

WALKING THROUGH THE INAUGURAL MURAL

Barbara Carrasco

As a career-long activist, participation in the historic inauguration of Barack Obama seemed almost an obligation to one's community. So I did not hesitate to accept a free plane ticket to D.C. from my friend Helen Hernandez. My loving husband and teen-age daughter were not happy that their wife and mom would be gone for an entire week. But it was not hard to convince them that I could not pass on this opportunity. All I needed was spending money, and, as luck would have it, my friend Fred and his partner, John, purchased one of my paintings just before I left. My organizing skills kicked in as I vowed to pack only a carry-on suitcase for a week in the cold city of D.C. Female friends' advice prepared me for the trip: "take good shoes," "take gloves," "bring a good hat," "borrow this coat." I left my pencils and paper behind. I was going to walk through the inaugural mural.

While I left with a plane ticket, I arrived without a ticket to the actual inauguration. I could see that my anxiousness was annoying my hosts. They kept telling me not to worry, reassuring me "everything will work out." It was easy for them to say since they all had inauguration tickets securely in hand! My mission was to connect with my dearest activist-friend and mentor, Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union. Sure enough, when I located her, she had obtained a ticket for me, a purple one, which placed us on the left field of the Capital lawn. It looked like we were going to be really, really close!

As we walked toward the Metro and prepared ourselves to brave security, the city vibrated with the energy of so many people, most of who came from all

across the country to witness and participate in history. Leaving the Metro was difficult because the crowd seemed to grow as we were approaching the mall area in front of the Capital. We were forced to stand stationary in the cold for almost two hours before the line moved at all. Then, the crowd suddenly swelled and before we could prepare for it, people pressed against us from all directions trying to move even closer to the security gates. I fought my immediate sense of panic and claustrophobia. Our group worked to stay together, but the force of the crowd pushed people away from each other. My maternal instincts kicked in, and I locked arms with Marisa, a former student of mine, and the youngest member in our group. She pushed her elbows out to protect us from getting crushed. In the end, we endured and reached the gate where security officials checked our bags and tickets. Finally, we got past security and found our place on the Capital lawn. We were not as close as we hoped, but we were finally there. Of the seven of us who started out together that morning, only three of us made it past the gates. I told Marisa and Dolores' daughter, Lori, we were real troopers (a phrase which dates me for sure).

Throughout all, I was struck by how well everyone treated one another. The bitter cold, the long lines to get to security, the growing numbers of people, none of this seemed to overwhelm the mood of unity and celebration. It was one of those rare moments when race, gender, and age felt inconsequential. We were just people talking with each other about our new president and the changes that already seemed underway. Notably, there also seemed to be a collective feeling of accomplishment about our activism and the electoral process. Early on, Obama earned the support of people who value community organizing, including notable women, such as Maria Elena Durazo, President of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union. She is someone I have known and admired for her many years of commitment to ensuring the rights of workers. Obama created such alliances by proving himself as

dedicated to the efforts of organizing and being sensitive to the needs and rights of women. His recent appointments to his cabinet further reflect that sensitivity. Throughout the campaign and inauguration events, Dolores's coined phrase, "Sí, se puede!" rightfully belonged center stage. Working together, we changed the course of history.

Though we were on the Capital lawn, we could not see much because the main events were very far in the distance. But we could hear everything fairly well. (I still can't believe I got to hear Aretha sing!) It was such a moving ceremony. At times, the crowd was overwhelmed with emotion. Some people cried. Others hugged friends. Then, President Obama gave his inaugural address. His speech was brief but powerful. Throughout the ceremony, everyone had been quiet for the most part. But after the swearing in, the crowd cheered loudly in unison. It was official!

Leaving the event, we encountered numerous street vendors selling various souvenirs, such as buttons, t-shirts, hats, posters, etc., even underwear. My favorite souvenir, though, was simply my Metro ticket with Obama's picture on the back. I tucked it carefully into my wallet as we walked over to Senator Barbara Boxers' office for a reception attended by politicians and volunteers who worked on the Obama campaign. Despite being tired from standing and walking in the cold for hours, people looked ecstatic.

It seemed perfectly natural to encounter so many of the community organizers I know from activist work in Los Angeles. There was my friend whose generous gift of a plane ticket had brought me to D.C., Helen Hernandez, the President and founder of the Imagen Foundation, which promotes the positive portrayal of Latinos in film and television, and whose organization produced a multicultural event titled One People, One Nation United that was hugely

successful because it so well reflected the face of the new administration. And it was here that I saw many friends from L.A., such as Father Estrada, whose work with young people has been so influential, and the many strong women—Norma de le Pena, Maria Leon, and Ruby Maldonado to name a few—who have dedicated years to helping to improve the lives of Latinas/os.

It's always exciting to watch Dolores in the political arena. People naturally gravitate to her and many actively seek her opinion and advice. Additionally, she has an abundant reserve of energy, genuinely loves to be around people, and enjoys going out. (These are some of the qualities I worked to capture in my "Dolores" print.) Spending time with Dolores consistently leaves me revitalized, albeit a bit exhausted. Celebrating the inauguration was made all the more special by the opportunity to be there with Dolores and see her historic importance as a community organizer recognized, both formally and informally, by the many other activists who, like me, felt compelled to attend the events. And it was with Dolores that I attended the Latino Ball (my first Ball!). When Congresswoman Hilda Solis entered the room, she was received like a rock star. Everyone wanted a photo taken with her. Other Latina politicians and activists who attended were Henry Cisneros, Gloria Molina, Edward James Olmos, Rosie Perez, Geraldo Rivera, Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, and George Lopez, to name a few. However, I especially felt proud seeing present at these events the younger Latinas, such as Marisa Blancarte, my former student from Loyola Marymount University, who had dedicated so much of their time, energy, and resources and represented a new generation of organizers.

Part of what I found so inspiring about attending the inauguration was the opportunity to meet ordinary people who were tired of politics as usual and had voted for change. Too, I felt that everyone who came to join the inauguration events undoubtedly returned home with a renewed outlook on

life. I know I did. More than ever, I want to share with my family and friends that possibilities are endless if we learn to respect one another and reach out to people from communities outside our own. There have been so many brave and inspiring women who have made my path in life a little less stressful and a lot more meaningful. My daughter is becoming the strong young woman we all helped her to become. Come her time to leave and venture out into the world on her own, she will not be alone. I'm particularly excited about the political future because Obama brings with him powerful women supporters that include among them, most importantly, his strong wife and the mother of their two young daughters. The aspirations and dreams of the women in the Obama household will be observed more closely than any other presidential family in history. They are the new role models who will influence young women and girls, like my daughter Barbie, across the nation and the entire world.