

Los Angeles Times

On Skid Row, Obama's Inauguration Triggers Hope for the Future

Carol J. Williams

Jan. 20, 2009

Sheri Wilborne has voted for president only once in her 44 years. When she cast her ballot for Barack Obama in November, she said, it was the first election day when she wasn't incarcerated, on parole or too deep in the fog of drugs to cast a ballot.

"It was the right time for me in my life. Before I was too strung out or too loaded. If I wasn't in jail, I was on my way to it," Wilborne said as she watched the inaugural ceremonies on a big-screen TV at the LAMP Community center on downtown's Skid Row.

Wilborne was among 16 people providing a running commentary as they watched the inauguration together. From her perch at the end of a grubby floral sofa covered with a blue blanket, she praised the new president's wife as "a classy lady." "Like Jackie Kennedy," added Kevin King, just paroled last month after his fourth California prison term on drug charges.

It was a time for reflection among the city's down and out, and for pondering the possibilities of a new social order in which, as Obama pointed out in his speech, the son of a man who wouldn't have been served in a restaurant 60 years ago had been entrusted with leadership of the world's most powerful country.

"It's not so much change. It's the unity. It's not a black and white thing any more," observed Mary Hailes, a 48-year-old still trying to get a handle on her substance abuse. "We just celebrated Martin Luther King Day yesterday, and now this!"

After Obama punctuated the oath of office with "So help me, God," the residents watching in the second-floor TV room, all but one of whom was black, whooped and clapped and cried like babies.

"This is history in the making," said King, who couldn't vote in November because he was still in prison. "Look how he walks, with his head up."

"Up high!" added Hailes. "I wish I was there."

The residents, trying to make new lives for themselves, insisted they weren't expecting miracles from the new president.

"I just hope the people of the United States will give him the opportunity. He's going to make mistakes and I don't want to see them playing the race card," said King, 50, who said he was proud to be from Obama's home town of Chicago. "It wasn't a race election, it was a people's election."

There was some back and forth about how well Caroline Kennedy had aged, when the TV camera panned to her in the vast crowd. There was debate about whether you needed to be a perfect musician or only almost perfect to be selected to play with the likes of Yo-Yo Ma. There was laughter when a woman named Adriana expressed fear that Michelle Obama might be “the first first lady to pop a kid on TV” as Sasha, the younger of the two Obama daughters, bounced playfully in the stands just before the oath of office. But there was awe and silence and then a passing of the tissues when Aretha Franklin sang “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” Her song set off a string of reminiscences about the singer’s heyday and the Civil Rights Movement.

“It’s come full circle from Dr. King’s dream,” said Hailes. “It’s not just a dream anymore.”