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Webmaster Obama connects with youth

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Monday, January 19, 2009

Even for young people not yet old enough to vote, the election of Barack Obama may prove to be the impetus for many a political career.

Local high school students will join the rest of the country Tuesday in eagerly watching his inauguration as the country's 44th president, an interest many say was sparked by Obama's facileness with the technology that speaks directly to them.

"I got an email from Obama every day and twice as many Facebook notifications," said Eleanor Cook, a Hampshire Regional High School senior. "I think so many young people were excited about this. ... How we're living our lives right now is on the Internet."

On Election Day, Facebook tracked how many users voted and provided voter information, including precinct and polling locations. Hundreds of groups were created, supporting political causes and candidates. The social networking Web site's users were "fans" of their candidates, an application used to voice admiration of musicians, actors, movies or politicians. Users posted notes, news articles and blogs, updated their personal status with comments regarding the status of the election, and sent other users free profile art, including a red, white and blue ice cream cone and the New York Times front page cover that read, "Obama wins."

"It was so exciting on election night; everyone was so excited on it," said Cook, of Williamsburg. "I don't think I'll forget that day."

In interviews with the Gazette, Hampshire Regional High School students talked about the meaning of the Obama candidacy and his historic election.

A career path

Cook said it sparked an interest in politics she suspects could turn into a career path.

"I love creating change, so it could be a good way of doing it," said Cook, 18, who wasn't old enough to vote last November, but participated in rallies for Obama in New Hampshire.

Lizzie Jekanowski knocked on doors in New Hampshire to support Obama and kept abreast of the news throughout the election. She said she cried watching Obama's acceptance speech at home with her father, Len Jekanowski, who shared stories with her about race riots in the 1960s.

"He was amazed for us to have come so far," Jekanowski said.

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KEVIN GUTTING

Like many high school students, Hampshire Regional High School senior Lizzie Jekanowski says the Obama candidacy and election triggered an interest in politics, and possibly a college major. Here, she poses with some of the Obama- and inauguration-related bumper stickers on her truck.



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The teens also said Obama is a politician who seems to reach beyond a generational divide.

"He addresses everyone," said Cook. "He's a great family man who cares about his daughters and wife. He's an American role model."

Jekanowski said she is keeping a copy of a text message she received on election night that said: "We just made history. All of this happened because you gave your time, talent and passion to this campaign. All of this happened because of you. Thanks, Barack."

"It reminded me that everything we do is important, just the little things," Jekanowski said of the message.

Great expectations

The new presidency, for many young people, is one of expectation and hope.

"I have faith in Obama's ability to minimize the damage of the recession," said Sam Antill, 18, of Williamsburg. The Hampshire Regional senior class president said he believes the president-elect's "strong team of advisers" will help turn the country around in time.

Many students plan to watch the inauguration Tuesday on a big screen in the high school library or in their classrooms. Cook, Julie Mawesley and John Downing, 17, of Williamsburg, will watch it in school and then again at the Academy of Music's rebroadcast of inauguration ceremonies at 6 p.m.

Others, like Jekanowski, will miss school that day.

"For me, this is a chance of a lifetime," said Jekanowski, who will be at the Academy of Music to witness Obama's swearing-in ceremony. "I know we'll be seeing it in school, but I want to be a part of the rush of all the people who support him."

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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