

LGBT Community everywhere at Obama inauguration

by Lisa Keen/contributing writer
Wednesday Jan 21, 2009

Visibility, however, was limited

For LGBT visibility and inclusion, this week's inaugural activities were a series of invisible leaps.

There were openly gay people sitting in coveted seats on Jan. 20 --on the podium of the presidential swearing in ceremony for Barack Obama with only a few hundred other high-profile dignitaries and celebrities. But the invites were last-minute and unpublicized. The Lesbian and Gay Marching Band was an official contingent in the inaugural parade for the first time ever, but major networks went to commercial just before it arrived in front of the reviewing stand. An openly gay member of the clergy delivered the invocation for the inaugural's highly publicized Lincoln Memorial concert on Jan. 18 but his prayer was omitted from the national broadcast.

Perhaps the most high-profile and visible moment for LGBT people during the events was the inclusion of a lesbian couple in the entourage of "everyday Americans" that traveled with the Obama family by train from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., on Jan. 17.

The couple, Lisa Hazirjian and her partner Michelle Kaiser, of Cleveland, were interviewed on CNN Saturday night after they got off the train. They told the live national television audience that they had been able to have "conversations" with the Obamas.

Hazirjian told *Bay Windows* on Jan. 21 that her conversation with Obama on the train lasted about 10 minutes and was "not a big policy discussion" but rather "much lighter fare." She said she and her partner attended a number of other inaugural events with the group, including the Sunday concert, and the Neighborhood Ball, where they were introduced to and danced with the Obamas.

The couple was also interviewed with another invited rider, an Iraq War veteran, for a videoblog by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Rock performer Melissa Etheridge and openly gay Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson were last-minute invited guests on the podium for the swearing-in ceremony. On his blog, (canterburytalesfromthefringe.blogspot) Robinson indicated he was seated in the sixth row but that his partner, Mark Andrew, was not also invited. Robinson estimated he was "about 30 feet" from President Obama as he was being sworn in, and called the opportunity "an astounding honor."

Etheridge told an audience at the Out for Equality concert later that night that she received a phone call just two days earlier from U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), "inviting myself and my two oldest children" to the podium. Feinstein served as chairman of the Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies.

Newly inaugurated President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama smiled and waved as the Lesbian and Gay Band marched by their reviewing stand at almost 6:30 p.m. Tuesday night. The band was the 80th contingent in a 103-group procession that marched up Pennsylvania Avenue

to the White House in celebration of the 44th president's inauguration.

Viewers watching C-SPAN saw it; viewers tuned into MSNBC or CNN saw their broadcasts go to commercial just seconds before the band arrived.

Such was the luck, it seems, of some other LGBT-related participants in the inauguration activities of President Barack Obama. Robinson's invocation at the Lincoln Memorial concert on Sunday was left off HBO's broadcast -- due to either an "error," as the Presidential Inauguration Committee explained it, or a "miscommunication," as HBO put it.

An Out for Equality concert, sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign, the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, and a host of other national gay organizations drew a sold-out crowd to the Mayflower Hotel but drew only one dignitary's attendance.

But with its star-studded roster of performers, the event was jam-packed with enthusiastic revelers in a ballroom at the historic Mayflower Hotel in downtown Washington on Tuesday night.

Despite having been embroiled in a controversy by defending President Obama's choice of evangelist Rick Warren to deliver the inaugural invocation, Etheridge received a rousing ovation when she took to the stage.

"Wow! This is the place to be, right? What a day, huh? What a day!"

Etheridge started playing immediately and did not mention Warren explicitly when she spoke to the audience.

"Finally, the concept of unity is coming together," said Etheridge, at one point. "Those old walls -- the us and them stuff --they're going away."

In a live interview on *The Daily Show* Tuesday night, Robinson said he did have occasion to run into evangelist Rick Warren during inaugural activities, at a worship service on the morning of the inauguration. Robinson said he greeted Warren and that Warren "was very kind to me." Just before they exited to the inaugural ceremony, said Robinson, Robinson told Warren he was praying for him.

Asked Stewart: "Do you feel like you were brought to the inauguration to stem criticism because of Rick Warren's anti-gay marriage positions or do you think you were going to be a part of this anyway?"

"I think I was going to be a part of this all along," Robinson replied, noting he had several conversations with Obama on the campaign trail in New Hampshire and that he had advised the campaign on LGBT issues "behind the scenes."

Etheridge also shared that she had spoken with California Attorney General Jerry Brown earlier in the week.

"And Jerry Brown is very, very confident that, in March, Proposition 8 will be overturned." Proposition 8, the California constitutional amendment banning gay marriage that was passed by voters last November -- with vocal support from Warren -- is before the state's supreme court. The court is expected to hear arguments in the case in March and render a decision within 90 days thereafter.

Etheridge recalled, too, that it was 1993 when she came out publicly, during an LGBT inaugural celebration at the National Press Club during President Bill Clinton's first inauguration activities.

"And 16 years later, I was on a [inauguration] platform!," exclaimed Etheridge. "We've come a

long way."

An Etheridge recording, "God is in the People," was included on an official inaugural CD and DVD of Obama speeches being sold by the inaugural committee, with songs by 17 recording artists.

Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese, who watched the swearing in from HRC headquarters, introduced Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, First Lady Diane Patrick and their openly gay daughter Katherine to the concert audience. Solmonese told the audience that Patrick "has been heroic in safeguarding marriage equality in Massachusetts."

Patrick told the audience that the success in Massachusetts came "because people made a claim on their government."

"I'm here," said Patrick, "to ask you to make a claim on your government."

One very early indication that making that claim won't be as hard as it was during the previous administration: the new Obama White House, very early after the swearing in ceremony, put up its new WhiteHouse.gov website. The website includes a link to its "Agenda" at the top, the first link from there is for "Civil Rights," and its first subhead deals with "Support for the LGBT Community."

Samantha A. Fields contributed to this story.