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Obama's fame gives him grace period

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It's 4 a.m. Tuesday in Washington, D.C., and Rochester resident Ed Vesneske adjusts to the cold and walks in the dark to a shuttle bus that will take him to the National Mall, where, in eight hours, he will watch President Barack Obama's swearing-in with 1.8 million others.

Even at this early hour, just steps from the tour bus Vesneske rode from Rochester, vendors line the route, hawking T-shirts, hats, earrings and posters emblazoned with Obama's image.

"It's like a Springsteen concert," said Vesneske, a retired college professor.

Obama's celebrity and America's fascination with his family is not a new phenomenon in American politics, as such interest has existed since the Kennedys were in the White House, experts say. However, the election of the nation's first African-American president, a cause for celebration in many circles, coincides with a time when media outlets abound and the Internet offers endless opportunities for entrepreneurs looking to profit on popularity.

The breadth of the Obamas' celebrity extends to the covers of *Us Weekly* and *People* magazines; to eBay, where more than 36,800 Obama-related items are for sale; and to Hollywood's marquee names, who were on hand for the three-day inauguration celebration.

"That isn't particularly healthy and it isn't particularly realistic," said Elayne Rapping, an American studies professor at the University at Buffalo and a pop culture expert. "He's got serious work to do. It's not good to think of them as celebrities on the cover of gossip magazines."

The jubilation over Obama's election stems from his race, the economic troubles Americans are facing and the difficulty of the last eight years, experts said.

"I think we're in a unique time in American history," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., during a conference call with reporters last week.

"We need real change in the country. ... Obama seems to have all the talents to bring this about."

"Despite the fact that the economy is bad, Obama has filled people with hope," he said.

The goodwill Obama has generated — his approval rating is 68 percent — will give him a "long leash," said Valeria Sinclair-Chapman, director of the Center for the Study of African-American Politics at the University of Rochester.

"His honeymoon can be considerable, even if he makes some missteps," Sinclair-Chapman said.

She also warned that if Obama were to suffer a personal failing, a generation of voters could feel betrayed and lose faith in their leaders, much as Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who resigned in disgrace last year after being linked to a prostitute, disillusioned New Yorkers.

"He has to remind himself on a regular basis to be humble and to be in service," she said.

Monroe County Republican Chairman Bill Reilich said it's not unusual for a president to have high approval ratings when first entering office. Obama's willingness to work with Republicans isn't hurting him either, Reilich said.

But governing requires making decisions, and not everyone likes every decision.

"He'd be best served if he takes into consideration all Americans' points of view," Reilich said. "I think where there could be some disappointment is people who were extreme to one degree."

Obama merchandise, meanwhile, is an extension of more traditional bumper stickers and buttons, Sinclair-Chapman said.

"People want to make a public statement about this moment, their commitment to change," she said.

One of those people with an enthusiasm for Obama-themed merchandise is Elise Palmer, 25, a campaign volunteer who couldn't vote because she isn't an American citizen.

"My parents have (an Obama) car magnet that's driving around northwest England now," Palmer said.

Palmer lives in the Upper Monroe neighborhood but is a native of Great Britain. She works in a lab at the University of Rochester.

She traveled by bus to Washington for the inauguration, and witnessed sales of posters that appeared to be printed out on home computers, crowds on the mall chanting "O-BAM-A, O-BAM-A!" and met people who had come from as far away as Alaska.

"I don't think it's going to last forever and I don't think he's going to change the world," Palmer said. "On the other hand he's changed the atmosphere of the country. ... I think some people will be disappointed, but I think the majority won't. I think they can realize he's only human."

David Cherelin, 45, who lives near Strong Memorial Hospital, thought the crowds — some made obscene gestures to the helicopter taking the Bushes back to Texas — reflected the disdain many Americans feel for the outgoing administration.

"It says where this country is at," he said.

Bus driver John Clarke of Rochester said that, for the most part, Obama supporters know it will take time to turn the economy around and solve the country's other problems.

"It's going to take patience," Clarke said. "You're going to have to suffer a little. ... His job is to guide us in the way we should go."

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