

An Historic Election - A Teachable Moment

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On November 4, 2008, history was made - in our country and for our world. It was one of those moments so rare in life that each of us will remember. We will remember exactly where we were, what we were doing, and what we were feeling.

I was sitting - ironically - in the presidential suite of the Westin Hotel in North Carolina with the staff of National CES and other CES Center Directors who had gathered for the Fall Forum. We broke bread together as we discussed the implications for this momentous event - eyes and ears never fully leaving the television screen. At 11:03 p.m. EST, Barack Obama was declared the 44th president of the United States - the first biracial president, the first Black president, the first non-white president. I cried ... and the depth of emotions surprised me. I believed I was ready for this decision. I felt it was time for this, and I wanted it. I looked inside and understood that I was crying not because of the results - but rather their implications. My tears came with the realization that this one night would do more for the youth I have been committed to serve than all our school reform efforts had done to date. I cried because I knew that tomorrow, our students- specifically, our black and brown students- would wake up to a new schema. THEIR world context would be changed to its core; they would know, in ways that had not yet been truly true, that what was possible for them now was deeply different and perhaps just a bit more equitable.

Later, I lay in my hotel bed with my husband on speakerphone, "watching TV together," awaiting President-Elect Obama's acceptance speech. I froze as the first family stepped onto the Chicago stage. I wanted nothing - not even the sound of my own breath - to interrupt this moment, this image that now is tattooed on my mind forever. I wondered with excitement, "What are our students thinking as they view this proud, black family take their place not only in our collective history but also, ultimately, in a house that their ancestors helped to build for the

profit of others?"

The next day Gary Cruz, a teacher in one of San Francisco's most segregated and lowest performing high schools, was also feeling at a deeper level. He wondered if the same was true for his students and did what good teachers do; in spite of the pressures of scripts and coverage, he grasped a teachable moment. He asked his two classes of students - who ranged in grade level (sophomores through seniors) as well as experience (AP, Special Education, deaf, and former gang members) - to take out their journals and reflect on the following prompts.

1. What were you doing when you found out the election results? Where were you, who was with you? What were people saying? (What?)
2. What were you feeling when you heard the news? Which emotions were shown by people around you? How could you tell? (So What?)
3. What does this make you think about the future? What do you think of the future of our country? In 20 years, what might you tell your children and/or loved ones about this historic day? (Now What?)

And, when his students were finished, they talked.

Following are some of his students' reflections and responses:

"I was on my way to my mom's pizza place. I was with my little sister. I was yelling "OBAMA - OBAMA!" Throughout downtown people were chanting with me and my sister all happy and shocked."
- Female Salvadorian senior, student body president

"When Barack Obama won the election I was in my house in the kitchen ... my parents and uncles and aunties were in the living room watching the election and I was listening to it. People had their mouths drop. Most of all they were happy. This is history; next time we can have a Latino President!!!" - Latina senior

"I was in a garage on 22nd and York. I was with other poll workers; we were cleaning up. People including me were happy and excited and hugging and jumping."
- Female Salvadorian senior

"I was in a taqueria at 24th and Alabama,



then I heard the cook say, 'Obama gano!' ('Obama won!'), and I rushed to the kitchen. I was like yeah!!! We won ... we started celebrating, ... they kicked me out of the kitchen of course, but I was still happy!!!" - Latino senior

"I was in my dad's room watching the news. My dad and my brother were with me when we heard it. People were just shocked, and some of them even cried of joy to see Obama win. They were just celebrating to each other, saying that history has been made." - Latino senior immigrant

"I was disappointed to have missed his speech." - Deaf female African-American sophomore

"When I heard the news I had to go watch the TV because I wasn't sure if he did win." - Latina senior

"I with mom Happy excited when TV Obama." - Deaf male Mexican senior, immigrant

"I was with my family watching the news. My mom was excited, I was shocked - truly. Democracy for me had never been so loud." - Latino senior

"I was at my house with my family and talking to one of my friends when Obama was elected president. When I heard that, I was shocked and thrilled to see an African-American for the first time ever become president." - Latino senior, special education

"I was at the polls. I worked for 16 hours and I was awake for a little more than 20 hours. I was really happy he won and I feel proud because I know I helped him win by being at his campaign. I heard people at the headquarters were crying and happy. I also think they expect too much of him right now." - Latino senior

"I was working on Capp for the election polls. I was confused because I did (not) understand how Obama won if the votes weren't counted. Once other people called me to tell me the results I knew it was true. I felt happy and accomplished because I wanted Obama to win. I heard people honking in the streets yelling "Obama" and felt very happy because I knew there was finally going to be



change. Other people thought negative and said Obama was going to die before going into power. I think that if nothing happens to Obama there will be change." - Latina senior

"I was in my pajamas and the stars were out and the sky was clear of clouds. I was feeling like they're going to rig the votes. But when he won it was like a dream, it was like now I most definitely can do anything - be anyone. It was awesome!" - Female African-American junior

"I together with my family watch TV. Happy! I feel good. Crying laughing Obama. I observed my family." - Deaf male Chinese sophomore, immigrant

"I was at home when I found out. I was supposed to be writing a sestina. My mom was next to me on the couch. I felt relief because McCain did not win. Now I am hopeful about Obama being president. I'm glad we finally have our first African-American president. I think our country will improve with Obama but it won't be easy. It will be hard for Obama to make these changes. Every one expects the best from him. I doubt he will be able to make everyone happy. But I think he will at least be better than Bush. I'm

also glad to have a democrat for a president although I don't think of myself as being part of any political party." - Female Guatemalan senior, immigrant

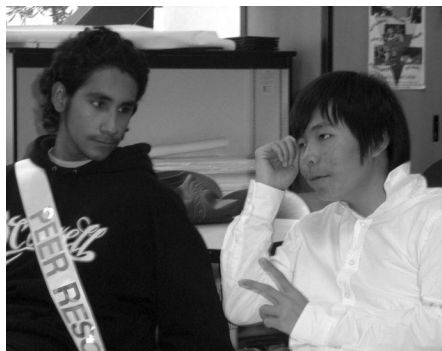
"I was at home in my pj's. I was so excited I wanted to cry. The whole world is going to change. We finally have an African-American President instead of a white one. That makes it seem like dreams can come true and yes you can." -

Israeli female senior

"Happiness and tears of joy." - Latino senior

"I stood in disbelief with tears in my eyes. November 4, 2008, was the best day of my life. I kept telling my sister to pinch me because I didn't know if I was done dreaming. To see young men who sell drugs and gang-bang 24/7 cry because finally what they used to

wish 4 came to pass! All (continued on page 12)



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you heard were the voices of "if Obama, a BLACK MAN can be the president of the U.S. I know I can do anything." ...to know that I witnessed history made me feel proud to be black. I know that now I can do anything! Obama being president only motivated me as a black female to go out and achieve all of my goals. YES I CAN! To try and defeat the impossible because now anything is POSSIBLE! In 20 years I'll be the first Black female president and say change is possible only if we work together as one. That's what showed me that our country, the U.S. ... the best county on planet earth is ready for change, if we weren't Obama wouldn't be my president today." - Female mixed-race junior

"I was at my house watching T.V. with my parents. It is such a HUGE change for our country and hopefully now we can have more great changes. To have an African-American president is a powerful historic event. I think this changes how our country is going to be viewed and for our future." - Female mixed-race junior

"I was at home on my computer. When they announced that Obama won, my mom started crying. I felt inspired, like anything is possible. I used to think I would never see the day that someone that wasn't white would win president. I hope that in the future more things would be easier and rational." - Latino senior

"I was at basketball practice and we all just started about how dangerous it is for him. When I heard ... the amount of options I saw as possible broadened. When I came home my mother was crying and it hit me why we came to the U.S." - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil war, immigrant

"When I saw that many Republican states switched to Democratic states, such as Pennsylvania and Nevada and Florida, I knew what was going to happen. I was excited but I kept my cool. I hope Obama makes world peace attainable." - Male African-American senior

"I felt like inspired, almost to cry ... I felt like deep in me, Obama is going to change America. People around me were not surprised, because they just already knew he was going to win. They had faith in him all along ... Whatever my goals are, I can achieve them, without any walls between me and them. This makes me think the future of the U.S. is in the right hands. Believe me, the U.S. is going to change." - Latino senior, immigrant

"This makes me feel that I can set a goal and that I can make it happen if I want to. But it takes your family, friends and people to achieve a goal and

that we can all change the U.S. for good." - Latina senior

"I think we will have change. Obama my family supported." - Deaf male Mexican senior, immigrant

"I got a chance to be alive on November 4, 2008, to see Obama become the first African-American (president) and I saw hope for the US. It is one of the most important days of my life and I will never forget this day. I feel that my future is going to be much better; I will have more opportunities and a chance. Also I feel that anything is possible now and if he became president why can't I?" - Female, Salvadorian senior, student body President

"I felt like there is maybe hope for the USA, maybe we can get on the other countries good sides again. I will tell people that this day a spark went off that ignited the American people ablaze with hope and courage." - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil war, immigrant

"I will tell (my children) ... don't forget kids, anyone can be whatever they want." - Latino senior, immigrant

"I will encourage my children try become president if they want to." - Deaf male Chinese sophomore, immigrant

"To talk about the future we must understand the past and our past has been filled with injustice and racism, hatred and slavery. Yet that night was truly a small step for 2 men but a huge step for mankind. The future has always been there but now I feel that rather than trying to put it off I want to run towards it (and) when I look back at the fourth of November of 2008 I will do so with pride and I will tell my kids and friends that it was one of the greatest moments of America, the world and the human race!" - Latino senior, spoken word poet

At the Fall Forum, Glenn Singleton asked, "What does it mean that our next president has the face of our most underserved students?" These students have certainly shared their answers to the question; what is yours? For me, I now realize that my own schema must change. In my effort to meet students where they are, I now must recognize I am working with a new day - a new world for our youth - one with more promise and possibility, one with a renewed sense of hope. ■

Note: while the data may appear biased, all voices of the students in Gary's two classes are represented. Greg Peters can be contacted at gpeters@sfcass.org.