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In Maine visits, 'a sense of absolute electricity'

Many recall the impression that Obama made on Maine crowds from Portland to Bangor.

By DIETER BRADBURY, Political Correspondent

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2007 Press Herald file
Presidential hopeful Barack Obama waves to the crowd after speaking at a fundraiser at the Portland Expo on Sept. 25, 2007. About 3,000 people showed up to hear Obama on a Tuesday afternoon. "There was a sense of absolute electricity," said former Maine House Speaker Glenn Cummings.

He spent three years at Harvard Law School, but Barack Obama never made one of those midnight student runs from Cambridge, Mass., to the L.L. Bean retail store in Freeport.

So it wasn't until September of 2007, when he gave a speech at the Portland Exposition Building during the Democratic primary season, that Obama first set foot in the Pine Tree State.

Some 3,000 people turned out for that event, and Glenn Cummings, an Obama supporter and former speaker of the Maine House, remembers looking out into the eyes of the crowd.

"There was a sense of absolute electricity," Cummings said. "There was a sense that this guy might be for real, that this is what we need."

Obama's ability to communicate, and his messages of hope, change and public service resonated with Maine voters, who swept him to victory in the state Democratic Party caucuses in February 2008, and again in the

general election last Nov. 4.

Those victories were small steps in a much larger march that will lead Obama up the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., where he will take the oath of office today as the 44th president, and the first African-American president in U.S. history.

More than 2 million people are expected to attend the inauguration, a crowd that will include a fair number of Mainers who heard Obama speak during his two campaign visits to the state.

Cummings, who will attend the inauguration and a reception for fundraisers with his family, was the first high-profile state political figure to endorse Obama.

"I felt like he had the ability to bring the country together, not only the Democratic Party but all Americans," Cummings said.

The Sept. 25 fundraiser in Portland, where Obama gave a half-hour speech even though he was suffering from a head cold, was expected to attract 1,800 people, paying \$23 apiece, Cummings said.

Instead, about 3,000 people showed up, filling the Expo's bleachers and most of the standing room on the floor on a Tuesday afternoon.

The crowd included Robert C.S. Monks, a real estate developer from Cape Elizabeth who was Obama's chief fundraiser in Maine. Monks said he saw Obama meeting "a pent-up desire amongst a whole panoply of people in our society for better, more inspirational leadership."

After the speech, Obama met with about 300 people who gathered at the Monks home in Cape Elizabeth for a private fundraiser, held outside under a large awning.

Leonard Cummings of Portland sat in the front row with his wife and granddaughter and listened to Obama closely.

"He was determined," said Cummings, 74, who is African-American. "Ambitious. Dedicated. With a will to succeed. And I was thrilled to see the way people responded to him as a young black man."

Glenn Cummings, the former Maine House speaker, said the Cape Elizabeth event raised about \$400,000, a record for a Democratic fundraiser of that type in Maine.

Monks, who has raised money for a number of Democratic candidates over the years, said soliciting funds for Obama was easy because donors were enthusiastic. "It was really heartening," he said.

Obama returned to Maine on Feb. 9, 2008, the day before his party's state caucuses. His appearance at the Bangor Auditorium attracted 5,700 people, the largest crowd there in 14 years.

Lines formed three hours before his speech, traffic congealed in downtown Bangor and 1,000 people who stood in line had to be turned away because the building's capacity had been reached.

The crowd included Jimmy Cook and his 14-year-old daughter, Jensen, a freshman at Bangor High School who volunteered on the Obama campaign.

"She stood in line for four hours to see him," Cook said.

One active Democrat, Victoria Mares-Hershey of Bridgton, did not see the Obama speeches. But she was a delegate for him at her local caucus and followed his campaign closely.

She said she hesitated to support Obama at first, believing that he might be used by party leaders to draw in a broader base of support and then be cast aside, possibly damaging his political future.

"I really thought that he was prepared to make the next step," she said. "I just wasn't sure what the right

timing was."

The right timing turned out to be now, and Mares-Hershey became an enthusiastic supporter, impressed by Obama's background as a community organizer, with a gift for articulating his principles.

"Obama was able to see the issues and problems of America very candidly and at a personal level, across all races and classes," she said.

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