UMass Student Union, Pioneer Valley venues host Inauguration parties

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More than 1,000 people crowded the Student Union at the University of Massachusetts last Tuesday to watch the inauguration of Barack Obama. Initially the event was to be held solely in the Cape Cod Lounge, but spillover sites in the Ballroom and Hatch had to be set up to accomodate the crowds.

As record-setting crowds packed into the nation's capital on Tuesday, the turnout at local gatherings also exceeded expectations as people joined to watch televised broadcasts of the Presidential Inauguration of Barack Obama.

Attended by mainly Obama supporters, public screenings were held at the University of Massachusetts, The Academy of Music in Northampton and at Rafters Sports Bar & Restaurant in Amherst.

At UMass, faculty, staff, students and local residents were among an estimated 1,000 spectators, according to Kevin Libby, the event's planner and a senior majoring in Social Thought and the Political Economy.

Both the Student Union's Cape Cod Lounge and ballroom filled to capacity, causing event staff to open The Hatch food court to make room for a larger-than-anticipated audience. Others crowded into the Blue Wall eatery.

"We originally thought we'd get between 50 and 100 people," explained Lloyd Henley, assistant director for the Center for Student Development. "Then, it started to grow."

"We were blown away with the RSVP requests," added Libby, who said people began arriving around 45 minutes prior to the event's planned start at 11 a.m. "It's exciting that we, as a UMass community, can come together to be a part of this."

Expressing a desire to share the moment with others was common throughout the day.

"Obviously it's just a momentous occasion. The difference here is you don't want to be alone. You want to be with a community of people," said TreaAndrea Russworm, assistant professor in the English department. "If you can't be in D.C., you want to be with others."

Vice Provost for Outreach Sharon L. Fross said, "We're all working at the campus, and it's really wonderful to be a part of the campus community and to be together."

Watching the television coverage from the Blue Wall, she added, "It is historic, and I think all of us recognize that. We recognize where the country is. We recognize the historic nature of his election, and [President Obama] has so many in the country behind him."

After Obama's inaugural address, some members of the crowd reacted to what they had just heard from the newly appointed commander in chief.

"I thought it was a very good speech," said Willie Pope, associate director of the Committee for the Collegiate Education of Black and other Minority Students. "It's one that's going to bring people and inspire people to do things together. And, that's the only way that we are going to move forward in this country is by us all coming together to putting our heads together to try and solve what problems we have."

UMass student, Ryan Pothering, agreed.

"I've always liked listening to his speeches," he said. "He's very eloquent. He ties his arguments in very well."

In downtown Northampton, hundreds were lined up outside The Academy of Music nearly an hour before the venue's free screening of the inaugural broadcast began.

Friends and former Amherst Regional High School classmates Charlotte de Vries, Brooke Steinhauser and Ella Stocker were in high spirits as they approached the theater's entrance. Now college graduates, the three recalled former President George W. Bush's election when they were high school freshmen and his re-election in their first year at college in 2004. However they said Obama's inauguration has a different feel.

"It's so exciting to be here. It's an historic event," said de Vries, a UMass alumna. "Obama is all about community and here we are

in a community."

Northampton resident Pamela Cobb was also glad to be in the company of others.

"I didn't want to sit at home and watch it by myself. I wanted to be with a group of people," said Cobb. "I've got a big TV at home – so, that's not it. It's about being with other people."

And folks inside were not alone as every one of the theater's 803 seats was filled as they watched the celebration on a large screen, according to Debra J'Anthony, the venue's executive director. It was the first time the academy has offered an inaugural telecast, she said, and they did so because they felt there was something "special" about this inauguration.

"This is the first time – in my voting history – that I've been this excited about a president-elect," agreed Holyoke resident Leslie Pray.

Pray said she considered traveling to Washington D.C. to watch in person. However, she said she had too many commitments to make the trip and took the day off instead.

UMass alumnus Michael Trabert said he did not have to take any time off because he is currently unemployed.

"Maybe Obama can help me with that," Trabert laughed.

The Academy of Music also offered a rebroadcast of the inaugural ceremonies at 6 p.m., which brought in about 600 people, J'Anthony said.

Prior to his inaugural address, customers at Rafters had speculated on what the 44th president might say.

"I feel he will do a really good job setting the tone for the next four years," said Alison Wilson-Pierce watching the coverage with fellow UMass student Vanessa Snow.

UMass graduate student Quentin Lewis said he was anticipating an "intelligent and inspiring" speech after the president takes his oath.

Lewis said he did volunteer work for Obama's campaign in New Hampshire and was excited to watch the inauguration in a more social atmosphere than his lab room at the University. However, having studied race as an anthropology student, Lewis said he is concerned for some people who may see the election of the first African-American president as an end to racism.

"It's a huge step forward," added his fiancé Alanna Rudzik. "But, it doesn't mean that suddenly those [racial] barriers are gone."

A native of Canada, Rudzik gave her perspective on what the day meant for those beyond the United States' borders.

"It's a seismic shift in the way the world looks at the U.S.," said Rudzik. "It's an epic moment that he will have to live up to, but I think people around the world are rooting for the U.S."

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