

## Jerseyans heed urge to attend Obama inauguration

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Christina Lombardo will be there because of her leadership skills ... Tracey McGill because she won a bet ... the Bonnie Brae drum corps because they finally caught a break ... Michael Kempner because he's been at every Democratic inauguration since Jimmy Carter ... Nicole Brown because she missed Woodstock.

They are the faces of New Jersey who will be in the crowd in Washington Tuesday, along with a boatload of politicos and the more exalted profiles of Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, Dionne Warwick and Queen Latifah.



JOHN O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER Tracey McGill and Vanessa Baldwin-Smith, both teachers at the North Ward Childhood Development Center in Newark, will be attending the inauguration of Barack Obama in Washington. The school is decorated with photos and news clippings about the president-elect as well as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

Forget that the weather is expected to be bad, the security worse and the traffic diabolical. Or that a ticket may only mean the opportunity to jam in with the 240,000 people closest to the Capitol steps.

Some will stay in \$2,200-a-night rooms; others will camp out if necessary. They may dance at the balls or dine on trail mix. There are children, senior citizens, political neophytes and big-time fundraisers, all united by a compulsive need to share a unique moment in history.

Many have called it a pilgrimage. A top New Jersey political analyst calls it "a joyful celebration of hope and promise, the likes of which we haven't seen in this country in a very long time."

"Nobody really expects Obama to solve all our problems, but people have felt desperate for someone who will pay attention, bring thoughtfulness, civility and intelligence to the issues," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

"After so many nasty, divisive election seasons, Obama has restored our sense of community, and people across the country want to share in that."

People with special invitations include a Tuskegee Airman from Elizabeth, the Roxy Ballet from Lambertville, a youth choir led by a Drew Theological School professor, a former Peace Corps worker from Rumson, a Democratic fundraiser from Cresskill and several very bright teenagers.

Those lucky enough to have places to stay already have left. Group rides sponsored by New Jersey colleges, high schools, churches, politicians, civil rights and peace activists will join the 10,000 buses expected to clog the bridges to Washington before dawn Inauguration Day.

"I'm booked on the Chinatown bus, but if it doesn't work, I'll walk if I have to," said Brown, a 37-year-old writer from Parsippany, referring to the cheap but notoriously unreliable bus service between Canal Street in Manhattan and Washington. "My parents and aunts had the civil rights movement and Woodstock.

"I don't even like crowds, but this is my time to be a part of history. Camp out? No problem. This is the party of the century."

Lombardo, a junior at Old Bridge High School, is one of several teenagers throughout the state whose invitation to join the inaugural came via the various youth leadership conferences held periodically in Washington for high-achieving students.

"I felt like I won the lottery when the invitation arrived," said Lombardo, 16, whose sponsor is the Presidential Youth Conference. "I can witness a piece of history and go to my first ball, all at the same time."

Lombardo isn't sure which inaugural ball she will be attending in her borrowed prom gown. It doesn't matter.

Shade M. Lee is one of the more reluctant participants in the Obama inauguration, although one of the few assured a seat.

"To be honest, I would have preferred to watch the inauguration from the comfort of my living room in Elizabeth, but my granddaughters screamed that I had to be a part of it," Lee said. "I'm pretty old for all the fuss, but I am also proud to have been a pioneer."

Lee, 87, is a Tuskegee Airman, an original member of the courageous, all-black corps of elite pilots who battled the enemy and discrimination in the ranks during World War II. Obama calls them heroes and has invited the estimated 330 Tuskegee Airmen who are still alive to sit to his left when he is sworn in.

The youngest are in their late 80s; the oldest is 94, according to officials. They filled out questionnaires telling organizers how long they can walk and how long they can stand. Lee said he still does 20 pushups a day, "so I don't expect a problem."

"I do worry a bit about Mary and her arthritis," he said of his wife, 78, who will accompany him. "But I've aspired all my life to merit, and I recognize that trait in Barack Obama. From slavery to the White House, I'm also very proud of how America has matured."

For the students at Bonnie Brae school in Liberty Corners, the trip to the capital promises to be a transforming experience. Most of the boys were sent to the private residential treatment center by welfare workers after they acted out in response to abandonment, abuse or neglect.

But, as school director Bill Powers said, "hope is what we sell here."

Powers submitted the 12-member Knights Drum Corps band as a long shot to march in the inaugural parade, although it had no bandleader, no uniforms, no funds and not enough drumsticks to go around.

To everyone's astonishment, the Knights were picked, and it has been their time to shine. They drew national press coverage and made the "Today" show. Donations poured in for new uniforms and instruments. Okay, so the uniforms got lost, the bus company pulled out and a chickenpox outbreak threatened to derail the whole project. The uniforms were found in the nick of time, another bus was secured and the chickenpox was quarantined before it could spread.

"We wouldn't be us if we didn't have to do it the hard way," Powers said cheerfully. "It may be a logistical nightmare, but it's the best thing that every happened for some of these kids."

For Kempner, the inaugural tickets held no drama. The Obama committee promised seats to anyone who donated \$50,000. Kempner did. Then he bundled an additional \$100,000 and donated that to the inaugural committee, too.

It is what Kempner does as one of the top Democratic fundraisers in America. That is why he was at the Jimmy Carter swearing-in and both Clinton inaugurations. But even for this old political hand, the 2009 inauguration is "extraordinarily exciting."

"I expect a mob scene and I won't be disappointed," said Kempner, chief executive of the MWW public relations agency, headquartered in East Rutherford. "For me, it is that moment when you see the transition of power. It never gets old."

From the moment Obama moved onto the presidential radar, "I knew I needed to be part of this process," said McGill, 41, a preschool teacher at the North Ward Childhood Development Center in Newark.

Shortly after the election, McGill turned to her longtime boss and friend, Steve Adubato, founder of the North Ward Center and, not incidentally, a Democratic power broker in North Jersey. She told him he was "full of baloney" if he couldn't get her two tickets to the inauguration.

Adubato rose to the challenge, which is why McGill and her fellow teacher Vanessa Baldwin, 40, have already bought long underwear, booked passage on Amtrak and begged bed space from a relative who lives in Baltimore.

Their hope?

"To get close enough to shake President Obama's hand," said Baldwin.

"Who wants a shake?" McGill said. "I want to give him a hug."

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Barack seems like a very intelligent, charismatic and articulate leader.

I just hope that on Wednesday, people don't wake up and think that he will pay their mortgage. Or guarantee a job. You have more power over your future than any politician.

Posted on 01/17/09 at 11:42PM

### **penna100 says...**

I'll stay home and watch CSI NY. More interesting and exciting.

Posted on 01/18/09 at 12:07AM

### **bulzeysays says...**

more feelgood, cottoncandy, touchy-feely emotionalism. The American Idol days are over. Now, Mr Obama will actually have to grow up and take on the responsibility of being The President.