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Election defined a shift in history for local residents

BY CHUCK WILLIAMS

Tuesday night, Lila Star went to bed at 8:30.

"I couldn't watch it," said the 77-year-old Columbus restaurant owner. "I wanted to wake up in the morning and hear about it."

But a few hours later, daughter Sarah Porter called to say that the major television networks had declared Barack Obama the winner.

"It really felt good," she said Thursday while prepping chicken for frying at the Royal Café.

Star shares the sentiments of a generation of older black Americans who came out of the Great Depression as children, lived through segregation and the struggle for civil rights and have now seen the election of the nation's first black president.

'For my grandchildren'

Former Spencer High principal Franklin Douglass, like Star, enjoyed the historical significance of Obama's election.

"There has been a lot of progress in my time," Douglass said. "But I thought I was beyond this one. I hoped my son or grandchildren would see it. I didn't think I would."

Neither did Gloria L. Battle. On Wednesday morning, the retired educator wanted a copy of the Ledger-Enquirer.

She wanted proof of the moment and something she could pass down to future generations. After getting a copy of that paper, she laminated it.

"It will never turn yellow," Battle said. "My family will have that paper 50 years from now. It's for my grandchildren and their children. That's history."

Battle knows a little bit about history. She was there when it was being made. She has an Atlanta newspaper photograph of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. framed on her desk.

In 1955 and '56, Battle was a student at Alabama State University in Montgomery. That was during the Montgomery bus boycott that helped spark the civil rights movement. She attended Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where King was pastor.

"I never thought I would live to see this," she said. "After seeing what I saw in the '50s, I just never thought I would see this."

Answered prayers

The Rev. J.C. Harris was there in the 1950s, too.

The 83-year-old pastor of Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church on Old Cusseta Road was a young minister in Albany, Ga., during the height of the civil rights movement. He hosted King in his Albany church and worked in the movement.

"I prayed to see this day, and God has answered my prayers," Harris said. "This is the dream that Dr. King spoke of. This is the dream that has been there all of these years. To see it come to pass in my lifetime is a miracle. This is not an act of man. This is God's work."

The fact that Obama received significant support from white Americans was not lost on Harris.

"It wasn't just my people who elected him," Harris said. "It was also your people."

Phenix City dentist Hugh Ogletree agrees. Ogletree, a 60-year-old black Republican, voted for Obama, the first Democrat presidential candidate he has supported since Jimmy Carter in 1976. Ogletree attended a segregated public high school in Auburn, Ala., then Tuskegee University on a football scholarship. He was among the first black students accepted at the University of Alabama School of Dentistry.

He points out that majority white states like Iowa and New Hampshire overwhelmingly supported Obama.

"It was young whites and free-thinking whites who supported him," Ogletree said. "That is the reason he was able to win."

'Qualified and black'

Robert Wright was a black Republican back in the 1980s when there were not many. But this year he supported and voted for Obama.

"I did not support him just because he was black," Wright said. "He's qualified and black. He's smart and black. He's educated and black. At this stage in my life, to have the opportunity to vote for someone so well qualified, I could not deny myself that opportunity."

Douglass, the former Spencer principal, and Harry Vernon took similar paths from North Alabama to high school principal jobs in Columbus. While Douglass was raised on a farm, Vernon, 81, was raised in Gadsden, where his father was a tailor and owned his own business. He spent 22 years as principal of Carver High School.

As a youngster, Vernon, who would make the deliveries to downtown department stores, experienced the injustices of the time.

"Being segregated is physical, but it is also mental," he said.

Vernon could not attend the University of Georgia because of segregation, but the state of Georgia helped pay his tuition to earn a master's degree from Columbia University in New York City.

He said the election of Obama is a powerful message to young people, many of whom helped push the Illinois senator into the White House.

"These young people today -- black and white -- didn't have to live through what we did," Vernon said. "They have a different attitude. They believe they can do anything they want to do. They didn't look at race. They looked at the man and what he can do. I am real proud of that."

Shift in America

Douglass, who spent 13 years as Spencer High's principal, agrees. A former social studies teacher, he appreciates the significance of what he has witnessed this week.

"I just saw a shift in American attitudes that was significant to me in terms of the way Obama was able to carry out his campaign and the reaction people are giving him," Douglass said. "I believe the fist is stronger than the fingers."

He saw people of all colors comprise that fist.

"If you put all of the people together you can be a leader," Douglass said. "He's a leader."

Like most of the people of his generation and background, Wright understood the significance of Obama's election.

"This is the culmination of everything that a lot of people fought and died for," Wright said. "It is a time when this country has lived up to its creed -- that all men are created equal. At times, some of us were not given the opportunity to excel. I never thought I would see this in my lifetime."

Ogletree draws a comparison of Obama to Jackie Robinson, the man who broke Major League Baseball's color barrier.

"When Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, he had one obligation -- to help the Dodgers win baseball games," Ogletree said. "By virtue of being selected to play for the Dodgers, he made a lot of black Americans proud and inspired a lot of people to believe they could accomplish great things.

"Barack Obama is not the president of black America. He is the president of the United States of America. His only obligation is to enhance the lives of all Americans. By virtue of his election, he has shown the American dream is alive and working."

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