

President Barack Obama: One Year Later

Local black community reflects on the first year of Barack Obama's historic presidency



By Karen Lincoln

Michel - kmichel@greenbaypressgazette.com

Approaching the anniversary of Barack Obama's historic inauguration, some members of the local black community award high marks to the nation's first black president.

And it's not because of his skin color, they say.

Given the challenges he faced when he took the oath of office as 44th president — the urgent need to stabilize a precarious economy and to set a new military course for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan amid mounting domestic issues — they say Obama has demonstrated strong leadership.

Their assessments fall in line with a Pew Center research poll released Tuesday that found Obama's favorable rating among blacks was 95 percent, compared with 56 percent of whites — down from 76 percent a year ago. Obama's policies have been less popular, however, especially among whites, where 39 percent approved of his job performance and 48 percent disapproved, according to a Pew poll released last month.

Alem Asres, director of college diversity at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, said it is difficult to gauge what the local black community as a whole thinks about any particular issue because individuals have not organized as a group.

"Maybe you can identify with him because of his skin color and say, 'OK, I defend him,'" Asres said. "I'm not that kind, and I don't see it that way."

Asres said Obama has not only taken on the toughest issues of our time — America's great recession, the war on terror, health-care reform and global climate change — but he has forged the nation ahead despite strong opposition from some Republicans who had "declared their intention to have him fail."

Shawn Robinson, multicultural adviser at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, said he refrains from following national politics and, as such, has no opinion on Obama's freshman year.

"I don't look at color," Robinson said. "It just happens that he was the first African-American elected president, so that means the country had believed in him and his words."

Robinson's only criticism of Obama was that he thinks more should be done toward education.

Donsia Strong Hill, a partner and founding member of the Chicago-based law firm Tyson Strong Hill Connor, which has an office in Green Bay, said Obama has "come into his own" in terms of foreign policy.

"He's certainly done a tremendous job of changing the way people feel about the United States abroad, and restoring a sense of community among the 'world community' that we're a part of," Strong Hill said. "On the domestic front, I think things have been more difficult."

Mary Oling-Sisay, vice president for student affairs and dean of students at St. Norbert College in De Pere, said expectations of Obama were high when he got elected, which has hindered him in some ways.

"There are too many people here and overseas who expect him to cure all the world's problems," Oling-Sisay said.

"And then at home there are a lot of people who are worried about the economy," she continued. "Which ever way you slice it, it's just really difficult."

Green Bay City Councilwoman Celestine Jeffreys said she thinks Obama has "done a great job" so far, but she's looking for more from him.

"I'm waiting to see how things pan out this year, namely with the bank bailout and job numbers, and how some of the foreclosure mitigation and other federal stimulus dollars ... work their way through the local communities and individuals to see what kinds of effects they really have."

Most agreed that just the fact that Obama — son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from the American heartland of Kansas — was elected to the nation's highest office is an accomplishment for the entire country.

"I never thought I would ever see the day when we would have an African-American as president," said Valerie Lindenbeck, a Realtor with Micooley & Co. Real Estate in Green Bay. "Just knowing that we've come this far makes me happy to be a U.S. citizen."

Asres said Obama proved he has what it takes to endure even the toughest challenges.

"The first year he has survived," Asres said. "We'll see what the second year has for him."

[Full site](#) | [WAP site](#)

©2009 Green Bay Press-Gazette.

All rights reserved.

[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)