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At Hadley event, Obama's words sink in

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Wednesday, January 21, 2009

HADLEY - At North Star learning center Tuesday, those watching President Barack Obama's inauguration felt the power of a momentous occasion, saying it marked a new era and affirmed a people's identity.

"A lot of people are gathering to watch this together," Ken Danford told a crowd of 50 at North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens in Hadley. "As this unfolds, everyone is spending time together. I know my parents are watching in Florida. We know people are watching across the Valley and across the country. Essentially, we're all stopping (to watch). It's really quite compelling."

Danford, director at North Star, thanked the center's members, homeschool students and parents for sharing the momentous occasion at North Star's first inauguration party. He led a discussion before the ceremonies commenced during which people eagerly voiced their opinions.

"I've never been so proud to be an American," said Colleen Champ, whose son, Elijah Palmer, attends North Star.

"After years of feeling like we couldn't trust the government, I feel like this could be different," said Alexander Heiman, 15, of Haydenville.

A couple of adults in the room said they didn't think they'd live to see America's first black president.

Read Predmore, a volunteer teacher at North Star, told the teens the country has made a lot of progress since the 1960s, when he witnessed racial segregation as a college student at Virginia Tech.

"I remember the day Martin Luther King was assassinated and just how painful that was," Predmore said, tearing up as he spoke.

Danford later said he believed Aretha Franklin's performance of "America" was the most moving part of the ceremony because an African-American set the stage for the first African-American president.

"It was staggering," Danford said.

People also spoke of progress they wish to see.

"As president, I hope he will try to stop the war," said Jessica McMenamain, 13, of South Hadley. Her cousin, Johnny Foster, 24, is in the Army and stationed in Georgia. "I sometimes worry about him and if he had to go out in the fighting."

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CAROL LOLLIS

Kalila Muller, 12, left, and her mother, Karin Muller, both of Amherst, watch the inauguration with others at North Star learning center in Hadley.



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The conversation stopped as the live video streaming from Washington started.

The North Star crowd looked up at the video image projected above the chalkboard. Some people sat with their arms folded; others placed their hands on their laps. Some people sat in chairs or on the floor while others stood. Everyone looked up.

A round of applause filled the room after the introduction, "Ladies and gentlemen the President-elect Barack H. Obama." Another round of applause followed Obama's swearing-in. Even Banjor, Danford's dog, made some noise.

Glitches in the video streaming, thought to be caused by high Web traffic as millions of other people watched, did not affect the crowd's enthusiasm.

"It was more important to listen to him than to see him," said Joseph Seitz, a staff member at North Star who provided live audio backup when the picture stalled. "We let his words sink in."

Following Obama's speech, a few people reinforced the president's message that each American has a responsibility to create change. People shared stories about how that responsibility is internationally admired.

Elizabeth Cordova, a native of Mexico, has received emails from friends in Australia, Mexico, Holland, Germany, Japan and Ukraine about their support for Obama and the country that elected him.

"There is a uniqueness of the political system in this country," said Cordova, of Northampton. "The immense power of each individual is very moving."

The events at North Star ended on a note from Danford, who said he is encouraged that North Star teens and his children, ages 9 and 12, will see a new political leadership and "get a sense of what a president could be like in your lifetime."

"When you walk outside, you walk into your first moment with a new president," Danford said.

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