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No ordinary day

Emotions fill local witnesses to history

By Aaron Nicodemus TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Yesterday's inauguration was no ordinary day for Worcester's Gloria D. Hall.

As she watched President Barack Obama sworn in as the nation's 44th president, Ms. Hall cried.

"Throughout the entire process of him running for office, I haven't been emotional," said Ms. Hall, an African-American and former director of the Willis Center Cultural Institute in Worcester. "When he took the oath of office, I just cried."

She said it seemed almost unreal to her that a black family is moving into the White House.

"The one picture I will step up and pay for is one of the girls playing on the White House lawn," she said.

Across the region, people reflected on the meaning — in their own lives and for the nation — of this inauguration.

Robert Thomas, executive director and chief executive officer of the Martin Luther King Jr. Business Empowerment Center in Worcester and an African-American, said words could not express how proud he is that America elected a black man as president.

"It's a great example for the rest of the world, of what this country has democratically brought to fruition," he said.

But for all the positive emotions Mr. Thomas felt yesterday, he said couldn't help being worried for Mr. Obama's safety.

"I remember Martin, John and Bobby," said Mr. Thomas, referring to Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, all assassinated. "I just think of all the tapes we all play in our heads. I'm always cautious, seeing what I've seen."

Mr. Thomas said he is hopeful the good feelings arising from the inauguration "are still with us next week, next month, next year, four years from now."

"If everybody could keep that celebratory feeling, now that would be the kind of America where everybody would want to be," he said.

Rev. Robert Bachelder, minister and president of the Worcester Area Mission Society, United Church of Christ, predicted yesterday's events would have a profound effect on America for years to come.

"Today, despite the myriad and highly complicated problems faced by our country and the world, I'm feeling a sense of possibility, believing with my favorite president, Abraham Lincoln, that America is still the last best hope of the world, and confident that another great chapter in the history of our national life is about to be written," he wrote in an e-mail to the newspaper. "Millions seem to be feeling this way, which certainly is part of the reason why the day feels so electric."

The inauguration affected different people in different ways.

"America was born out of race, and it's a stain on our nation," said University of Massachusetts Medical School professor Thoru Pederson, who said the election of a black man to the nation's top political post was "a monumental step, but it's not a solution" to the nation's myriad problems.

"We have to be cautious. We've really put this remarkable man and his team on a pedestal of expectation," he said. The problems that America faces are global, he said, and despite his talents, Mr. Obama is just one man.

Several people described the inauguration as one of those shared experiences when Americans remember where they were and who they were with when they witnessed the historic moment. Most of those moments — JFK's assassination, the space shuttle Challenger explosion, 9-11 — were overwhelmingly negative. The inauguration was notable for being so memorable and so positive.

"It's really the most historic inauguration in my lifetime," said Peter S. Cohan of Marlboro, a Babson College professor and author of eight books.

"He's an African-American president who's taking over at a point in America's history when we are at a low point," he said. He was elected, he said, not because he's black but "because he was the most competent person running, the smartest, the most inspiring, with the most creative approaches to solving our problems."

For Timothy J. Garvin, president and chief executive officer of the United Way of Central Massachusetts, Mr. Obama's inaugural address was a call to action.

"Every time there has been a crisis, we Americans have risen up to meet it," he said. "President Obama wasn't saying, 'Yes we can.' He was saying, 'Yes, we will.'"

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