

East Bay citizens brave cold to attend inauguration

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The bitter cold. The long lines. The aching feet. The chemical handwarmers that don't last long enough.

In the end, none of the discomfort mattered to the many Bay Area faithful among the record crowd in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday to witness the inauguration of Barack Obama as the nation's 44th president.

"I feel like an icicle. I don't know if my legs are really here. They're frozen," said Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, the county's first African-American supervisor.

"But I never cried so much in my life. I probably had icicles hanging down my face from the tears."

Martinez Councilwoman Janet Kennedy echoed Glover's sentiments.

"I wouldn't trade this experience for anything in this world," she said as she iced her swollen knee late Tuesday. "You feel like you are really a part of history."

With estimates ranging up to 2 million, attendance would be a record for an American inaugural, eclipsing the 1.2 million who turned out for the 1965 inauguration of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Hundreds of thousands arrived beginning at 4 a.m. in the middle of a chilly snap.

Under an inky blue sky dotted with a bright moon, the thermometer read 20 degrees at 6 a.m., only rising to 28 by the noon swearing-in.

Yet, the cold appeared not to dissuade the crowds, who traveled from all points across the nation.

By noon, a river of celebrants stretched from the Capitol across the Mall and formed what many described as one of the most powerful images of the day.

Many wore Obama emblazoned gear and were open with their emotions, with tear-stained cheeks, spontaneous hugs of families and strangers and shouts of President Obama after he put down his right hand at the oath's completion.

And despite the bone-rattling cold, the unpredictable trains and lines that seemed to move inches per hour, people were happy and cooperative.

"Have you ever stood in line to buy Rolling Stones' tickets?" said Lynda Kilday, an advocacy coordinator for the Contra Costa Child Care Council who politely declined to publicize in detail the precise

undergarments she wore to stay warm. "It was just like that. Everyone was so perky."

She and her husband, Ken, arrived at the Capitol at 4:30 a.m. and described an orderly and efficient security system.

But that was not true everywhere.

Susan Helman Edwards and her 17-year-old daughter, Adaramola Redmond, a senior at Oakland's Skyline High School, were among thousands waiting to enter the assigned "blue" ticket area who were turned away because there wasn't enough time to process everyone through the security checkpoint.

They finally found a spot far from a screen, where they couldn't clearly see or hear the speeches.

"I was really disappointed. I had to shed quite a few tears at one point," said Adaramola as she rode the Metro train back to Virginia and the warmth of her grandmother's house. "Some were tears of happiness, because I knew he was finally commander in chief, when I heard the 21-gun salute. But I'm disappointed; I had expected so much more."

Retired economics professor Marcus Alexis, 76, and his wife, attorney Geraldine, were almost stymied blocks from the National Mall, too.

"I started yelling, 'Let Barack's people in,'" he said, blaming inaugural planners for the overcrowding and confusion. "We got in. The police finally relented."

Tim Farley, the government affairs director for St. Mary's College and a political junkie who has attended four inaugurations, was shut out.

"We were caught in a logistical nightmare," Farley said, describing a madhouse tangle of merging lines that ultimately left him outside the gates.

But he and his teenage son, Vincent, wriggled into a bar and grill just before it filled to capacity. They watched the ceremony on TV and enjoyed a hot lunch.

"Even though many, perhaps thousands of people were frustrated by the crowds, lines, long delays and missed viewing, there was still a feeling of hope, optimism and joy," Farley said.

For Farley and others, it was an emotional day.

Contra Costa Realtors Association government affairs director Bielle Moore, who had a view of the stage, described watching an African-American man sob during the recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

"It was very moving," she said. "I feel like I could still cry when I think about it."

Contra Costa County political consultant Tom Koch, a veteran of past inaugurations that he said paled in size and scope to this one, remembers more than a few tears.

"A lot of us had some moments where we kind of lost it during the president's speech, and that was a nice experience to have with strangers," he said.

And while opinions differed over whether it was appropriate to boo outgoing President George W. Bush, California Professional Firefighters chief Lou Paulson says he couldn't help but notice as he left the Capitol the helicopter carrying Bush flew overhead for a final time.

"The symbolism was palpable," he said.

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