

Clouds over U.S. cleared

Advertisement

Text size: [small](#) | [medium](#) | [large](#)

By [MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS](#)

Published: January 21, 2009

Johnnie Taylor shook her head, raised her arms and mouthed a silent prayer as the band struck up "Hail to the Chief" for President Barack Obama.

Taylor, 60, recalled her youth as a civil-rights activist who was yanked from a lunch-counter stool during a Woolworth's sit-in. The conflict resolution trainer at the Richmond Peace Education Center sees Obama's presidency as the product of divine intervention.

"When things like this happen, it's not by accident. It's not by history. It's an ordained event," she said. "I know man had to vote, but God made this happen."

Kayla Hill-Jones was born a half-century after Taylor, but she bore a psychic load no less onerous. For the Glen Allen Elementary School fourth-grader, yesterday meant this: "That I can accomplish anything, even though I'm black."

Taylor and Kayla were among three dozen people who watched Obama's inauguration at Highland Park's Fire House 15 as they washed down chili, cornbread, tossed salad and brownies with sweet iced tea. The fire station-turned-eatery is run by Boaz & Ruth, a nonprofit that seeks to transform Highland Park, serve as a community bridge, and rebuild the lives of formerly incarcerated men and women.

As I listened to a 10-year-old child describe her brave new world, it brought to mind the old one of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Upon telling his young daughter that the Atlanta amusement park Funtown was closed to black children, he could see "ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky."

Those clouds have hovered over the collective mental sky of African-Americans throughout the nation's history.

Yesterday, the skies cleared.

The forecast for America is another matter. The nation's helm has been handed to an African-American during one of the most turbulent times in our nation's history.

Adria Scharf, director of the Richmond Peace Education Center, described yesterday as "disorienting," and indeed, there was a magical aura that bordered on surreal. You might say the country has found its bearings after straying wildly off course from the grand ideals charted in its founding.

The journey toward that ideal is far from complete. But perhaps for the first time, many of us understand how King felt in the famous speech that foreshadowed his death. Like him, we don't know what will happen now. There are difficult days ahead. But that doesn't matter as much anymore. We've been to the mountaintop.

"I'm 50," said Ruth Cosby, a Boaz & Ruth graduate who supervises its furniture store at Third and Main streets. "I thought I would never see this. I just couldn't stop crying. I think this is going to unite us as a country, and we're going to realize Dr. King's dream."

If that's the case, it's children such as Kayla who stand to inherit a nobler nation.

Kayla's parents, Stan Jones and Regina Hill, are supporters of Boaz & Ruth. "We wanted her to experience giving instead of receiving -- of serving others," her mother said of Kayla.

Kayla wore a red and blue T-shirt that featured a portrait of the new first family inside the presidential seal. "She said she wanted to be the first African-American president," her mother said, chuckling. "I told her she could be the first woman."

Contact Michael Paul Williams at (804) 649-6815 or mwilliams@timesdispatch.com .