



Gays among millions crowding D.C. for inauguration

Jan. 20 event seen as an 'extraordinary moment'

By CHRIS JOHNSON

Jan. 16, 2009

Gay supporters of President-elect Barack Obama will be among the millions from across the country expected to flock to D.C. to witness the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States.

Officials are expecting 1.5 million or more people to crowd D.C. on Inauguration Day, triggering President Bush on Tuesday to declare D.C. a federal emergency area, making the city eligible for federal money to help cover the cost of security for the events.

Mike Smith, 48 and a gay resident of San Francisco, Calif., said he wanted to see the inauguration because he's "been a fan" of Obama since "before the primaries."

"I think it's just such an extraordinary moment," he said. "I just really want to stand on the [National] Mall and see with my own eyes when the world changes, because I think the world will change."

Smith, executive director for the AIDS Emergency Fund & Breast Cancer Emergency Fund, said he never thought in his lifetime a black person would be elected president.

"I just thought there was just too much baggage in too many places and it amazes me that we did it," he said. "It creates hope for so many people who have felt so disenfranchised for so long that it's just such a monumental moment."

Smith said he helped Obama with his presidential campaign during the primary season by going to his website every Wednesday and giving him \$100. Smith said he kept contributing until he maxed out his possible donations at \$2,300.

While in D.C., Smith said he plans to stay with friends in Columbia Heights and will walk both ways to the inauguration festivities near the National Mall.

He noted that he intends to watch the swearing-in ceremony, but "will probably try to get back to the house and watch the parade on television and warm up." He also said he has a ticket for Out for Equality, an unofficial Inaugural Ball at the Mayflower Hotel hosted by several gay groups.

Selma Tucker, 22 and a gay resident of Grand Rapids, Mich., said he came to D.C. because he wants "a capstone experience" to the presidential election.

"It's meant so much to me and a lot to my family and friends, and it's been a big part of my life for some time now," he said. "This is kind of the moment of fruition and so when I saw opportunity to come to Washington ... I just had to jump at it."

Tucker, a student at Grand Valley State University, said he came to the inauguration with about 700 students as part of a seminar with the Washington Center, a non-profit organization that

provides opportunities for students to come to D.C. His program focuses on how media coverage influenced the outcome of the presidential election.

Tucker said he helped Obama during his presidential campaign by participating in grassroots efforts such as making calls and knocking on doors for two months leading up to the November election.

"I was really happy to be part of that whole experience in just that grassroots campaign because it became very personal towards the end," he said.

Tucker came to D.C. from Michigan with three other students in a mini-van rented by the Washington Center. He is staying at the Holiday Inn in Rosslyn in Arlington, Va.

While in D.C., Tucker said he plans to attend the Michigan Inaugural Ball on Tuesday, which Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm (D) is expected to attend. He also plans to attend the pre-inauguration celebration at the Lincoln Memorial on Sunday.

Stuart Merrill, 47 and a gay resident of Minneapolis, Minn., said he wanted to witness the inauguration because he's been an "avid supporter" of Obama throughout the campaign and sees the event as "a historical moment."

"It's an awfully nice change after the past eight years," he said, "plus I'm very excited to see the first African-American president."

Merrill, a pharmaceutical representative, said he worked for Obama on his presidential campaign by doing phone calls to potential voters in Utah, Nevada, Ohio and Minnesota for the primaries and the general election.

While visiting D.C., Merrill said he plans to sleep on a friend's sofa in Alexandria, Va. Merrill only plans on going to the swearing-in ceremony, and will not attend the parade, parties or balls.

"It just struck me that this time is not about \$5,000 a plate dinners," he said. "This time is about people who are going to be walking on the Mall and the Lincoln Memorial, and I would do that rather than go to some \$5,000 a plate event."

Robinson to speak at pre-inauguration event

Obama's decision to invite Rev. Gene Robinson, an openly gay bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church in the New Hampshire diocese, to give the invocation at a pre-inauguration event has won praise from gay leaders.

It comes after many of the same leaders assailed Obama for deciding on Rev. Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in California and a supporter of Proposition 8, to give the invocation Tuesday.

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement Monday that Robinson "models what prayer should be — spiritual reflection put into action for justice."

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, called the decision to invite Robinson to give the invocation a "stellar choice" in a statement Monday.

"For the first time in history, an out gay man will lead the nation in opening the transfer of power from one administration to another," she said, "and every person watching in the [United States] and around the world will have seen it. That, alone, is change."

But some conservative leaders were not happy with the decision. Matt Barber, director of cultural affairs with Liberty Alliance Action and Liberty Counsel, said in a statement Wednesday that Obama “belittles” the Bible by inviting a gay bishop who is unrepentant of “his aberrant sexual appetite for men” to speak at the pre-inauguration event.

Among the 800,000 attendees expected at the pre-inauguration event, which will take place from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., are Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden.

Shin Inouye, a Presidential Inaugural Committee spokesperson, said Obama selected Robinson to give the invocation because he “has provided the president-elect with his advice and counsel on many occasions, and is one of our nation’s prominent religious leaders.”

“His participation reflects the fact that the President-elect and Vice President-elect are committed to holding inaugural events that celebrate our common values and reflect the diversity and history of our great nation,” Inouye said.

Robinson, who didn’t respond to a request to comment, was quoted Monday in the Concord Monitor as saying that “it’s important for any minority to see themselves represented in some way.”

The bishop reportedly said that he doesn’t believe Obama included him in the inauguration festivities in response to the Warren criticism.

Robinson told the Concord Monitor that he didn’t yet know what he would say during his invocation, but he knew he wouldn’t use a Bible.

“While that is a holy and sacred text to me, it is not for many Americans,” Robinson said. “I will be careful not to be especially Christian in my prayer. This is a prayer for the whole nation.”

While many gay attendees were excited about the decision to include Robinson in the celebration, they expressed continued frustration over Warren’s participation.

Merrill said he was “not too pleased” with the choice of Warren, but said “it’s an opportunity for dialogue.” He said that he intends to hold up a pink triangle made of cloth while Warren gives his invocation as a symbol of the persecution of gay people.

Gay groups involved in D.C. festivities

A number of gay groups were invited to participate in the inauguration festivities. The Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington was invited to perform as part of the pre-inauguration ceremony Sunday where Robinson will give his invocation.

Jeff Buhrman, the gay conductor and artistic director for the group, said in a statement Tuesday that GMCW takes “immense symbolic satisfaction” by being invited to “sing at the Lincoln Memorial, where so many others have spoken and sung to achieve [equality].”

“As President-Elect Obama begins his presidency, we move closer to a time when the dream of equality for all is fulfilled,” he said.

Taunee Grant, a chorus spokesperson, said HBO, which will broadcast the performance live, tapped the group to sing at the concert.

About 100 members of the chorus, which includes 225 singing members, will perform with “featured celebrity entertainers” that have yet to be announced, according to the group’s statement.

Grant said Wednesday she was not yet in a position to confirm which pieces the group would sing at the concert.

The Gay Men's Chorus of Washington had earlier applied to be part of the festivities on Inauguration Day, but was informed last month that it had not been selected to take part in the Tuesday celebration.

Another gay group that will perform as part of the inaugural parade is the Lesbian & Gay Band Association, a federation of gay bands based in San Francisco. The group is the first gay contingent ever chosen to participate in a presidential inaugural parade.

Rice Majors, artistic director for the group's inaugural committee, said the group intends to play "The Washington Post" march when it reaches the reviewing stand. Other songs the band will play will be "The Manhattan Beach March," "Brand New Day," "Hold on I'm Comin'" and "The Ode to Joy."

Majors, a gay tuba player, said he will be marching with the band, but won't be playing an instrument because he needs to oversee the rehearsal process. He intends to carry a flag or banner during the parade.

The 177 slots in the LGBA contingent were to be filled with musicians, flags, twirlers, honor guard and banner holders, Majors said. Participants were coming from 24 bands throughout the country and would wear a silver baseball-style jacket and blue berets for their performance.

LGBA also participated in President Clinton's inauguration festivities in 1993 and 1997, but performed on the sidelines and was not a contingent in the parade. The group declined to pursue an opportunity to participate in Bush's inauguration festivities in 2001 and 2005.