

New Brunswick gathering puts oath-taking on the screen

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Sienna Jones took part of the day off from school to share in a moment when history and hope linked.

Sienna was among about 400 invited guests gathered inside the Livingston Ballroom at the Heldrich Hotel to witness, via television, the inauguration of Barack Obama as the nation's 44th president.

As Obama was introduced to a standing ovation in both the nation's capital and inside the Heldrich, Sienna, 12, said that in an important way, the moment gave wing to dreams.

"He's the first African-American president," she said, while seated next to her father, Marshall Jones III, the executive di-

rector of Crossroads Theatre Company, which is among the nation's preeminent African-American theaters.

"People will treat us differently," Sienna said.

Her hopeful sentiments were a variation on a theme that's gathered momentum since Obama's nomination. And they echoed from nearly all at the Heldrich.

"This is beautiful, this is beautiful," Arnette Phipps, a local activist and music entrepreneur, said as the Obama family left the Capitol.

Phipps, wearing a white baseball cap emblazoned with the presidential seal and a rendering of Obama's signature, also said that while Obama's inauguration offered a sense of hope to everyone, it gave hope most to black men who grew up without a father. They now face both a sense

of opportunity and of responsibility, she said.

"Now we can bury The Man," she said, using the slang phrase for a person of authority who uses power indiscriminately. "Now let's deal with a new day."

The guests, invited by Mayor James M. Cahill and the New Brunswick Development Corp., stood or sat, alternately cheering Obama's appearance on the Capitol steps, quieting down for the Rev. Rick Warren's prayer, contemplating the president's address, standing to sing the National Anthem, and tearing up as they watched the proceedings.

Nearly all wore buttons proclaiming that they celebrated "a new birth of freedom."

Red, white and blue balloons and bunting, posters with Obama's likeness and several television tuned to MSNBC turned

the ballroom into something of a victory party.

Cahill said that in a sense the Obama presidency and what it augurs dovetails with what's been happening in the city over the last few decades.

"We're all about change," he said. "It's what we've been doing for 30-plus years."

Still, he said, Obama more than just symbolized a break with the past. "It's a new day," Cahill said.

City Fire Department Director Robert Rawls said that the Obama presidency made tangible to Dr. Martin Luther King's dreams of equality.

"This is a good day for the country — and for everybody," said Rawls, who tried but failed to get tickets for the inauguration.

Rawls, who last summer at-

tended the prestigious Senior Executives in State and Local Government program at Harvard on a fellowship, called Obama "an inspiration." Still, he said, the new president comes into office with a sizable burden to bear, and facing seemingly intractable questions on the domestically and foreign fronts.

But Rawls, echoing Obama's theme of shared responsibility, said those are pressures the country as a whole must bear.

"As much as we expect from him, it's on all of us," Rawls said.

Outside the ballroom, most of several bins destined for Elijah's Promise soup kitchen a few blocks away filled with canned and boxed foodstuffs — the price of admission to the ballroom — represented something of a good start.