Alumni

Many Happy Returns

By
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Kim Rosen

The Columbia Club resides within the Princeton Club's building on West 43rd Street, so in the spirit of bipartisanship, the two groups jointly hosted a happy hour to witness the historic election of Barack Obama '83CC, and pay tribute to the new first family's collegiate pedigree.

"Think about it," said John Celock '04JRN, a Columbia Club board member. "Both Teddy Roosevelt and FDR dropped out of Columbia Law School. So what we're seeing is a little pride in the fact that — obviously he'll be the first African American

president — but you're seeing a lot of pride in the fact that he's the first Columbia graduate to be president."

A few dozen people sipped martinis and cabernets as CNN announced the returns on a big-screen TV. An oil portrait of DeWitt Clinton, Columbia College Class of 1786 and 1812 Federalist Party nominee for president, hung on the lobby wall. Among a table of friends sat Vaughn Hart '08GS.

Hart's mom, who is Jamaican, and his dad, who is Trinidadian, told him, as a child growing up in Brooklyn, that he'd have to be twice as good as everyone else to succeed. For a short while, he attended the Rochester Institute of Technology; he left engineering, and after a few semesters at Nassau Community College, became an English literature major at Columbia's School of General Studies. Hart, 33, wore a gray suit with a Columbia pin affixed to his lapel. He said he hoped the election of America's first black president would dispel the racist stereotype that affirmative action helps blacks who otherwise would be undeserving of an Ivy League education.

"This is a historic moment to show that, no, that's not the case," Hart said, multitasking on his BlackBerry. "And, I'm glad he's a Lion, so, woo hoo!"

Like Obama, Chris Luna GS '11, transferred to Columbia from a small California school (Obama came from Occidental College, Luna from San Joaquin Delta College). Luna told the story of how Obama spent his first night in New York sleeping in an alleyway near Amsterdam and 109th. The next morning, the future president joined a homeless man to wash up at an open fire hydrant.

"That's how I think it was in the '70s and '80s," said Luna, 28. "But it's definitely changed."

Some Princeton alumni welcomed the prospect of future first lady Michelle Obama, Class of 1985, as an improvement over the two most recent Princetonians to inhabit the nation's corridors of power - Donald Rumsfeld and Samuel Alito.

Others did not. Three blonde women with southern accents, who had cheered when John McCain won Georgia, decamped from the bar and trudged to the elevators as soon as CNN called Ohio for Obama.

"This country's going to hell in a handbasket," said one of the women.

"I work hard for my paycheck," said another.

In the slowly emptying dining room, a barman in a tuxedo vest dried a tumbler with a towel. At 11 p.m. CNN announced breaking news: Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States. Hart sat in ecstatic, wide-eyed disbelief. Rawle Barker, a security guard at the club, came running into the room to hug a waitress.

"We longed for this day," he said to her.

Hart put on a wool topcoat and donned a blue baseball cap with a big C on it and, with friends, headed for the jubilant celebration in Times Square, where a fire engine had parted a path through the crowd by honking to the rhythm of "Yes We Can!" McCain appeared on the jumbotron to give his concession speech and the crowd booed.

Hart ducked into a nearby bar to watch on a TV as President-elect Barack Obama took the stage at Grant Park in Chicago. Patrons hushed one another.

"It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled," Obama said. "Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America."

Raucous cheers filled the bar. Hart, giggling like he was still that schoolboy at Brooklyn Tech High School, shouted his approval for the president-elect's oratory, how it evoked a certain Baptist minister from Georgia and the poetry of Langston Hughes.

"This is that transcendence," Hart said above the din. "I, too, am America!"

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