

Lessons for All the “Little Obamas” By Tim King

As the dust settles on the Inauguration ceremonies of our 44th President, I find myself wondering what lesson should my students and all of our children learn from the election of our first African-American President? This question is even more pressing given this is the first Black History Month in which our eyes are focused, thanks to Obama, more on the achievements of African-Americans in the present than the past.

Most Americans watched President Obama’s ascent to political prominence and global celebrity from afar. Chicagoans, like me, have had a more intimate view of his maturation from local politician, to U.S. Senator and bona-fide power-broker, to our country’s President. We have walked the same streets, sat in the same church pews, and shepherded children into the same schools as the man who would be President. We regale friends and associates with stories of the time we spotted him in Starbucks or dined at the same restaurant. We like to tell ourselves that our contributions to his earliest campaigns for local political posts helped propel him to the oval office. We’re not hitching a ride on the Obama bandwagon, we *are* the bandwagon.

So is the Obama lesson we teach our children, pick the right person early and hold on for the meteoric rise? Or is the lesson that anything is possible? Or is it that the American public can love a Black man who isn’t a sports star or rapper?

Perhaps the aforementioned are important lessons, perhaps not. I think, however, more than anything else I teach my students about Obama, the lesson I want them to learn is how preparation, persistence and sacrifice beat out happenstance, stardom and fate. Kids should know not that hard work, diligence and commitment can result in becoming the most powerful man in the world. It’s not just about dreaming big, it’s about working hard and never stopping. This is a difficult lesson to teach because what people see first is the celebrity and “perfect storm” that led to the moment he became President. What people *should* see, however, is that Obama’s road to the White House was full of detours, roadblocks and potholes. Yet, his hard work, determination, vision, and preparedness for the celebrity and perfect storm are what really resulted in him taking the Presidential Oath of Office.

I watched President Obama swearing in ceremony live in Washington DC with a group of my students who CNN anchor Don Lemon dubbed “The Little Obamas.” While I have understood the significance of Obama’s candidacy from the very beginning, I was not fully engulfed in Obama-mania until the moment the crowd cheered when his face appeared for the first time on the jumbo monitors dotting the Mall. To witness the flood of hope and good will that coursed through the crowd that morning crescendo to a climax was awe-inspiring. But it was seeing my students—a group of Black boys from the ‘hood—shed tears of joy as Barack Obama became President Obama that made me realize the world changed that day.

For years I have taught and mentored students. I have known students with intellects

as dazzling as Obama's and enough charisma to transform rooms with a smile. Some of these students have gone on to achieve personal and professional success, while others have had their aspirations derailed by cruel twists of fate and roadblocks they couldn't (or wouldn't) overcome. What none of my former students had, and all of my current students possess, is the knowledge that in today's America, Black boys really can grow up to be President of the United States. President Obama showed us it could be done. Now, our job is to teach our children how he did it.

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