An Historic Election - A Teachable Moment
Greg Peters, California

On November 4, 2008, history was made - in our country and for our world. It was one of those moments so rare in life that each of us will remember. We will remember exactly where we were, what we were doing, and what we were feeling.

I was sitting - ironically - in the presidential suite of the Westin Hotel in North Carolina with the staff of National CES and other CES Center Directors who had gathered for the Fall Forum. We broke bread together, we discussed the implications for this momentous event - eyes and ears never fully leaving the television screen. At 11:03 p.m. EST, Barack Obama was declared the 44th president of the United States - the first biracial, the first Black president, the first non-white president. I cried - and the depth of emotion surprised me. I believed I was ready for this decision. I felt it was time for this, and I wanted it. I looked inside and understood that I was crying not because of the results - but rather their implications. My tears came with the realization that this one night would do more for the youth I had been committed to serve than all our school reform efforts had done to date. I cried because I knew that tomorrow, our country would change. Specifically, our black and brown students would wake up to a new schema. THEIR world, their culture, their body would be changed to its core; they would know, in ways that had not yet been true, that their voices mattered, that the future was now deeply different and perhaps just a bit more equitable.

Later, I lay in my hotel bed with my husband on speakerphone, “watching TV together,” awaiting President-Elect Obama’s acceptance speech. I froze as the first family stepped onto the Chicago stage. I wanted nothing - not even the sound of my own breath - to interrupt this moment, this image that now is tattooed on my mind forever. I wondered with excitement, “What are our students thinking as they view this proud, black family take their place not only in our collective history but also, ultimately, in a house that their ancestors helped to build for the profit of others?”

The next day Gary Cruz, a teacher in one of San Francisco’s most segregated and lowest performing high schools, was at home, feeling at a deeper level. He wondered if the same was true for his students and did what good teachers do; in spite of the pressures of scripts and coverage, he grasped a teachable moment. He asked his two classes of students - who ranged in grade level (sophomores through seniors) as well as experience (AP, Special Education, deaf, and former gang members) - to take out their journals and reflect on the following prompts.

1. What were you doing when you found out the election results? Where were you, who was with you? What were people saying? (What?)
2. What were you feeling when you heard the news? Which emotions were shown by people around you? How could you tell? (So What?)
3. What does this make you think about the future? What do you think of the future of our country? In 20 years, what might you tell your children and/or loved ones about this historic day? (Now What?)

And, when his students were finished, they talked.

Following are some of his students’ reflections and responses:

“I was on my way to my mom’s place. We were watching the election and I was with my little sister. I was yelling “OBAMA - OBAMA!” Throughout downtown people were yelling with me and my sister all happy and shocked.” - Female Salvadorian senior, student body president.

“When Barack Obama won the election I was in my house in the kitchen — my parents and uncles and aunts were in the living room watching the election and I was listening to it. People had their mouths drop. Most of all they were happy. This is history; next time we can have a Latino President!” - Latino senior

“I was in a garage on 22nd and York. I was with other poll workers; we were cleaning up. People including me were happy and excited and hugging and crying. Other people called me to tell me the results I knew it was true. I felt happy and accomplished because I wanted Obama to win. I heard people hugging in the streets.” - Female Salvadorian senior

“I was at my house with my family and talking to one of my friends when Obama was elected president. When I heard that, I was shocked and thrilled to see an African-American for the first time ever become president.” - Latino senior

“I was at the polls. I worked for 16 hours and I was awake for a little more than 20 hours. I was really happy he won and I feel proud because I know I helped him win by being at his campaign. I heard people in the head-quarters were crying and happy. I also think they expect too much of him right now,” - Latino senior

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“I was in my pajamas and the stars were out and the sky was clear of clouds. I was feeling like they’re going to rig the votes. But when he won it was like a dream, it was like now I most definitely can do anything - be anyone. It was awesome!” - Female African-American junior

“I was together with my family watch TV. Happy! I feel good. Crying laughing Obama. I observed my family.” - Deaf male Chinese sophomore

“I was at home when I found out. I was supposed to be writing a senator. My mom was next to me on the couch. I felt relief because McCain didn’t win. Now I am hopeful about Obama being president. I glad we finally have our first African-American president. I think our country will improve with Obama but it won’t be easy. It will be hard for Obama to make these changes. Every one expects the best from him. I doubt he will be able to make everyone happy. But I think he will at least be better than Bush. I’m also glad to have a democrat for a president although I don’t think of myself as being part of any political party.” - Female Guatemalan senior, immigrant

“I was at home in my pj’s. I was more than happy I wanted to cry. The whole world is going to change. I feel we have an African-American President instead of a white one. That makes it seem like dreams can come true and yes you can.” - Israeli female senior

“Happiness and tears of joy.” - Latino senior

“I stood in disbelief with tears in my eyes. November 4, 2008, was the best day of my life. I kept telling my sister to pinch me because I didn’t know if I was done dreaming. To see young men who sell drugs and gang-bang 24/7 cry because other people called me to tell me the results I knew it was true. I felt happy and accomplished because I wanted Obama to win. I heard people hugging in the streets.” - Latina senior

“All (continued on page 12)
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“When Barack Obama won the election I was in my house in the kitchen ... my parents and uncles and aunts were in the living room watching the election and I was listening to it. People had their mouths drop. Most of all they were happy. This is history; next time we can have a Latino President!!” - Latino senior

“I was at 11pm on the 4th of November watching the election. I was with other poll workers; we were cleaning up. People including me were happy and excited and hugging and crying. I was with other poll workers; we were cleaning up. People including me were happy and excited and hugging and crying.” - Latina senior

“I was in a taqueria at 24th and Alabama, then I heard the cook say, “Obama won!” (“Obama won”), and I rushed to the kitchen. I was like yeah!!! We won ... we started celebrating, ... they kicked me out of the kitchen of course, but I was still happy!!!” - Latino senior

“I was in my dad’s room watching the news. My dad and my brother were with me when we heard it. People were just shocked, and some of them even cried of joy to see Obama win. They were just celebrating to each other, saying that history has been made.” - Latino senior

“I was disappointed to have missed his speech.” - Female African-American sophomore

“When I heard the news I had to watch the TV because I wasn’t sure if he did win.” - Latino senior

“I with mom Happy excited when TV Obama.” - Deaf male Mexican senior, immigrant

“I was with my family watching the news. My mom was excited, I was shocked - truly. Democracy for me has never been so loud.” - Latino senior

“I was at my house with my family and talking to one of my friends when Obama was elected president. When I heard that, I was shocked and thrilled to see an African-American for the first time ever become president.” - Latino senior

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you heard were the voices of "if Obama, a BLACK MAN can be the president of the U.S. I know I can do anything." ...to know that I witnessed history made near me, that feels black. I know that now I can do anything! Obama being president only moti- vated me as a black female to go out and achieve all of the dreams I've been told are impossible. To try and defeat the impossible because now anything is POSSIBLE! In 20 years I'll be the first Black female president and say change is possible only if we work together as one. That's what showed me that our country, the U.S. ... the best county on planet earth is ready for change, if we weren't Obama wouldn't be my president today." - Female mixed-race junior

"I was at a house watching T.V. with my par- ents. It is such a HUGE change for our country and hopefully now we can have more great changes. To have an African-American president is a powerful historic event. I think this changes how our country is going to be viewed and for our future." - Male Bosnian junior

"What does it mean that our next president has an African-American president? I think this changes how our country is going to be viewed and for our future. It is such a HUGE change for our country and..." - Male Latino senior

"That's what showed me that our country, the U.S. ... maybe we can get on the other countries good sides again. I will tell people that this day a spark went off and if he became president why can't I?" - Female, mixed-race junior

"I was at home watching the T.V. and I was just already knew he was going to win. They had faith in him all along ..." - Latino senior, spoken word poet

"What a great story. It's astonishing to think of CFG trained slots in an elite group, because today the training is so widespread. There are so many established places in the country that offer it, and we're happy to be one here in Houston. Besides Houston, where do you see the strongholds of the CFG movement? They're in a lot of different places. New York is very strong, South Florida is very strong, New England is very strong - everything from an entire high school, Southern High School in New Hampshire, junior ..." - Latino senior

"His election should inspire African American youth to vote. I think that in 2008, they had a strong voice. Now I feel that their vote is not strong anymore. I think that..." - Male Latino senior, immigrant

"I got a chance to be alive on November 4, 2008, to see Obama become the first African-American president and I saw that if I work hard, I can achieve them, without any walls between me and the U.S. It is one of the most important days of my life and I will never forget this day. I feel that my future is going to be much better; I will have more opportunities and a chance. Also I feel that anything is possible now and if he became president why can't I?" - Female, Salvadoran senior, student body President

"The future has always been there but now, even... - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil war, immigrant

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"We'll just say, "And the list goes on and on." Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Hartford, Boston, Chicago, and the Colorado area. San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Seattle, Boston. This is just off the top of my head. - Male, Latino senior

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