

## Once torn by race, Birmingham puts its hope in unity

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By Lisa Wangness, Globe Staff | January 19, 2009

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. - In the suburb of Mountain Brook, where luxury cars line the school parking lot, Sharon Brown, a middle-aged real estate agent, sipped a cup of Starbucks coffee as she waited for a client. Like most of her neighbors in this conservative state, she voted for John McCain but finds herself greeting Barack Obama's inauguration with excitement.

"The way the country is right now," she said, "we'd better get on board with him."

On an empty block in downtown Birmingham, 22-year-old Shandrea Bradford pushed her daughter's stroller, an icy wind whipping her thin track suit. A Democrat, Bradford never felt connected to Washington before; now she watches Obama intently. But she does not want him to be just her president.

"A lot of Republicans are seeking Obama's help, too," she said. "It's not just us living it, these hard times. It's everybody."

On the eve of the inauguration, Birmingham is seeing hardened partisanship soften for a moment. In conversations across the city and its suburbs, conservatives spoke of quietly rooting for their new president; liberals allowed that he must compromise to move his agenda forward.

Obama has made reconciliation between red and blue America the centerpiece of his career, and is entering office amid signs of real progress - an easing of tensions that have raged for years or decades.

A Pew Research Center poll last week found a decline in the percentage of people who said the country is more divided than in the past: 46 percent, down 20 points from January 2007. And Obama arrives with the highest favorability ratings of any new president in a generation.

His campaign's favorite word was "hope," and many here see in Obama a validation of the promise America offers all its people. But fear may be an even more powerful force for unity. People are terrified by the rising unemployment rate and sinking home values, worried that petty arguments could keep the new administration from addressing serious problems, and a sober urgency seems to have taken hold.

"Some of the excitement and hope right after he got elected has been tempered," said Kate Nielsen, head of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, referring to the grim economic developments.

In Birmingham, signs of economic distress are everywhere - the busy parking lot of the unemployment office, the crowded waiting room of a Catholic charity, the migrant construction workers who commute hours to Birmingham for work.

Ten workers from Tennessee were building a drainage system at a forlorn public housing complex in the bitter cold last week. Bucky Parkey, 38, stood in a 5-foot ditch laying bricks for a catch basin. It was hard work. "Back breaking," he said, spitting the words out like glass.

Parkey said he spent eight years in prison for selling drugs. Now he is trying to support five children with honest work. As he slapped mortar on brick, he said he thinks about the money he could make selling drugs "every night I go to bed, and every morning when I wake up."

The incoming president, he said, is the only reason he perseveres. "He inspires me to keep trying, that's all," he said. "Not to give up."

It has been almost a half century since Birmingham became infamous for its violent oppression of African-Americans, searing into the national memory images of white police turning dogs and fire hoses on peaceful protesters. Amid this terror, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail": "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny."

The city's relationship with its past is fraught. It wants to redefine itself as a center of higher education and medicine, but the Civil Rights Institute and the historic 16th Street Baptist Church are major tourist attractions.

But now, the bonds King spoke of are easier to see in the younger people mingling in places like the Urban Standard, a coffeehouse in a cavernous downtown building glittering with artsy lamps. But Birmingham is no post-racial paradise, either. White flight left behind a mostly poor and black school system, and whites and blacks quietly acknowledge that racial tensions remain.

Yet Johnathan Austin, a 29-year-old African-American technology consultant recently appointed to the City Council, says Obama's election shows that it is only a matter of time until even those tensions fade.

Austin, whose great aunt is among those shown being hit with a fire hose in the Civil Rights Institute's video displays, compares the rapid progress in race relations of recent decades to the head-spinning technological progress of the last 10 years after millennia without computers. One of his top priorities, he added, is getting Birmingham wired.

"The racist people in Birmingham, in Alabama, and all over this country - those people are going to die with that, and they're not going to pass it on to their children," he said, over a beer in a neighborhood bar. "I don't have any hate or resentment to anybody for what they did to my family. What we have to do is look to the future. . . . The most important thing is [Obama] is talking about unity."

Birmingham's political divisions are not a simple matter of race. Religion is a powerful force in Alabama politics, fostering a strong social conservatism that abhors abortion and gay marriage. But as the economy has worsened, other issues have taken precedence.

DeShaunda Morse, a 31-year-old bank teller, voted for McCain because she opposes abortion, but since the election she has grown increasingly worried about whether her husband will keep his job at the Mercedes plant. She hopes Obama will fix the economy.

Jamie Cawood, a 32-year-old socially conservative Republican and property developer who recently transformed a crumbling Masonic lodge in a poor section of town into a striking event space, also voted for McCain. He is still worried that Obama might raise his taxes, he but likes the fact that Obama is young and smart, and that he is reaching out to conservatives like Rick Warren, the evangelical pastor who will give the inaugural invocation.

"I think he's crossed some boundaries that other Democrats wouldn't have been willing to do," he said.

Jimmy Callis, a wry 59-year-old hatter and shoe repairman with flowing white whiskers, grouses about the lobbyists who run Washington and the vanity of the school system's last superintendent, who he said used to carry on long conversations with his personal trainer on his cellphone while getting his shoes shined.

Callis has not voted in years, and he did not cast a ballot last November. But eventually he concedes that he hopes Obama can restore his pride in being an American. "But it's been awhile." ■