathered at venues in Walnut Creek, Richmond, Oakland, Martinez and elsewhere to watch the televised swearing-in ceremony of Barack Obama, America's first black president.

They yelled. They waved American flags. They laughed. They nursed coffee. They hugged, and they cried.

Most said they eschewed the comfort of their living rooms and came to early-morning community events because they wanted to share the occasion with others and build memories to share with their grandchildren.

Here is a look at what happened around the East Bay:

Richmond

The Civic Auditorium sounded like a church revival meeting as a packed audience made up of people of all ages yelled out responses during Obama's inauguration speech.

"You tell it!" "Come on, now!" "That's right!" "Amen!"

They waved their American flags and swayed together while Aretha Franklin belted out "Let freedom ring!"

It was a colorblind crowd. Black, white or Latino, it didn't matter — you were everyone's sister or brother Tuesday morning.

"We are all people, we are all Americans," said Diane Gatewood, of Richmond. "We are not white or black or Latino. We need to get back to loving each other."

Outside the building, vendors hawked T-shirts, hats and other souvenirs. Car horns honked in celebration as they drove past.

Inside, Richmond resident Nancy Burke, 50, called the moment "a powerful day that's been long in coming."

"His background encompasses so much, it feels like he represents all of us," she said. "I'm very proud to be an American today, and I haven't been in a long time."

"I'm grinning from ear-to-ear. It brought me to tears," said Archie Turner, a 70-year-old Richmond resident. "I wish the whole of Richmond could have been here. They don't know what they missed — history. My mother is 96, and she didn't think she would ever see something like this."

Mary Alice Harris, 65, of Richmond, marched for fair hiring practices in the city in the 1950s and '60s. "To see one small one small part of Dr. King's dream come true with the election of Barack Obama is thrilling to those of us from that period," she said.

The optimism and jubilation of the morning was mixed with some pragmatism.

"I think it is a very big change, definitely," said Tracy Reed, 45, of Richmond. "But (this is not the end and that) it's going to take some time. I hope people don't think it will be immediate or that they don't need to be involved. Everybody plays a part. We have to remain steadfast, remain strong."

Rick Guerrero, a 52-year-old Hercules resident, was a regional leader for the Obama campaign and had planned to be in Washington on Tuesday, only to have those plans dashed when he was laid off the day before the Nov. 4 election.

"Until Sunday there was sadness, but I believe God had a reason for me to be here," he said. "I'm just overwhelmed by the amount of joy. The joy is transcendent, it's right here, and this is where I need to be, with my family."

Walnut Creek

Three generations of Vlachs came to the Leshner Center to watch on big screens as Obama took the oath of office.

Laurie Vlach, of Concord, flanked by her husband and mother-in-law, took her 11-year-old son RJ out of school for the inauguration.

"I wanted to make sure we came ... so he can watch history," she said.

RJ didn't think he had ever watched an inauguration before. He paused a moment as his mom pointed out former President Jimmy Carter on the screen and explained to him that Carter was a peanut farmer at one time.

Of the event, the clapping, the cheers, the jeers and the tears, the sixth-grader said, "I think it's all pretty amazing."

RJ and his mom joined in with the rambunctious crowd, waving an American flag — almost as big as RJ — from the balcony of the theater.

More than 1,000 gathered at the Leshner Center as part of a free inauguration event. Two big screens were set up in two theaters so people could watch the festivities together.

The images captured everything from the arrival of Obama and his wife, Michelle, which drew cheers, to flashes of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, outgoing President

George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, which drew jeers from the animated crowd.

Walnut Creek City Councilman Kish Rajan clapped even as others in the Leshner Center hissed and booed Bush.

He applauded out of "respect for the office and respect for the man who gave so much of himself to serve," Rajan said. "Whether or not I may agree with his views, I appreciate his service."

When the C-SPAN announcer in Washington told the crowd at the National Mall to rise for Obama's swearing-in, 2,400 miles away the crowd in Walnut Creek rose in unison as they watched the screen.

They chanted "Obama" when the crowd in the nation's capitol chanted, and many wept as the 44th president of the United States was sworn into office — enthused and excited for both the historic moment and the realization that Bush's term was ending.

"It's been a long eight years," said Tex Martin of Lodi.

Others said they came because they wanted to be somewhere they would remember on this day.

"I am proud that America has finally woken up," said Renee Rosado. "And I believe he truly will make change."

Martinez

Four of the five members of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors left their chairs on the dais and watched the ceremonies from the chamber audience. Their colleague Federal Glover, the county's first African-American supervisor, was among the vast crowd in Washington.

The chamber was festooned with ribbons for the county's 31st annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration and Humanitarian of the Year Awards, held later Tuesday.

The county broadcast the ceremony via C-SPAN on two television screens and a big screen.

"I think it was very powerful, no matter what side of the aisle you're on," said Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho, a Republican and daughter of the late state Sen. John Nejedly. "It's a very powerful moment in our nation and world's history."

Supervisor John Gioia said that the speech was "not just a speech for Americans, but a speech to the world. He sent a message to the world that we'll be strong, but we'll be fair."

Supervisor Susan Bonilla, the board's chairwoman, said her two daughters, a sophomore and a senior in high school, visited the mall Monday to buy Obama T-shirts to wear to school Tuesday.

While the first two shops were sold out, they pair found some shirts and wore them for the inauguration.

"The whole nation was drawing hope from those words, and he successfully connected people from the past to the present on why America is a great nation," Bonilla said. "We have that opportunity before us now to build our future."

#### San Ramon

Paul Robeson Jr., 82, son of the legendary African-American actor, singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson, whose own father had been born a slave, called Inauguration Day the "completion of Reconstruction" as Abraham Lincoln had envisioned it.

Robeson Jr., a New York resident, was in the Bay Area to accept an award posthumously for his father, who is being honored today by the Eugene O'Neill Foundation.

One of the first black men to play serious roles in the American theater, the late Robeson starred in O'Neill's "All God's Chillun Got Wings" and "The Emperor Jones." His career was cut short when his activism became the target of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

Speaking of how his father might have reacted to Obama's inauguration speech if he were alive, Robeson Jr. said, "I think being that he was the son of a slave, I think he would be even more affected than I am. He said he wouldn't see (a black president) in his lifetime, but he said that he thought I might."

Robeson Jr. commented on the proximity of former "slave markets" to the place where Obama was sworn into office.

"A slave who was less than a person is the antecedent of (Obama), and now he occupies the White House. The symbolism then is that all people, including black people, are finally human and deserve human rights," said Robeson Jr., who watched the inauguration in his room at a San Ramon hotel. "(Obama) symbolizes both a new unity and yet also recalls the injustices of the past. But the effect of this is to heal them."

#### Berkeley

About 200 people of all ages crowded into Cafe Valparaiso and the adjacent La Peñ±a Cultural Center, a bastion of Latin American culture and progressive politics in south Berkeley.

"You're going to remember this day, Emmie," Berkeley resident Jed Parsons told his 4-year-old daughter. "It's the best speech I've ever heard in my life."

It was a proudly left-wing crowd that hugged, cheered and shed tears at the event's most poignant moments, while also hissing Bush and giving a tepid response to some of Obama's statements that some saw as overly threatening — such as his forceful warnings to would-be terrorists.

"I cried several times. That surprised me," said Berkeley resident Ron Kelly, who brought a samba whistle so he could make plenty of noise without losing his voice. "I appreciated his reminding people why we worked for him, that we chose hope over fear."

Oakland author Anne Finger, an atheist, was one of many in the crowd who said she was pleased that Obama's speech recognized "nonbelievers" alongside Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus.

As a member of the disability rights movement, she said she was "very happy to see a disabled person on the platform."

However, she also shared with many of the cafe's patrons a sober outlook on the incoming administration, and a readiness to not remain silent if Obama begins veering his policies toward an unwelcome direction.

"I don't have a whole lot of faith in any politicians," Finger said. "What I really have faith in is mass movements, people mobilizing from below."

Eleven-year-old Osmane Sow, who arrived to the cafe on his scooter wearing an Obama sweatshirt, most enjoyed the classical music interlude. He said he was looking forward to the next four years.

"I'm really psyched," he said. "I was really happy to see Bush get in his helicopter and go back to his Texas ranch."

Oakland, Oracle Arena

Joyce Irving, of Oakland, emerged from the Oracle Arena wiping away tears.

"I had to be here — it was beautiful," she said. "We have made change by voting for Obama, that maybe other races and nationalities can do this someday, too. It's not just a one-race world."

Irving's friend, Cassonja Wiley, added, "The joy, the emotions — it's just been amazing. He's just so cool and calm. He's a person who can handle the pressure, and that's just what we need, someone that's for us."

Oakland, Everett & Jones BBQ

The crowd at Everett & Jones near Jack London Square turned its attention from the red, white and blue balloons, the cakes iced with images of the first family and the clinking champagne glasses, to the image of the new president and stood rapt as Obama spoke, tears running silently down many cheeks.

Dede Schindler, 28, of Oakland, said she and her husband, Adam, had volunteered for the Obama campaign.

"We just really wanted to be with people in Oakland and share the moment with our hometown," she said, weeping. "I thought the speech was amazing; he said exactly what people wanted to hear. I think he gave us an excuse to dig in and help."

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