

‘Beyond Words’ Black leaders hail Obama

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Valerie Cooper, president of Picture That LLC in Stamford, an art consultant and acquisition firm, said she is proud that U.S. Sen. Barack Obama will be the Democratic presidential nominee. (Chris Preovolos/Staff photo)

Archie Elam, 53, said he never thought he'd see a black presidential candidate. "I'm not an old guy," Elam said. "But I didn't think I'd live long enough to see this. It's the kind of thing that my mother and generations before marched for and fought for." When it became clear U.S. Sen. Barack Obama had captured the Democratic presidential nomination, Elam, a Stamford resident and former Board of Education member, said he felt "ecstatic beyond words." Others in the black community added "ecstatic" to describe the results of the long-fought Democratic presidential primaries. Elam said he "knew right then we had a good guy" when he met Illinois senator last year at a Martin Luther King Jr. memorial dedication ceremony in Washington, D.C. "He is, in many ways, the embodiment of what we could be as a country," Elam said.

Though excited to have a black presidential nominee, Valerie Cooper said that as an African-American woman she has felt an "internal struggle" during the Democratic primary races between Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton. "I'm just ecstatic and couldn't be more proud of the country for making such an optimal choice," said the Stamford native, president of Picture That LLC, a firm that consults on and acquires art for firms interested in running exhibits and events. "Having grown up with parents who, because of their race, did not have the right to vote and now witnessing four decades later, an African-American nominee, it really makes me feel very proud in a way I've never felt before to be an American." Cooper said she is disappointed that so many women are bitter that Clinton lost the nomination. "I would have also been happy had it been Hillary because I'm a woman," she said. "I'm hoping that the healing will take place relatively quickly so that we can come together as a party because I am a Democrat. And a woman. And an African-American."

Eugene Campbell, president on the Yerwood Center, and Thomas Marshall, a black Stamford resident, also noted the historic Clinton campaign. "I think it's very encouraging," Campbell said. "History being made on both ends, with an African-American and a woman making it to this point. We have a sense of pride in the community of what has transpired." Obama's nomination "will have a significant in history, similar to other major accomplishments by other African-Americans," Marshall said. "This will go down in history as one of those very prominent historical events and had Hillary Clinton received the nomination herself, then indeed it would have been a very similar type of historical achievement."

Norwalk resident Diane Winston, a black woman, had a less sympathetic view of the New York senator's campaign, which she said took focus away from more important issues, such as the economy and Iraq war. "While I believe Hillary Clinton has every right to run for the Democratic nomination, I think it has been a divisive scenario," she said. "We as a nation need to look at the bigger picture and not at race or gender. I believe it's the spirit that Barack Obama brings that has the potential to unite us into one country again."

The Stamford chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People will get involved in voter registration so residents "will have a voice in this historic event," said Jack Bryant, chapter president.

"I think it's what the United States needs at this time - a person with a new outlook on policies. I think it will definitely bring out more voters," Bryant said. Obama's ability to inspire unity will make him an attractive candidate, said state Rep. Bruce Morris, D-Norwalk. "I'm ecstatic. I was an Obama supporter from the beginning," Morris said. "Obama's conversation isn't about racial division, but about all of us, the United States. To me, that's powerful. With his candidacy, we are on the verge of monumental change in this country."

Morris' sentiments were echoed by the Rev. Tommie Jackson, pastor of Stamford's Faith Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, who felt "absolute joy" in hearing of Obama's victory. "I am wholly committed to the election of Senator Barack Obama as president in November 2008," Jackson said. "I think it's a case of what the United States of America can show the rest of the world: that we are a people, regardless of race, color, gender or age, religious or faith traditions, to put the best and the right candidate in office."